

EMBODIED PERSPECTIVES AND MOUNTAIN-LANDSCAPES IN “MONT BLANC”
AND BOOK XIII OF *THE PRELUDE*

A Thesis
by
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ABSTRACT

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Shelley’s “Mont Blanc” and the final book of Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* each tell the story of an individual’s encounter with a vast mountain landscape. Although there are many similarities between the two poems, the poets’ experiences of the mountain-landscapes—and their interpretations of those experiences—are quite different, reflecting the poets’ respective philosophies of epistemology and poetic inspiration and composition. For this project, I have based my reading of the poems on two seemingly oppositional concepts: the Romantic sublime and Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodiment. Discussions of the sublime tend to focus on its supersensory nature—that the human subject undergoes an experience that catapults the mind beyond what the senses are able to perceive. I have attempted to bring focus back to the sensory encounters that enable this experience to take place. Were it not for the embodied experience of the physical world, the supersensory experience of the sublime could not occur. In applying this idea to the poems above, I have placed a strong emphasis on the sensory experiences recorded by each poet and considered those details in relation to the sublime epiphany that follows. The comparison of two similar but fundamentally unique poems serves to highlight the differences that physical experiences can produce with regard

to such epiphanies. In the end, we find that the poet's unique situation within a physical landscape plays a crucial role in his interpretation of that landscape, and this in turn affects the poetic expression of the landscape and all that follows.

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Introduction.

It was during the 1700s that mountain climbing became popular as a sport among young Englishmen. Prior to this period, mountains were generally viewed from afar—one would approach and ascend the mountain only to perform religious duties or to communicate with divine spirits. In *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, Marjorie Hope Nicolson traces the history of the mountain's reputation from this early phase to the new interest in mountain-landscapes that began to stir during the years leading up to the Romantic period. As Nicolson demonstrates, earlier generations regarded mountains with some degree of fear. Robert H. Bates notes the medieval belief that mountains were placed on the earth's surface as punishment following the fall of man (3). Mountains were considered to be deformities of the earth, warts on the landscape, dangerous environments to be avoided by whatever means necessary. Sir Leslie Stephen, an ardent mountain climber and some time president of the Alpine Club, describes this fearfulness in terms of the imaginative rendering of the unknown that the mysteriousness of mountain landscapes made possible:

Old travelers saw a mountain and called it simply a hideous excrescence; but then they peopled it with monsters and demons; gnomes wriggled through its subterranean recesses; mysterious voices spoke in its avalanches; dragons winged their way across its gorges; the devil haled the ghosts of old sinners to its lakes to be tormented; the wild huntsman issued from its deep ravines; and possibly some enchanted king sat waiting for better days in a mysterious hall beneath its rocks. (21)

The mysteriousness of the mountain-landscape thus contributed to its repulsiveness to early generations. On the other hand, their mystery lent them religious significance as places that stood outside the reach of human understanding—Mt. Olympus served as the abode of the gods for the ancient Greeks, and various mountaintops became platforms for encounters with God during the time of the Old and New Testaments. Yet, the idea of climbing a mountain for reasons pertaining to sport or aesthetic appreciation would have been considered foolish at best by the people of our early history.¹

At some point during the Eighteenth Century, these attitudes changed, and mountains began to emerge in the arts as objects of aesthetic value. Mountain gloom began to give way to mountain glory.² In tracing the history of the sublime in English art, James B. Twitchell discusses the debut of the “ha-ha” in eighteenth-century gardens, a feature he describes as “an artificial trench or dry moat dug in the middle ground of the manor house estate: it was a sunken fence” (11). Prior to the innovation of the “ha-ha,” a physical obstruction (*i.e.* a fence) would be necessary to create a barrier between the manicured lawns surrounding the manor and the farmland and forests beyond. Twitchell notes the success of the “ha-ha” in blurring the boundary between formal gardens and what lay beyond. Essentially, the “ha-ha” helped to break down the distinction between the orderly and regulated “here” and the wild and rugged “there.” Bringing people in closer proximity to untamed nature, it represents, to

¹ The contrasting attitudes toward mountains between pre-Romantic society and post-Romantic society that I present here, and that is discussed in detail by Nicolson, Bates and others, is a somewhat simplified account of general trends in popular thought. There were, of course, many exceptions to these trends. Bates, in particular, provides an expansive history that includes many instances of pre-Romantic admiration for mountains. Likewise, many post-Romantic writers express contrary opinions as to their ultimate regard for mountain-landscapes.

² The terms “mountain gloom” and “mountain glory” are originally borrowed from Ruskin’s aesthetic musings on mountain landscapes in Volume IV of *Modern Painters*.

some degree, the transition from viewing mountains, with their massive size and irregular terrain, as objects to be feared to viewing them as objects of wonder and aesthetic pleasure. Nicolson credits the shift from mountain gloom to mountain glory to the newly reconstructed and wildly popular notion of the sublime: the publication of Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) carved out a place in aesthetic theory for the expansive, irregular and threatening side of nature. Bates points out the contributions that scientific and technical advancement made to the growing interest in mountain-landscapes. Technical improvements in equipment enabled climbers such as Horace Bénédict De Saussure to explore mountains in ways never before possible. In 1786, Jacques Balmat and one Dr. Paccard of Chamonix attained the summit of Mont Blanc, a mountain that had been previously deemed unclimbable. Science provided both the means and motivation to climb, as a deeper understanding of geography and climate somewhat lessened the dangers of climbing, and many early climbers cited scientific investigation in both areas as their purpose in taking on the dangerous task in the first place.

In art, eighteenth-century interests moved mountain-landscapes from periphery to focal point. Mountains began to hold much more significance in the meanings of works. This shift in perspective occurred quite literally in the visual arts, as Joseph Wright framed the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius with a thick halo of clouds, casting the surrounding valley into shadow, and John Martin's bard is at risk of being consumed by the rocky crags that tower around him. In literature, mountains advanced from setting to plot device, and at times even rose to the level of subject, in works such as Coleridge's "Hymn before Sunrise" and Keats's "Ben Nevis." In the Gothic tradition, mountain-landscapes generally functioned as towering entrapments where banditti lurked and helpless maidens were sure to become lost and, by

some means or other, ravished. At the same time, however, many writers were beginning to direct their gaze away from the action below and onto the mountain itself. In such instances, the mountain became less a participant and more an object of aesthetic and philosophical consideration. Fred Randel details the history of the Romantic mountaintop as a stage on which epiphanic awakenings are enacted (or notably absent). Randel establishes the Romantic mountaintop as a place of access not only to conventional deities but also to such abstract notions as Wordsworth's self-expansion and Shelley's disembodied Power.

Twitchell emphasizes the movement away from a strictly Christian mode of transcendence and explains the Romantic response to the vacancy that resulted from the displacement of the Christian God: "No longer bound up in the valuative terms of the Christian hierarchy, the heavens opened up; as A. D. Nuttall has shown, they became 'a common sky.'" (30). The attempt to understand the nature of the epiphanic mountain experience necessarily involves an effort to discover what, if anything, lies beyond the skyline.

The present study will address the role of the mountain-landscape in two Romantic poems: Shelley's "Mont Blanc" and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (the Snowdon episode, in particular). I will take Randel's discussion of mountaintops as my point of departure, but I will extend my study to include, more generally, the "mountain experience," and narrow it to exclude that mode of the mountain experience that involves a notable *lack* of epiphany. In short, my concern will be, specifically, the mountain experience that leads to an epiphanic awakening in the subject. It is my contention that the critical factor associating the mountain-landscape with the individual's enlightenment is the unique physical relationship between the perceiving subject and the object landscape that the mountain makes possible. The poems I have chosen to consider are similar in that they both deal directly with mountain-landscapes

that serve as inspiration to enlightened awareness, but their differences provide new possibilities for explaining the mountain experience: by measuring Wordsworth's physical journey up Snowdon against Shelley's visual-imaginative ascent of Mont Blanc, I will demonstrate how proximity is more affecting than elevation, and the direction of the subject's gaze more significant than physical contact with the landscape, in enabling moments of enlightenment.

Spatial Hierarchy.

Randel's mountaintops represent a long-established understanding of the spatial relationship between spiritual and material. In Deigo Valades's 1579 drawing of "The Great Chain of Being," all the basic categories of the sixteenth-century universe are stacked neatly in a rigid hierarchy, beginning with God at the top, descending through angels, men, animals, vegetables, and inanimate matter, and finally ending with the spirits of Hell at the bottom. This drawing offers a glaring example of the spatial relationships that were (and often still are) attributed to our being. Humankind, being comprised of both body and spirit, is situated between the spiritual world and the material. The conspicuous boundaries separating each category emphasize how fixed these positions were: there is no channel for movement from one category to another. Thus, the men in the drawing may look up toward the heavens, they may imagine God and send up their prayers of pleading and thanksgiving, but their feet remain firmly fixed on the ground below them. Vertical movement is effectively inhibited.

The idea that humankind occupies a fixed station in the universe extends well beyond the ideology of sixteenth-century Spain. Many Greek myths express the villainy of the human overreacher who would dare approach the heavens (consider the story of Icarus, for example, or the fate of Bellerophon). In the Old Testament, an attempt to "build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven" (*King James Bible*, Gen. 11.4) ends in chaos and destruction. In these particular examples, the primary transgression is the intention of moving beyond one's proper place; to be more specific, it is the intention of moving *upward*, beyond

one's proper place. In each of these cases, the transgressor moves toward the heavens while losing contact with the earth below him. Metaphorically, as his feet leave the ground, he sheds his material nature, becoming less like a man and more like a god.

The nature of metaphors like the one above is addressed in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*. Lakoff and Johnson would categorize the spatial metaphor that places the spiritual above and the material below—the “good is up” metaphor, as they call it—as an “orientational metaphor,” which is a type of metaphor that “organizes a whole system of concepts with respect to one another” (14). It is a generalized metaphor by which countless derivative metaphors are understood. In particular, “GOOD IS UP gives an UP orientation to general well-being, and this orientation is coherent with special cases like HAPPY IS UP, HEALTH IS UP, ALIVE IS UP, CONTROL IS UP” (14), and, to continue this string of metaphors, SPIRITUAL IS UP, UNDERSTANDING IS UP, VIRTUE IS UP. More specifically, the “good is up” metaphor provides the structure to such derivative metaphors as, “She's feeling down,” and, “Things are looking up.” It also provides for our use of such phrases as “heightened awareness” and “elevated thoughts” to refer to enlightened states of consciousness (a phrase which, in turn, derives from metaphor). Lakoff and Johnson emphasize that orientational metaphors always have an experiential basis: “Spatialization metaphors are rooted in physical and cultural experience; they are not randomly assigned. A metaphor can serve as a vehicle for understanding a concept only by virtue of its experiential basis” (18). Among the experiential factors that likely contribute to the metaphor(s) expressed in the hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being, the belief that God quite literally occupied the heavens (the sky, that is) is considerable. The placement of God above rather than below can be attributed to the orientation of the human body, where the

center of consciousness (and the seat of virtue) is located in the upper extreme, and the lower extreme is applied to such basic physical tasks as moving from one place to another. Hence, we understand that “spiritual is up” and, therefore, God is up. To move upward, then, is to move into closer proximity to God, or to move away from our physical nature. In the absence of a god, to move upward is to move to a more purely spiritual state of being.

It is easy to understand how this same spatial hierarchy could be attributed to Romantic poems where individuals atop mountains experience profound moments of enlightenment. Generally speaking, vertical movement was acceptable, even in ancient times, as long as the subject maintained contact with the earth: the ancient Greeks ascended mountains for the purpose of performing religious sacrifices; Moses received the Ten Commandments while atop a mountain; Muhammad experienced a spiritual epiphany in a cave on top of Mt. Hira. These individuals, though clearly moving nearer to the abode of the supernatural, maintained a firm footing on the ground below them. They honored their dualistic human nature by staying grounded, quite literally, as they sought out a closer proximity to the gods, or God or Allah. It is this grounding that makes possible an experience of enlightenment rather than sacrilege. There are, however, two problems with positing Romantic mountain poetry as a continuation of the cultural tradition where physical ascension is so inextricably bound to the concept of spiritual ascension. The first is that the Romantic (de)construction of spatial hierarchies was quite different than what had previously been established. Blake turns established hierarchies on their heads in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Shelley creates a similar effect in *Prometheus Unbound* by situating evil (Jupiter) above and good (Prometheus) below. Byron mocks the celebrated mountaintop religious encounter by placing Manfred atop the Jungfrau to experience precisely *nothing*. If

the god above is essentially bad, or if the god is altogether absent, then the physical elevation that brings the subject into the proximity of that god cannot reasonably be said to correlate to a genuine spiritual ascension. The structure of the “good is up” metaphor no longer extrapolates to the meaning expressed. The second issue, and the one more relevant to the poems at hand, is that some of the greatest epiphanies in response to mountain-landscapes have occurred in the valleys around the mountains. Shelley’s poem to Mont Blanc is frequently cited as one of the most impressive passages of mountain poetry ever written, even though Shelley himself never set foot on the mountain.³ Physical elevation, it would seem, is irrelevant to the subject’s potential to attain enlightenment. Regarding Shelley’s encounter with Mont Blanc and Wordsworth’s ascent of Snowdon, the epiphanies that occur clearly center on the presence of the mountains, but we cannot presumptively attribute them to the physical elevation of the human subject. There is evidently some other factor at work having to do with the peculiar nature of the mountain-landscape and the speaker’s situation within the landscape.

In order to discover what this factor may be, it will be helpful to establish that the poems are comparable—that they are similar enough for their differences to be of significance. I will begin with the basic observation that the poems each focus on a particular, localized mountain-landscape. Moreover, each poem descriptively progresses from the bottom of the mountain to the summit. Wordsworth’s account opens as he departs from his lodgings at “Bethkelet” (Beddgelert) with the intention of reaching the summit of Snowdon by sunrise. The journey up the mountain begins at a cottage near the mountain’s

³ See, for instance, Randel (294). Even some individuals who are openly biased toward the experience of mountain climbing have expressed the sentiment—see Bates (82) and Stephen (63).

base. From there, Wordsworth and his two companions make their way to the summit directly and uneventfully. Shelley's descriptive journey up Mont Blanc, though less direct than Wordsworth's, also carries the poem upward, toward the summit. The journey begins from his vantage point 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" (l. 20) at the mountain's base, and continuing up a waterfall and past caverns until finally reaching the farthest extent of visibility, where the mountain appears to be "piercing the infinite sky" (60). The clouds that obstruct Shelley's view of the mountain's summit have their counterparts in the mists in the Snowdon episode, which cover the valleys below. The Arve is comparable to the Afon Gwyrfai, which creates the trench in the mists between Wordsworth's standpoint and the sea beyond the hills. Ultimately, each poem involves a subject who is looking out upon an expansive but only partially visible landscape that is resounding with the "voice" of a river; in both cases the landscape leads the poet into a philosophical musing on the relationship between himself and the natural world. These musings draw him into a state of enlightenment.

Yet, at nearly every point where the poems intersect, the difference in the directions they travel becomes especially noticeable. The epiphanies in the poems, we will find, are different enough to resist a casual comparison; they represent Shelley's and Wordsworth's respective ontological philosophies, as well as their opposing philosophies of poetic inspiration and composition. One poet looks on a landscape and sees himself; the other questions his place in an impersonal universe that is indifferent to his very being. One poet displays the potential to affect the world and his place in it; the other wonders about the human capacity to influence that which is external to the mind of the individual. One poet

displays confidence; the other, uncertainty. One dwells on reflection; the other claims a sense of immediacy. In the end, what Shelley finds beyond the skyline of Mont Blanc is quite unlike what Wordsworth finds atop Snowdon. In an attempt to bring these two experiences together for discussion, I will call upon that over-arching concept that has come to account for the diverse epiphanic experiences that filled the space that had once been exclusively occupied by the divine revelation of the Christian tradition: the sublime.

The Sublime.

The sublime is a curious concept that gained widespread attention in England in the Eighteenth Century. In his history of the sublime, Samuel H. Monk traces the emergence of the Romantic sublime back to the growing popularity of the Grand Tour, a custom that led many young Englishmen through the Alps and into Italy as part of an educational pilgrimage to the birthplace of Western culture. The beginnings of this custom marked the first time that Englishmen, in relatively large numbers, found themselves among the towering and rugged heights of the Alpine landscape. The landscape left a strong impression on many of these travelers, and, as Monk explains, the need arose for some form of rhetoric that could address the sensations that arose in response: “If, coming from England, they had conventionally regarded mountains as simply disagreeable necessities, and if, in the midst of danger and labor, they felt certain agreeable emotions arising from objects that were clearly unbeautiful, they might well have been impelled to speculate on the aesthetic problems implied in this new observation” (208). The Romantic sublime arose, then, to supply an aesthetic category for that experience of nature which could not be classified as beautiful but which was enjoyable nonetheless.

Burke published his *Philosophical Enquiry* in the midst of these shifting sentiments toward mountain-landscapes. In his study, he sought to account for the paradoxical idea that an experience that invokes negative sensations (pain, terror) could be ultimately construed as positive. According to Burke, terror is the central element of the sublime: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort

terrible, or a conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (58). Such qualities as obscurity and privation are of the sublime because they invite the imagination to supply what is lacking to the senses, and Burke points out that the mind, when left to fill in these gaps in perception, will always supply the most terrifying objects (99). Infinity is of the sublime because it baffles the senses, again leaving the mind with a feeling of uncertainty and a resulting vulnerability. In all cases, however, we must be situated far enough from the perceived source of danger to where our terror does not give way to a genuine fear for our safety. Burke continues, in this passage, to explain how, “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful.” Strength of feeling, paired with an understanding that the perceived danger is only a fiction, accounts for the positive sensation of the experience of terror in the Burkean sublime. Burke’s explanation of the sublime satisfies the need to account for pleasurable sensations in response to objects that fall outside the category of the beautiful and introduces the idea of infinitude as a characteristic quality of the object of the sublime, which becomes a major factor of later accounts of the sublime.

Thirty-four years following the publication of Burke’s *Enquiry*, Immanuel Kant published his own inquiry into the nature of the sublime: *The Critique of Judgment*. Kant brought the sublime a little closer to the mode that would inform later versions of the sublime, placing less emphasis on the role of terror (and pain) and claiming a sense of infinitude as the determining factor for sublime experiences. For Kant, an experience of the sublime occurs when we encounter, via our sensory faculties, an object that resists the power

of the senses to produce a single, comprehensive intuition. It is marked by a conflict between the Imagination's infinite potential for apprehension and the Reason's demand for a finite totality to every intuition—"the Imagination proceeds of itself to infinity" (114), whereas Reason, "for every given magnitude...requires totality" (115). The Reason, in effect, intuits the infinite as a finite object despite its boundlessness. The resulting sensation is sublime—it is a satisfaction that comes from intuiting "that, the mere ability to think which, shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of Sense" (110). The awareness of this supersensible faculty, which attends the experience of the sublime, is the source of pleasurable feelings in the Kantian sublime.

The role of infinity, even an artificial infinity, in provoking a sense of the sublime factors prominently in the Burkean and Kantian accounts of the sublime, and its prominence remains a consistent feature in sublime discourse in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁴ We might adjust Burke's summary of the sublime, for the purpose of this study, to the following: whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the idea of infinitude is a source of the sublime. The sublime occurs at the threshold between the sensible and the supersensible, where the sensory faculty suddenly falters and the imagination is called upon to account for a sensation that eludes our usual means of understanding. As Philip Shaw writes, it is "the moment when the ability to apprehend, to know, and to express a thought or sensation is defeated. Yet through this very defeat, the mind gets a feeling for that which lies beyond thought and language" (3). Similarly, Thomas Weiskel summarizes the sublime as a system of "relations between indeterminacy and a 'meaning' predicated of indeterminacy...the

⁴ In addition to Burke and Kant, see Friedrich Schiller's essay, "On the Sublime," and G. W. F. Hegel's *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*.

signifiers of this discourse are themselves constituted by a subject's relation to an object—his inability to grasp it" (34-5). An object that, by whatever means, eludes our attempt to understand, apprehend, measure or quantify is suggestive of infinitude and is, therefore, a possible source of the sublime.

The sense of infinitude in the two poems is created in large part by the presence of clouds (in "Mont Blanc") and mists (in the Snowdon episode). The clouds that cover the summit of Mont Blanc imply to Shelley the presence of an absolute entity, which Shelley deems to be neither benign nor malignant.⁵ It is indifferent, and its purpose in the poem is to overwhelm the individual's tendency to calculate and measure the world around him, and by effect to open his mind to where he can receive the higher truths that the natural world would impart. The clouds wash out the visible boundary where the mountaintop meets the sky, allowing the unlimited imagination to take over where the finite sense of vision leaves off. Boundaries, outlines, horizons—these are elements of perception that support our sensory faculty, for they limit the object to where we are able to perceive it all at once. When we lose sight of these defining lines, the object seems to continue on indefinitely, offering to the mind an idea of the infinite. Burke writes, "There are scarce any things which can become the objects of our senses that are really, and in their own nature infinite. But the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they really were" (100). In the Snowdon episode, the mists block out any point of reference that would allow the poet to assess just how deep the valley below is. There is no objective means of estimating the depth of the sea of mist, so the inquisitive mind

⁵ Note that Shelley does bring up the threat of danger, but it relates more to the part of the landscape that he *does* see—the glaciers, for example.

can presumably continue down through the depths indefinitely, until the imagination presents the mind with an idea of infinitude.

The imagination is the primary faculty of the experience of the sublime and requires explanation. Burke writes of the imagination:

Besides the ideas, with their annexed pains and pleasures, which are presented by the sense; the mind of man possesses a sort of creative power of its own; either in representing at pleasure the images of things in the order and manner in which they were received by the senses, or in combining those images in a new manner, and according to a different order. (15-6)

He distinguishes the imagination as a faculty of the mind separate from the faculty of sense perception. The imagination acts upon the ideas gathered from perception by means of either reflecting them as they are received or creatively altering them. The imagination is, basically, the mind's faculty for processing information gained through the senses. Burke goes on to state that "the power of the imagination is incapable of producing any thing absolutely new; it can only vary the disposition of those ideas which it has received from the senses" (16). By referring to the imagination as a "creative power," then, Burke is indicating its potential to act on the information gathered from sense perception. This is different than the creative function of the imagination in Kant's philosophy. Like Burke, Kant establishes the imagination as distinct from the faculty of perception. He also insists upon the power of the imagination to organize the ideas gleaned from sense experience, claiming its task, in part, to be that of synthesizing the manifold of apperception into a single intuition. Yet Kant extends the power of the imagination beyond mere organization of ideas and attributes to it a generative capability. He differentiates between the "reproductive" imagination (which is

more or less what Burke described the imagination to be) and the “productive” imagination.

In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, he writes,

Imagination is the faculty of representing in intuition an object that is *not itself present*. Now since all our intuition is sensible, the imagination, owing to the subjective condition under which alone it can give to the concepts of understanding a corresponding intuition, belongs to *sensibility*. But inasmuch as its synthesis is an expression of spontaneity, which is determinative and not, like sense, determinable merely, and which is therefore able to determine sense *a priori* in respect of its form in accordance with the unity of apperception, imagination is to that extent a faculty which determines the sensibility *a priori*. (165)

Kant cites the potential for *a priori* knowledge as the creative capacity of the imagination, which he calls the “productive” imagination: “In so far as imagination is spontaneity, I sometimes also title it the *productive* imagination, to distinguish it from the *reproductive* imagination, whose synthesis is entirely subject to empirical laws, the laws, namely, of association” (165). Thus Kant raises the imagination from a merely synthesizing faculty to a faculty capable of spontaneously producing intuitions (that is, producing intuitions without prior input from the external world).

Wordsworth and Shelley join Burke and Kant in establishing the imagination as a synthesizing faculty, but they extend its function, as Kant does, to include creative production. Wordsworth, who outlines his theory of imagination in the preface to his 1815 *Poems*, writes of synthesis, “To the mode in which Fancy has already been characterised as the power of evoking and combining, or, as my friend Mr. Coleridge has styled it, ‘the aggregative and associative power,’ my objection is only that the definition is too general. To

aggregate and to associate, to evoke and combine, belong as well to the Imagination as to the Fancy” (218). The imagination participates in the work of synthesis, and its difference from “fancy” is primarily in the effects of the process. Whereas Fancy makes associations based on spatio-temporal ideas and appeals to our finite understanding, “Imagination [is given] to incite and to support the eternal.” Its creative capacity is exemplified in its tendency to raise our thoughts beyond what we are able to fully comprehend—to produce an idea of infinitude based on finite materials. In the opening of *A Defense of Poetry*, Shelley makes a similar distinction between Imagination and Reason; he writes,

The one is the *το ποιειν* or the principle of synthesis, and has for its objects those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself; the other is the *το λογιζειν*, or the principle of analysis, and its action regards the relation of things simply as relations; considering thoughts, not in their integral unity, but as the algebraical representations which conduct to certain general ends. (510)

Again, imagination is the faculty of the mind that is uniquely suggestive of the infinite. It can produce an idea of forms, where Reason can only conceptualize particulars. In its generative capacity, it can create ideas that supercede the spatio-temporal concepts that are produced from a sensory experience of the world. It is this aspect of the imagination that makes it a vital component of experiences of the sublime: if the sublime is caused by the excitement of an idea of infinitude, then the imagination is the mental faculty that enables the experience to take place.

Theories of the sublime deal with the *process* by which we arrive, by means of the imagination, at a sense of expanded awareness—in all cases, it leads us to something beyond what our basic senses can provide, or at least to an idea of something beyond the senses. It

does not, however, account for what it is that is present beyond the senses. This space remains unfurnished. It is a “common sky,” a suitable abode for entities as diverse as disembodied Power, or the aggrandized self, or even God himself.⁶ For this reason, the sublime will provide a suitable framework for considering the Snowdon episode and “Mont Blanc,” as it will inform the means by which Wordsworth and Shelley respond to their respective landscapes without limiting the scope of what they may encounter (or to what they may find that they are unable to encounter) beyond the threshold of sensory experience. Wordsworth and Shelley each respond to the natural landscape, in their respective ways, by negating the material qualities of the landscape. The horizon that would mark the limit of Mont Blanc’s heights is hidden from sight; the ground that would contain the space of the valley beneath Snowdon is altogether removed from the experience. Physical limitations are undone, and the material elements of the scenery take on a semblance of infinite existence. Yet, for all this seeming movement away from the physical, we should be careful not to overlook the role that physical qualities play in the experience of the sublime. As theories of the sublime demand, the reaction that is inspired by a mountain landscape will not be experienced in response to just any landscape. It is the nature of the physical that enables the movement of the spiritual (or intellectual, depending on what the case may be). From here, I would like to consider the way that the subject’s physical situation within the landscape affects the experience of the sublime. I will turn now to the idea of *embodiment* to shed light on this relationship.

⁶ In Coleridge’s “Hymn Before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni,” the poet encounters God through his experience of the sublime. Randel shows how the “something beyond” took on different aspects according to the varying philosophies (or religions, as the case may be) of the poets.

Embodied Perspectives.

Embodiment is a theoretical concept that has made frequent appearances in recent literary criticism, most commonly in feminist criticism, where the unique physical experience of being female serves as a basis for consideration of literature by and about women.⁷ The embodied reception of music has received a great deal of attention as well, and the concept has been applied in ecocriticism to address the ways in which human subjects operate in or on the natural world.⁸ It is this latter application of the concept that I wish to investigate. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* is a keystone work in the development of our understanding of embodiment and will provide a favorable point of departure for a consideration of the physical experience of landscape in the Snowdon episode and "Mont Blanc." Merleau-Ponty's major contribution to the field of phenomenology was to pointedly situate the subject in the field of perception—to bring our attention back to our physical being in the world. In the preface to his *Phenomenology*, he states his intention to provide a long over-due answer to the question, "What is phenomenology?" He answers this question by asserting that phenomenology is

a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their

⁷ See, for instance, *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* edited by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury.

⁸ See Frances Dyson's *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* and *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersection of Nature and Culture* edited by Gail Weiss and Honi Fern Haber.

‘facticity’ ... it is also a philosophy for which the world is always ‘already there’ before reflection begins—as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status. (vii)

He rejects such efforts as those made by Descartes and Kant to arrive at an understanding of perception by describing the sensory faculties of the perceiving subject as proof for the existence of the external world. The world, he argues, is already there; to prove its existence by explaining the nature of our perceptive faculties is “to make it the outcome of a series of syntheses which link, in the first place sensations, then aspects of the object corresponding to different perspectives, when both are nothing but products of analysis, with no sort of prior reality” (x). We should begin, then, not with an explanation of our perceptive faculties, but with an acknowledgement of the reality of perception itself. The real is already present—it “has to be described, not constructed or formed” (x). Merleau-Ponty emphasizes our physical being in a physical world. At first glance, this theory of phenomenology seems strikingly objectivist, as the material of our knowledge of the world originates, not as ideas, but as objects external to the human mind. It places a particular emphasis on subjective experience, however, by situating the perceiving subject in a “phenomenal field,” which incorporates the relational qualities of all the objects of that field. He introduces the phenomenal field as a complex web of perspectives:

[T]o look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it... Thus every object is the mirror of all others. When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can

‘see’; but back of my lamp is nothing but the face which it ‘shows’ to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world. (68)

The physical world, the *real* world, is a world of spatial relationships. Objects exist only in relationship to other objects. Moreover, the objects of the phenomenal field that I occupy exist in relationship to *me*, the perceiving subject. Only in relation to the perceiving subject do the terms “foreground” and “background” make sense; only in relation to the perceiving subject does the horizon have any being.

In light of this philosophy, the Snowdon episode and “Mont Blanc” become poems, not only about mountain landscapes, but also about individuals situated within mountain landscapes. We acknowledge the physical details that the poems offer, but we must also consider how those details lay out the unique perspectives of the speakers, and we consider the speakers themselves as a presence in the landscapes. I will begin by constructing an account of the physical experiences that are suggested in the poems. I will do this by tracing the physical details that each poem provides in order to establish a probable perspective of the landscape. The basis of Shelley’s perspective in “Mont Blanc” is the view of the partially visible mountain from his position on a bridge over the Arve. He is, therefore, directly above the river, looking up at the mountain while the rapids rush below and behind him. The mountain and the surrounding peaks, the river, and the cloud ceiling overhead effectively engulf him. He lingers in this place for the entirety of the poem, his gaze moving up the mountain, but his body remaining stationary. The stillness of the poet forms a strong contrast with the activity of the scene around him: the sunlight and shadows that “sail / Fast” over the landscape (14-5), the river “Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame / Of lightning through the tempest” (18-9), the caverns echoing, the winds continually blowing.

Even the trees take on action, “clinging” to the mountain and tempting the winds with their “mighty swinging” (20, 23). The ravine is busy with “ceaseless motion” (32). In the midst of all this chaos, Shelley stands motionless, though his mind is restlessly trying to comprehend the scene around him. Wordsworth shifts this structure to where the activity is more balanced between subject and landscape. The journey up the mountain entails physical exertion on the part of the poet, who “panted up / With eager pace” (31-2), as well as a changing vantage point that is absent from Shelley’s account; as Wordsworth crests the top of the mountain, his steps bring him suddenly out of the shadow of the mountain and into the moonlight: “instantly a light upon the turf / Fell like a flash” (39-40). In Shelley’s poem, the flashes of lightning are independent of the movement of the poet; they come and go by their own nature, and he can no more affect their presence than he can stop the glaciers from moving down the mountainside. Here, the flash of moonlight is created, not by a movement of the natural elements, but by the subject’s repositioning himself in relation to those elements. There are two significant and related points to make with regard to this difference: (1) it reemphasizes Shelley’s passivity in comparison to Wordsworth’s active influence, and (2) it brings to attention the effect of the subject moving within the landscape. Basically, the active subject has the power to change his vantage point, whereas the inert subject maintains a singular, unchanging vantage point, which greatly limits his possible perspectives on the landscape. Wordsworth climbs a mountain in the course of the 55-line opening description; Shelley is paralyzed in wonder for the whole 144 lines of “Mont Blanc.” Wordsworth’s changing vantage point as he moves from shadow to light brings movement to an otherwise still element of the landscape. And yet, the landscape around Snowdon is not static. There is a movement out from the individual elements of the scene toward the other elements—a

continual movement of reaching, gazing, and in this instance, physically approaching. The physical (inter)activity on the mountaintop represents the subject's control over his being in a given environment.

Consider, however, that despite the various movements that Shelley describes in the landscape, the basic shape of the visible landscape is the same at the end of the poem as it is at the beginning. This is because Shelley never physically moves beyond his vantage point on the bridge, so within the phenomenal field he maintains a consistent spatial relationship to the larger elements of the landscape. In the end, the movement of the natural world serves primarily to highlight the speaker's own stillness and, by extension, his limited perspective. When he looks on the landscape, his senses are overwhelmed. The ravine seems to him "Dizzy" (34); his thoughts are "wild" and "wandering" (41); his "very spirit fails" (57). He is, in effect, paralyzed, passively receiving the scene around as the "everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind" (1-2), at the same time actively interpreting the scene, his mind "Holding an unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around" (39-40). The ambiguity between action/inertia is not problematic for Shelley. It is, in fact, just the sort of experience he would expect to undergo in the face of the sublime. For Wordsworth, however, the experience of the sublime does not involve such a sense of paralysis. The control that he maintains over himself—of both mind and body—is fitting to his version of the sublime, which tends more to bolster the ego rather than threaten its disappearance.

But what of Wordsworth's perspective when he achieves the summit? He has clearly demonstrated an ability to affect his position in the phenomenal field, and the change that derives from that power is equally suited to his philosophy of the sublime. If we trace Wordsworth's changing vantage point from the base of the mountain to its summit, we will

reveal a movement from darkness, silence, and general privation into light and activity—a sensory marvel that is encountered by virtue of the individual’s own effort. It recalls the very act of creation, the effort to summon order and meaning from chaos, or nothingness. When Wordsworth sets off up the mountain, he is in a sort of sensory vacuum, deprived of both sight—“Little could we see, / Hemmed round on every side with fog and damp” (15-6)—and sound—“silently we sunk / Each into commerce with his private thoughts” (18-9). The entirety of the ascent is spent in this vacuum, excepting the brief instance of the dog barking, which ultimately serves only to accentuate the silence that brackets it. Immediately following the flash of moonlight, his senses are opened up to a grand show of lights, shapes and sounds. The light of the moon, the roar of the river, and the vastness and variation in the scenery enliven the speaker and bring him into communion with the natural world. The capacity of the individual to affect such a change in vantage point is uniquely Wordsworthian. He displays a similar capacity for deliberate creativity in Book Six, when he follows up his disappointment with Mont Blanc by visiting the nearby Vale of Chamouny, which “reconciled” him to the natural world by providing, by way of its scenery, “A frequent lesson of sound tenderness, / The universal reason of mankind, / The truth of young and old” (461, 475-7). In Book Thirteen, he positions himself atop the mountain, and although the references to his material body are subtle and few (the mention of his feet in lines 36, 44 and 54, for example) his presence is felt, almost anticipated, it seems, by the landscape itself. It is difficult to imagine the scene apart from the presence of the speaker, for whom “The universal spectacle throughout / Was shaped for admiration and delight” (60-1). He is, in the context of the poem, a necessary element of the scene, a traveler above the mists, looking out

over a world that is at once expressive of its own glory and accepting of the subject as a genuine constituent of the whole.

This contrast between active and passive, between action and passivity, is not a mere function of the descriptive choices made by two poets with differing theories of the sublime (although those choices do come into play). The world that Wordsworth looks out on is vastly different than the landscape surrounding Mont Blanc. We can imagine the soft lines of the hills around Snowdon with “their dusky backs upheaved” (45) and the smooth, level horizon on the sea. Wordsworth is standing on the highest mountain for miles around, looking out over a landscape that rests *at his feet*. Shelley, by contrast, 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 horizon, if it is to be found, is discovered not by casting the gaze out over a still, level expanse, but by craning the neck back to scan the heights of the irregular mountains. Shelley declines to make direct mention of his material presence in the landscape, but were he to describe what he saw at *his feet*, it would not have taken the form of a tranquil sea. The waters approaching Shelley’s feet were powerful and raging.

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 cloudline.⁹ The adjectives used to describe the lower landscape in Stanza II are suggestive of a power that is counter to the “feeble brook” of the poet’s mind in Stanza I: he describes the river “bursting” through the ravine (18), the trees’ “mighty swinging” (23), and the untamable

⁹ Wasserman distinguishes between power in the usual sense (the “mortal power” of line 103) and Power as the “ultimate cause” (see Wasserman 222).

echoes in the caverns—“A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame” (30). 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
 Is there, that from the boundaries of the sky
 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. (102-14)

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. Philosophies of the sublime, however, require that the perceived danger in the object be fictive, or at the very least distant enough that it poses no immediate threat to the subject. Kant echoes Burke when he writes, “He who fears can form no judgment about the Sublime in nature...it is impossible

to find satisfaction in a terror that is seriously felt” (*Critique of Judgment* 124). Shelley 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” (123-5), then to the greater Power beyond the glaciers, which “dwells apart in its tranquility / Remote, serene, and inaccessible” (96-7). It is Shelley’s poetic sensibility, his ability to “Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel” the Power of the mountain, his “higher mind” (to borrow a phrase from Wordsworth) that enables him to undergo the sublime experience.

Wordsworth and Shelley both insist on the existence of higher minds, which are essentially poetic minds that are capable of understanding the world to a degree that the common people cannot. They are minds with especially keen imaginative-creative faculties. 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]” (93-4), and “grosser minds,” upon whom Nature must deliberately exert such transformations. Shelley draws a similar distinction when he claims that the mountain’s voice would be “not understood / By all” but could be interpreted by “the wise, and great, and good” (81-2). An important difference to note between their portrayals of these higher minds is that Wordsworth attributes to them the ability to instigate the experience that will result in an epiphany, whereas Shelley, as usual, presents their subjectivity to happenstance, as determined by the laws of Necessity without concern for human interest. Nonetheless, the existence of higher minds, chief among which were poets, was extremely important to Shelley. His philosophy of poetry, as expressed in the *Defense*, 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” (531). The poet makes this flight by means of an “invisible” and “inconstant” inspiration, and it is his receptiveness to such instances of 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 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. 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 cloudline 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” (23-4). The abyss is certainly present in “Mont Blanc.” The landscape stretches infinitely in every direction:

Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,

Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy, and serene—
 Its subject mountains their unearthly forms
 Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between
 Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,
 Blue as the overhanging heaven. (60-5)

It is very well possible that the space referenced by the “infinite sky,” which is reflected in the “unfathomable deeps,” is grand 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” (80-1). 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” (77-9) while resisting comprehension because of its inherent need to give form to what should, in Shelley’s mind, remain formless.

Such tension is noticeably lacking in Wordsworth’s encounter, which results in a sense of calmness that, in line with my argument, can be traced back to the poet’s physical experience of the landscape. Nature’s force is not very remarkable in the Snowdon episode. Its might is so subtle as to go almost unnoticed. Wordsworth begins his trek up the mountain “as if in opposition set / Against an enemy” (30-1). Once he reaches the summit, nature takes on a submissive posture: the mist “meek and silent rested at my feet” (44); the sea “seemed / To dwindle and give up its majesty” (49-50). Even the chasm in the mist, which is arguably the most powerful element of this landscape, poses no sense of danger to Wordsworth. He is at ease—he feels admiration and delight, but perceives no threat to his human self.

Throughout the description, there is a vague notion that the landscape possesses a certain power, but the power is of a benign entity and will not be turned upon the adoring human subject—after all, “Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her” (“Tintern Abbey” 126-7), even though she may have the potential to do so.

The sense of accord between subject and object is characteristic of the Wordsworthian sublime. In this version of the sublime, pleasurable feelings do not follow negative sensations; pleasure arises from a sort of self-expansion that occurs when the mind of the subject encounters and *participates* in an external power. Wordsworth describes the sublime as that which “suspends the comparing power of the mind & possesses it with a feeling of intense unity, without a conscious contemplation of parts” (“On the Sublime” 353-4). The mind observes a fusion, not only of external objects, but also of the external world and the self. This melding process begins with

a humiliation or prostration of the mind before some external agency which it presumes not to make an effort to participate, but is absorbed in the contemplation of the might in the external power, &, as far as it has any consciousness of itself, its grandeur subsists in the naked fact of being conscious of external Power at once awful & immeasurable; so that, in both cases, the head & the front of the sensation is intense unity. (354)

The mind is impressed, not with a sense of urgency, but with a sense of unity. When Wordsworth looks out over the landscape from atop Snowdon, he, too, beholds an abyss—that vast natural scene that spans the heavens, where “the moon looked down upon this shew / In single glory” (52-3), the seemingly bottomless sea of mist, and the real sea, which extends far beyond his vision. What Wordsworth encounters in the abyss is not God, nor

vacancy or disembodied Power, but the mind itself. Wordsworth describes the scene as “The perfect image of a mighty mind, / Of one that feeds upon infinity” (69-70). The transformation that Nature performs on the mountain-landscape is a reflection of a function of the human mind (of the poet’s mind, in particular). Moreover, the unity of the power of the human mind with the “external power” of nature is paralleled in the poet’s perception of the physical world. Wordsworth’s description of this sublime landscape is marked by a profound interconnectedness, where the entire scene appears to merge into a cohesive whole. The moon looks down on the scene below; the mists “shot themselves / In headlands, tongues, and promontory shapes, / Into the sea, the real sea” (47-9); the speaker stands, with his companions, looking out on the scene, “the mist / Touching our very feet” (53-4); he hears the “streams / Innumerable, roaring with one voice” (58-9). The description is filled with instances of reaching out for, of gazing toward. It becomes a “universal spectacle” (60), a singular entity in which the distinct boundaries of the various elements of the scene are slowly worn away.

G. Kim Blank sets Wordsworth’s “steadfastness” against Shelley’s “questionings” (172), a distinction that I would like to emphasize as I close my discussion of the sublime. The distinction is one of confidence/uncertainty, of control/chaos, and of security/vulnerability. It is present in the descriptive details of each scene, as I have shown, but it is also present in the very structure of each account and, if we trace it further along, in the authors’ philosophies of poetic composition. The Snowdon episode professes a degree of organization that is noticeably lacking in “Mont Blanc.” We can trace this quality back to Wordsworth’s account of poetic composition as laid out in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth describes poetic composition as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful

feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity [*sic*]” and goes on to explain how “the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind” (504). The composition of the Snowdon episode seems to follow this process. Wordsworth climbed Snowdon in 1793, many years before he completed his first composition of this portion of *The Prelude*.¹⁰ The account itself is written in past tense and displays an orderly division between the experience of the landscape and the mental processing of the experience that follows. The first stanza of Book Thirteen recounts the circumstances leading up to the climbing of Snowdon. The second stanza provides a detailed description of the scene. Here, Wordsworth presents the sights and sounds that met him on top of the mountain. The third stanza begins his musing on the scene: “A meditation rose in me that night / Upon the lonely mountain *when the scene / Had passed away*” (66-8, emphasis mine). Only after the scene has faded does Wordsworth begin to make sense of the message it carried. Some aspects of the landscape are not expounded on until much later in the meditation. After describing the “roar of waters, torrents, streams / Innumerable, roaring with one voice” in lines 58-9, Wordsworth finally draws a metaphorical connection between the river and the human mind in lines 171-84:

This faculty [imagination] hath been the moving soul

Of our long labour: we have traced the stream

From darkness, and the very place of birth

¹⁰ According to The Cornell Wordsworth series, Wordsworth completed most of the five-book *Prelude* (the first version to include an account of the climbing of Snowdon) in early 1804. See page 12 for a detailed history of this composition.

In its blind cavern, whence is faintly heard
 The sound of waters; followed it to light
 And open day, accompanied its course
 Among the ways of Nature, afterwards
 Lost sight of it bewildered and engulfed,
 Then given it greeting as it rose once more
 With strength, reflecting in its solemn breast
 The works of man, and face of human life;
 And lastly, from its progress have we drawn
 The feeling of life endless, the one thought
 By which we live, infinity and God.

The source of the roar of waters roaring with one voice—the imaginative core of the natural scene—is likened to Wordsworth’s own imagination; the flow of the river reminds him of the development of his creative mind. Yet, this metaphor is recognized only after the experience has taken place—and after the poet has had time to process the experience in his mind and make sense of it.

Shelley’s interpretation of the landscape seems to be much more in the moment. The interweaving of description and interpretation expresses a sense of spontaneity that supports Shelley’s claim that the poem “was composed under the immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects which it attempts to describe” (*History*, vi).

“Mont Blanc” actually *begins* with the mind-river metaphor, then quickly transitions into the physical description of the river. With the lines, “when I gaze on thee / I seem as in a trance sublime and strange / To muse on my own separate phantasy, / My own, my human mind”

(34-7), the mind is again cast back into the landscape metaphor, and the speaker's thoughts become birds that flutter about the caves and crags. Although it is highly unlikely that Shelley actually composed "Mont Blanc" on the spot, the urgency to capture his experience in poetic expression reflects his conviction that poetic inspiration begins to fade the moment it manifests. He describes this loss of inspiration in the *Defense*:

A man cannot say, "I will compose poetry." The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within, like the colour of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results: but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conception of the poet. (531)

Where Wordsworth would revisit his experience at a later time and begin his composition based on "emotion recollected in tranquility," Shelley would be scrambling for pen and paper while still under the influence of the original experience. The poet's task, according to Shelley, is to find expression as quickly as possible in order to minimize the loss of the poetic revelation. The integration of description and interpretation in "Mont Blanc" is suggestive of this process of composition, and we as readers can imagine the poet attempting to make sense of the scene at the time the various elements of the landscape gradually come to his notice.

The variation in structure between the Snowdon episode and "Mont Blanc" (and the control/chaos, etc., distinction that it represents) points to an important difference between

Wordsworth's and Shelley's versions of the sublime, which has to do primarily with the ability of the individual to successfully seek out instances of the sublime. For Wordsworth, the experience of the sublime is an occasion that can be actively sought out and, often enough, achieved. The wonder of the landscape comes upon him quickly, perhaps sooner than he expected, as he reaches the summit of Snowdon, but he had set out hours before with the intention of experiencing *something* atop the mountain—and his effort proved fruitful. Generally speaking, his sublime is much more obtainable than is Shelley's. Shelley spends much of his time chasing down those profound moments of heightened awareness, as in *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, but he possesses no power to call those experiences up at will. When they do occur, they occur by the Power's own necessity without regard to the summons of the individual. In both cases, however, the sublime is something that, despite possible negative sensations, is understood as a positive phenomenon. It is something to be actively sought, as it provides the material for poetic expression: an enlightened awareness of the world beyond (or perhaps including) the self.

The contrasting faces of the two landscapes, then—the serene view from the top of Snowdon and the chaos of the lower landscape of Mont Blanc—are reflected in the poets' contrasting responses to the landscapes and, ultimately, in the poets' composition of poetry about their responses to the landscapes. Having resituated the supersensory sublime in the physical (sensory) experience of the landscape, I will now consider the unique sensory means by which each poet interacts with his environment.

Modes of Perception.

In the Nineteenth Century, just as mountaineering was becoming popular as a sport, a debate arose over the question of the ethics of climbing mountains and, as a correlative, the best way to experience the mountain-landscape. This debate was sparked by an impassioned rebuke in John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, wherein he likened the new sport to the game of climbing a greased pole for the mere challenge of reaching the top:

[T]he Alps themselves, which your own poets used to love so reverently, you look upon as soaped poles in a bear-garden, which you set yourselves to climb and slide down again, with "shrieks of delight." When you are past shrieking, having no human articulate voice to say you are glad with, you fill the quietude of their valleys with gunpowder blasts, and rush home, red with cutaneous eruption of conceit, and voluble with convulsive hiccough of self-satisfaction. (53)

As the bitter tone of this passage indicates, Ruskin loved mountains, believing them "to have been built for the human race, as at once their schools and cathedrals; full of treasures of illuminated manuscripts for the scholar...glorious in holiness for the worshipper" (*Modern Painters*, 425). In Ruskin's mind, to climb a mountain was to invade its sanctity, to injure its dignity, and to belittle the spiritual truths that it may convey. Human individuals were capable of participating in meaningful interchange with mountain-landscapes, but this should be done in a way that would honor the integrity of the mountain. Physical exertion set against the mountain's terrain could not contribute to such an interchange and, if it were strenuous

enough, could even detract from it. In short, Ruskin believed that mountains were best viewed from below.

Stephen defends mountain climbing against Ruskin's charge in the closing section of *The Playground of Europe*, where he argues that to view the mountain from below is to only partially experience the grandeur that makes the mountain so admirable in the first place. Part of the mountaineer's advantage is that he is able to more accurately estimate the immense features of the mountain-landscape:

The faint blue line across the upper névé, scarcely distinguishable to the eye, represents to one observer nothing but a trifling undulation; a second, perhaps, knows that it means a crevasse; the mountaineer remembers that it is the top of a huge chasm, thirty feet across, and perhaps ten times as deep, with perpendicular sides of glimmering blue ice, and fringed by thick rows of enormous pendent icicles. (318)

Features of the landscape are less impressive when viewed from afar,¹¹ and it is for this reason that one must climb the mountain to truly appreciate their immensity. As he notes, “if mountains owe their influence upon the imagination in a great degree to their size and steepness, and apparent inaccessibility...the advantages of the mountaineer are obvious” (321). The precise details of the chasm, gained by a mere change of perspective and proximity, rely on the same sense that Ruskin's observer uses to perceive the landscape—that

¹¹ Wordsworth makes a similar claim in his essay “On the Sublime and the Beautiful,” where he describes the differing effects of viewing mountains from afar and viewing them close up: “If these objects [mountains] be so distant that, while we look at them, they are only thought of as the crown of a comprehensive Landscape...we shall receive from them a grand impression, and nothing more. But if they be looked at from a point which has brought us so near that the mountain is almost the sole object before our eyes...we shall be impressed with a sensation of sublimity” (351). This occurrence is well illustrated in the boat-stealing episode of *The Prelude*, Book One.

of sight; Stephen, however, extends his argument to include the role of a direct contact with the earth in affecting the mountaineer's perception of the landscape. The mountaineer estimates the landscape using, not only his sight, but also the amount of physical exertion that is required to ascend it: "The steepness is not expressed in degrees, but by the memory of the sensation produced when a snow-slope seems to be rising up and smiting you in the face; when, far away from all human help, you are clinging like a fly to the slippery side of a mighty pinnacle in mid air" (321).

In short, Ruskin and Stephen represented two possible ways of encountering a mountain-landscape: either we can come into close physical contact with the mountain, or we can view the mountain from the valley below. These are the very means of encounter that occur in the Snowdon episode and "Mont Blanc." Wordsworth, of course, illustrates the experience of physical contact with the landscape, but instead of developing a sense of familiarity with the mountain-landscape that intensifies his experience of it, he overlooks the mountain altogether, quite literally in the end. Again, this aspect of the experience is founded upon the physical details of the scene, or the lack thereof. It would seem that the natural tendency for the subject at the bottom of the mountain, facing the mountain, would be to direct the gaze upward, toward the rising slope of the landscape—especially if his intention is to ascend that slope. Wordsworth reports, however, that he was "Hemmed round on every side with fog and damp...by myself / Was nothing either seen or heard the while / Which took me from my musings" (16, 20-2). Despite his contact with the mountain, he cannot *see* the mountain, so he looks at the ground and moves along "With forehead bent / Earthward, as if in opposition set / Against an enemy" (29-31). This lone reference to the mountain is brief and indirect and expresses none of the awe that Stephen insists is basic to the climber's

experience of the mountain-landscape. Of course, Wordsworth's estimation of the mountain by his physical exertion—which is the central tenet of Stephen's praise for the experience of mountain climbing—is somewhat lacking: "I panted up / With eager pace, and no less eager thoughts, / Thus might we wear perhaps an hour away" (31-3). Only a single word of Wordsworth's entire account ("panted") is suggestive of any real physical exertion.¹² If anything, Wordsworth's reference to the mountain reveals a peculiar tension between subject and mountain,¹³ perhaps not unlike the struggle indicated by Stephen's "clinging like a fly to the slippery side of a mighty pinnacle in mid air," although to a much lesser degree. Wordsworth maintains his downcast gaze for the remainder of his journey up the mountain. When he reaches the summit he notices, not that the moon is suddenly visible overhead, but first that the ground at his feet "appeared to brighten" (36). It is only at this point that he lifts his gaze toward the surrounding landscape, and at this point, of course, the mountain no longer fills that space. The grand presence of Snowdon has been left behind; it has been overlooked.

This is not to say that the mountain is unimportant to what Wordsworth experiences in this episode, only that it has essentially gone unnoticed in the course of the narrative. With regard to its significance, it serves the crucial function of elevating the subject above the surrounding landscape, providing him with the spectacle that inspires his description while receiving no descriptive tribute in turn. Were it not for this random mass of earth jutting up

¹² This sort of understatement with regard to physical exertion is not untypical of Wordsworth. Consider Book Six of *The Prelude*, where he crosses the Alps with only "a little scruple" (507) and without even realizing he had done so until a local peasant informs him of the fact.

¹³ In his essay "The Climbing of Snowdon," Jonathan Wordsworth offers a compelling argument that the perceived aggression toward nature in Wordsworth's poetry is a passing moment on the path to an ultimate communion with Nature.

out of the landscape, the climactic vision of the Snowdon episode could never have taken place, for Wordsworth would never have made his way out of the fog and darkness that obscured the valley below. The Snowdon episode, then, is still clearly a *mountain* experience, even though the mountain itself is ultimately an invisible presence in the poem. What Wordsworth's narrative indicates is that physical contact alone is not sufficient to enable a transformative experience in response to a landscape. The capacity to *see* and to *hear* the landscape is essential.

The means of perceiving the landscape in "Mont Blanc" offer support for this claim, demonstrating Ruskin's belief that there is a substantial advantage to viewing mountain-landscapes from below. The mountain-landscape in this poem fills the subject's field of vision to the point of excess. Shelley cannot see beyond the mountains; he cannot see even to the outlining horizons of the mountains. Unable to perceive the scene as a unified whole, Shelley allows his gaze to shift from one element to the next—from the river to the forests to the glacier to the point where Mont Blanc seems to disappear into the sky. Yet, unlike Wordsworth, Shelley never comes into direct contact with the landscape. Standing on a bridge, he is suspended in the midst of the scene, removed from direct physical contact with the natural world around him. It is his sight and hearing that provide him with information about his environment. He sees the mountains, the river, the forests, caves, clouds and glaciers. He hears the winds and the rushing torrents of the Arve. These are the same senses Wordsworth uses to perceive the view from Snowdon—he sees the moon, the mist, the hills and the sea; he hears the river in the chasm—although Wordsworth, of course, stands solidly on the mountain, with the mist grazing his feet. Still, Wordsworth's tactile exploration of his environment goes no farther than his vaguely depicted (and, it seems, vaguely experienced)

effort to get to the top of the mountain, and we can surmise that, had he the ability to flit to the top of Snowdon with no physical contact whatsoever, he would have been none the worse for it. The functional purpose of physically encountering the mountain, for Wordsworth, is to alter the information that is available through sight and hearing. Alternatively, Shelley's physical remove from the landscape poses no issue concerning his ability to respond to the landscape in a meaningful way. The information available to his sight and hearing is abundant, and that, along with the continual movement that animates the landscape, provides ample material for his philosophic musing.

More important than physical contact, for Shelley, is proximity: were he far enough from the mountain that it did not fill his vision to the degree it does in the poem, his response to it may have been quite different. Had he found himself at such a distance from the mountain that, instead of looking up at the mountain, he could look *out toward* the mountain, his response may have been very much like what Wordsworth records of his reaction to Mont Blanc in Book Six of *The Prelude*: "That day we first / Beheld the summit of Mount Blanc, and grieved / To have a soulless image on the eye / Which had usurped upon a living thought / That never more could be" (452-5). Mont Blanc seems to fit easily within Wordsworth's range of vision—he is not impressed by the immensity of the landscape but states simply, that he "beheld" Mont Blanc, summit and all, and was disappointed with what he found there. He comments directly on the effect of viewing mountains from afar in his essay "On the Sublime and the Beautiful": "If these objects [mountains] be so distant that, while we look at them, they are only thought of as the crown of a comprehensive Landscape...we shall receive from them a grand impression, and nothing more. But if they be looked at from a point which has brought us so near that the mountain is almost the sole object before our

eyes...we shall be impressed with a sensation of sublimity” (351). Shelley is situated just close enough to the mountain, not only for the mountain to be “almost the sole object before [his] eyes,” but for his senses to be flooded with the experience—yet he is not so close that he overlooks the mountain altogether.

Thus, in answer to the question of how best to experience the mountain-landscape¹⁴ we might suggest that mountains are best experienced from whatever vantage point most adequately accommodates our need to see and hear the various elements of the landscape, regardless of the altitude—or the level of contact with the mountain—of the perceiving subject. If the purpose is to approach an experience of the sublime, this vantage point needs to be such that the senses ultimately fail in their attempt to perceive the whole. In other words, there should be something in the subject’s perception of the landscape that is suggestive of the infinite, for it is at those moments when the senses fail that the sense of infinitude arises. In “Mont Blanc,” this sense of infinitude derives from Shelley’s situation near the base of the mountain, which creates a disparity between the expanse of the landscape and the subject’s capacity for perceiving it that leaves outlines and horizons undeterminable; Shelley cannot perceive the full outline of the mountain before him. In the Snowdon episode, the sense of infinitude similarly derives from the limitations of the senses. Wordsworth cannot see through the mists, and he cannot see beyond the distant horizon of the Atlantic.

¹⁴ It should be clear at this point that I refer to the “mountain-landscape”—and not just the “mountain”—because Wordsworth never quite addresses the mountain itself. The common subject of these poems is the general landscape, a landscape of which the mountain is a significant feature.

When the senses fail, the imagination takes over and suggests to the mind an idea of infinity.¹⁵

The role of the imagination in perceiving a landscape cannot go unmentioned, as it factors prominently in Shelley's experience of 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. The first few stanzas recount Shelley's visual ascent up Mont Blanc. 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” (127-9). The shift from sight to imagination is subtle in the poem, and were it not for Shelley's note in the *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* that the mountain “was covered in cloud” (151),¹⁶ the reader might take the description that follows as a continuation of the poet's sensory experience of mountain. 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 it form and thereby to risk reestablishing that despised anthropomorphic deity. Despite the then recent exploit by Balmat and Paccard, the top of Mont Blanc represents, for Shelley, the formlessness and inaccessibility that he associates

¹⁵ Kant attributes to the imagination the potential to continue apprehending the elements of an object *ad infinitum*; he insists, however, that the imagination is held in check by the faculty of reason, which demands totality for any given intuition. See his discussion of the mathematical sublime in §26.

¹⁶ Shelley is quite specific regarding the presence of the clouds on the mountains: “As we entered the valley of Chamouni... clouds hung upon the mountains at the distance of perhaps 6000 feet from the earth, but so as effectually to conceal not only Mont Blanc, but the other *aiguilles*, as they call them here, attached and subordinate to it” (153).

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. It remains unaffected by the change and activity of the world below: "Power dwells apart in its tranquillity / Remote, serene, and inaccessible" (96-7). Shelley describes the continual ebb and flow of the sensory world below the cloudline, the cycle of life and death, the movement of the seasons, and the changing face of the earth. In 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" (127-32). The snow falls eternally atop Mont Blanc. The winds there are silent (135), the lightning, "voiceless" (137). Shelley removes the mountaintop from the realm of sensory experience in an effort to establish its remoteness and its elusion of the limiting influence of human perception.

In summary, there are at least three levels of perception at work in the poems: direct physical contact, vision and hearing (which, in terms of the body, are less direct than physical contact but still rely on an interchange between the subject and the sensory world), and imagination (where the mind advances from that interchange and begins to make sense of the world without regard to further external sources of information). The physical climbing of the mountain provides a direct contact with the earth that, although not always a necessary condition for experiencing the sublime, enables the subject to alter his perspective and, in conjunction with other modes of perception, can lead to an experience of the sublime and an expanded awareness of the self and its relationship to the natural world. Physical contact alone cannot achieve this experience, as evidenced by Wordsworth's trek up Snowdon, but functions more as a means to shift the position in the landscape from which other senses gather information about the external world. Vision and/or hearing are necessary in order for

the individual to perceive those qualities of the landscape that contribute to the experience of the sublime. Vision is primarily responsible for suggesting infinitude to the mind; hearing can contribute to the idea of infinitude so long as it tends toward either excess of volume or silence. Imagination, although not typically considered a mode of perception, can work in a way similar to perception. In “Mont Blanc,” the imagination completes the descriptive rendering of a scene that would otherwise remain only partially available to the understanding. The transition from visual perception to imaginative perception is subtle enough to cause the ontological difference between those portions of the landscape that are visibly present and those that Shelley imaginatively constructs to go almost unnoticed. The information Shelley gathers from this imaginative rendering is at least as important to his experience as that which he gains from sensory perception. In short, these modes of perception support and supplement each other in order to provide an image to the mind that carries it to the threshold of sensory experience. Where the body cannot go, the gaze takes over, and where the gaze fails, the imagination kicks in. The physical ascent of Snowdon makes Wordsworth witness to an audio-visual exhibition that would otherwise have gone unperceived. In the *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, Shelley writes of his first view of Mont Blanc, “I never knew—I never imagined what mountains were before” (151); vision provides the mind with something that imagination could not and so bolsters the imagination to the heights of Mont Blanc, where Shelley encounters the very Power of the universe. In experiences of the sublime, the perceptual process always follows through to the engagement of the imagination, for that is ultimately what allows the poet to peer briefly into the world beyond the senses.

Conclusion.

I have traced the descriptive journeys in these poems from their beginnings at the bases of the mountains to the very summits. Wordsworth embarks on a physical journey to the top of Snowdon and, having reached the summit, casts his gaze back down onto the landscape below. Twitchell describes the Wordsworthian sublime as a journey just up to the threshold of the liminal, a movement toward the horizon without experiencing the total release that marks a crossing over that threshold into the *subliminal*: it is a “trip to the brink of the world beyond ‘sensible’ perception,” and yet “The poet remains at the edge still bound to language” (73). This is true particularly of the older Wordsworth, who is less likely to experience “aching joys” and “dizzy raptures” in response to the landscape (“Tintern Abbey” 87, 88). Once he reaches the summit of Snowdon, which from the valley below marks the boundary between earth and sky, the threshold so to speak, the poet lingers only momentarily before returning, via his gaze, to the landscape from which he ascended; there, he experiences a union with the natural world. Of course, his horizon also shifts, and “the world beyond ‘sensible’ perception” becomes the world inhabited (and sensorily perceived) by the human mind. The spatial metaphor breaks down as the source of enlightenment changes with the changing vantage point and perception of the human subject. Like Shelley, Wordsworth makes a visual journey that leads him to an epiphanic awareness of his relationship to the world.

Shelley’s journey does not end in a return trip down the mountain. His gaze is directed upward continually, and at the end of the poem he leaves us, still musing on the

nature of the Power atop the mountain. I mentioned earlier the role the mountain played in Wordsworth's experience: without having climbed the mountain, he would never have been elevated above the obscuring fog. But what if Shelley *had* climbed the mountain? What would he have seen from atop Mont Blanc? My guess is that he would have glanced briefly back onto the landscape below (who could resist such a view?), then directed his gaze upward again. As Twitchell writes, what Shelley seeks "is more than a bird's-eye view...it is an angel's-eye view" (166). But there is more to it than this. Shelley is not so much interested in the spatial hierarchy that places "good" above as he is in the inaccessibility of the space, for 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. (*Prometheus* 3.3.44-54)

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 desires an "angel's-eye view," it is because there is always a space 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. The poet's occupation is to chase down those

momentary glimpses that offer to the human mind an uncertain sense of that which will forever be just beyond the reach of our full understanding.

It has been my purpose to resituate the poets within their respective landscapes and to consider the ways in which acknowledgment of the physical details of the scenes affects our understanding of the poems. I have demonstrated that the orientational metaphor that structures the way we interpret so many spatial relationships in our day-to-day experience breaks down when we attempt to apply it to these particular mountain-landscape poems. The primary metaphor, “good is up,” suggests that the higher elevations in the landscape are locales for epiphanic awakenings to occur. But we have seen that this suggestion doesn’t hold up; the altitude of the poet is irrelevant. His position within the phenomenal field of the landscape, however, affects the way the landscape appears to him. That position and the perspectives it affords, along with the sensory modes of perception that the poet employs in his encounter with the landscape, constitute the poet’s physical, embodied experience of the landscape. It is this embodied experience, with its awareness of the physical presence of both subject and landscape and the spatial relationship between them, that makes possible an advancement of the mind beyond the ideas that are presented to it from the physical experience into a supersensory mode of perception. Here, the imagination propels the mind beyond what it is capable of comprehending, presenting it with an idea of infinity and effecting an experience of the sublime. Indeed, it is the curious nature of the sublime (its unique interplay between embodied experience and supersensory perception—between the physical and the imagined) that enables it to displace the orientational metaphor, removing the source of enlightenment from its fixed place atop the mountain and opening up all areas of the mountain-landscape as possible sources. The “opening up” of the landscape in terms of

possible sources of the sublime corresponds with the “opening up” of the sky (or valley, or caves) in terms of possible objects of the sublime. “Mont Blanc” and the Snowdon episode illustrate well the expanded possibilities for achieving an epiphanic awakening in response to a mountain landscape. By considering the poems in light of the “embodied sublime,” we find that proximity within the landscape is indeed more important than the elevation of the speaker, and the direction of the subject’s gaze more important than physical contact with the landscape, in elevating the mind to an experience of sublime awareness.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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