

Language and Literature

<http://lal.sagepub.com>

Foregrounding and the sublime: Shelley in Chamonix

David S. Miall

Language and Literature 2007; 16; 155

DOI: 10.1177/0963947007075982

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://lal.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/16/2/155>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Poetics and Linguistics Association

Additional services and information for *Language and Literature* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://lal.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://lal.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://lal.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/16/2/155>

ARTICLE

Foregrounding and the sublime: Shelley in Chamonix

David S. Miall, *University of Alberta, Canada*

Abstract

Commentators have spoken of the moment of sublime experience as one of amazement, of being overwhelmed by the strikingness of the sublime appearance. The sublime, in other words, is an effect of defamiliarization. If a poet is to embody the sublime experience in language (i.e., in the poetic sublime), we would expect the resources of linguistic foregrounding to be central to this effort. The defamiliarizing moment is, of course, central to the modern conception of the response to foregrounding. It is thus also at the heart of response to the sublime.

In this article I consider the resources of foregrounding called upon by Shelley in his letter from Chamonix and his poem 'Mont Blanc', and suggest that these enable us as readers to enact his experience through striking figurative, phonetic, and metrical features. I focus on four features: the sense of defamiliarization; disrupted or unusual syntax; the senses being under pressure; and figures that suggest a merging of mind and nature. In particular, I develop a conception of the ecological significance of the sublime scene, showing how Shelley creates an ethical view of Mont Blanc through three concepts that I term presence, community, and autonomy.

Keywords: *defamiliarization; ecology; ethics; landscape; Mont Blanc; romanticism*

In an early and highly influential account of the sublime, Longinus holds that the effect of the sublime is astonishment: 'a well-timed stroke of sublimity scatters everything before it like a thunderbolt' (1965: 100). In other words, the sublime represents an extreme mode of defamiliarization. The defamiliarizing moment is, of course, central to the modern conception of the response to foregrounding (Miall and Kuiken, 1994). Thus for the poet seeking to embody in language a defamiliarizing sublime experience, such as the sight of a mountain or a glacier (the natural sublime), the linguistic resources of foregrounding (i.e., the poetic sublime) will be central to the effort. I will suggest that this is a matter not only of finding a language adequate to convey the imagery and processes of the sublime, but a question of how a relationship between the reader and the sublime in nature can be evoked through the language of foregrounding – a relationship that I will seek to place within an ecological framework.

To exemplify the sublime I will examine the foregrounding resources called upon by the poet Shelley in his letter on Mont Blanc dating from July 1816 and his poem on the mountain written shortly afterwards, and consider how these enable us as readers to enact and feel his experience through striking figurative, phonetic and metrical features. I will then outline some ways in which the poetic



sublime invites us to participate in the powers of nature that are represented in the poem. The present article, I should add, is only a first sketch of a potentially extensive topic. The perspective on the sublime I will discuss in Shelley relates to at least three important critical discourses: first, it has historical roots in a tradition of loco-descriptive poetry, second, it can be linked to ecological approaches to Romantic poetry, which have been developing rapidly in the last decade; and, finally, it relates to the literature on the sublime, which is itself, of course, vast. I have no space for serious discussion of any of these areas.¹

Shelley entered the vale of Chamonix on 22 July 1816. It was a partly cloudy day. After stopping in Servoz, he followed the road near the River Arve and crossed the river at a bridge known as Pont Pellisier. Here for the first time he caught sight of the lower slopes of Mont Blanc: framed by the pine forest on the steep banks each side of the river, the river rushing in full spate below, the mountain itself with its snow fields and glaciers appears to rise up, blocking the end of the valley. Writing that evening to his friend Peacock, Shelley said of this part of the journey:

Mont Blanc was before us but was covered with cloud, & its base furrowed with dreadful gaps was seen alone. Pinnacles of snow, intolerably bright, part of the chain connected with Mont Blanc shone thro the clouds at intervals on high. I never knew I never imagined what mountains were before. The immensity of these aeriell summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of extatic [sic] wonder, not unallied to madness – And remember this was all one scene. It all pressed home to our regard & our imagination. – Though it embraced a great number of miles the snowy pyramids which shot into the bright blue sky seemed to overhang our path – the ravine, clothed with gigantic pines and black with its depth below. – so deep that the very roaring of the untameable Arve which rolled through it could not be heard above – was close to our very footsteps. All was as much our own as if we had been the creators of such impressions in the minds of others, as now occupied our own. – Nature was the poet whose harmony held our spirits more breathless than that of the divinest. (Shelley, 1964: I, 497)

This is Shelley's first response to the natural sublime at the Pont Pellisier, as mediated by his letter. He was shortly to write his poem 'Mont Blanc' (Shelley and Shelley, 1817: 175–83) that would develop this moment and extend its insights to other sublime features of the Chamonix valley. But for the moment, I want to single out four features of Shelley's prose description. These are partly overlapping (experience of the first is likely also to be signalled by the second and third, and all three may lead to the fourth).

First, most obvious, is his sense of defamiliarization, of being overwhelmed: 'I never knew I never imagined what mountains were before.' Other words, such as 'dreadful' or 'intolerably' suggest the same astonished response. Second, the pressure of the experience seems to cause his syntax to break down at least

once ('I never knew I never imagined ...'), while the effort to relate the different parts of what was 'all one scene' prompts an unusual number of dashes, several of which, occurring after a period, violate conventional grammar. Third, his language shows the experience pressing on, and threatening to overwhelm the senses, not only vision ('intolerably bright ... burst upon the sight'), but also the kinaesthetic response suggested by 'seemed to overhang our path', and 'held our spirits more breathless'. Fourth, and perhaps most significant, a merging of mind and nature. Shelley represents the scene as though he had participated in producing it ('All was as much our own as if we had been the creators of such impressions in the minds of others, as now occupied our own'): a surprising figure ('as if') that relocates the origin of the landscape to the poet's mind. In effect, this abruptly shifts the deictic centre and blurs the boundary between mind and landscape – a shift that anticipates the framework Shelley is to adopt in 'Mont Blanc'.

Taken together, these four features of Shelley's account show a process in which the cognitive and affective schemata of the poet break down, faced with their inadequacy in response to the scene before him: his prior concept of mountains is overthrown, the size of the landscape is immense ('it embraced a great number of miles') yet seems to impend over him personally, and the river in the ravine is roaring yet cannot be heard – in all, an experience that he compares to madness, a testament to the overwhelming feelings that this powerfully defamiliarizing scene has aroused in him. As a result, a new kind of relationship to the scene is forged, in which the perceptual and bodily configuration induced in him helps the poet to feel that he has merged with the natural forces of the Arve valley: that is, a radical deictic shift occurs that now includes the landscape within the mind of the poet, holding him 'breathless'. The paradox inherent in Shelley's account is elaborated by Eric Glenn Wilson: 'Nature as a poet is mind as much as matter. Poet as nature is matter as much as mind' (2005: 55). For the student of Shelley it is of considerable interest to see how this response to the natural sublime is developed, complicated and extended in his poem 'Mont Blanc,' and I will discuss some of the features of this poem later.

But Shelley's sublime experience here is instructive also in suggesting a conception of the sublime at odds with some standard accounts. All commentators speak of the moment of sublime experience being one of amazement, of being overwhelmed by the strikingness of the sublime appearance. Thomas Weiskel, for instance, proposed a three-phase model in which normal perception (the first phase) is disrupted by surprise or astonishment at a sudden disproportion or excess (second phase); the mind then constitutes a new relationship with the object (third phase), which is said to be symbolic of the transcendent order (1976: 23–4). But Weiskel also conceives of the sublime in Freudian terms as a response to the primal wound sustained by the Oedipal complex: it is, he says, a 'moment in which the mind turns within and performs its identification with reason ... and thereby reestablishes the oedipus complex, whose positive resolution is the basis of culture itself' (1976: 94) – in other words,

a turning away from the power of the sublime scene. This seems the reverse of Shelley's account, which involves rather his identification with the scene. Another influential account, that of Burke, presupposes terror as the principle of the sublime: it depends on immersion in obscurity or one of its cognate conditions: a sense of power, privation, vastness, infinity, or the like, and signifies our powers of self-preservation. While Shelley's sublime clearly evokes vastness, his feelings seem motivated by awe at the alien power he confronts rather than its terror. For Kant the sublime signified the affirmation of reason amidst the defeat of the imagination, since our senses fail to give an adequate representation of the sublime. Despite our helplessness 'as beings of nature,' Kant explained, the sublime assures us of possessing 'a faculty of estimating ourselves as independent of nature' (1952: 111). 'This saves humanity in our own person from humiliation, even though as mortal men we have to submit to external violence' (1952: 111). The sublime, according to Kant, shows us how 'the mind can make itself sensible of the appropriate sublimity of the sphere of its own being, even above nature' (1952: 112). Shelley's response to Mont Blanc, on the contrary, is to explore what the sublime landscape can teach about the common basis of the mind and nature. In his poem 'Mont Blanc' Shelley went on to make this issue explicit.²

The poem, which is divided into five parts, begins with this issue: 'The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind' (1–2).³ At the same time,

from secret springs
The source of human thought its tribute brings
Of waters – with a sound but half its own,
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume
In the wild woods (lines 4–8)

This seems to state the problem that Shelley will consider in the rest of the poem: what is the relation of human thought to the universe of 'things'. While Shelley avoids imputing thought to the universe in this opening statement, it is clear that human thought, although 'feeble', contributes to its 'flow'. In the second section the relationship is exemplified by the Ravine of the River Arve as one sign of the power of the mountain above and by Shelley's reflections on his own powers of thought in 'unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around' (lines 39–40). The remaining three sections focus specifically on the mountain as a whole and the challenge it presents to human understanding. In the third section Shelley envisages the inhospitable summit regions, yet suggests that the mountain can teach a faith in our relationship with nature that will overcome 'Large codes of fraud and woe' (line 81). In the fourth section Shelley widens the perspective, showing both the destructive power of the mountain through its glaciers (the glaciers were expanding at the time), as well as the creative power of the rivers that flow from them. Finally, in the fifth section, he returns to the summit of Mont Blanc, and situates it once again in the universal scheme as a location of 'The secret Strength of things / Which governs thought' (lines 139–40). In this cursory, very simplified account of the poem I have

focused on the issue of human thought, how its relation to nature is challenged by Shelley's response to the mountain. As a highly defamiliarizing experience, however, and that which makes it a notable example of the sublime, the poem achieves much of its effect through shifting the field of perception, enabling us to glimpse perspectives that are wider or higher than in our accustomed schemata for landscape, or inflected with historical or natural processes on a scale we would not normally see. As a result, our conceptions of human thought and feeling are challenged: what does it mean to know such a scene as Mont Blanc, and how is it that we can know? At times the scene threatens to overwhelm any possible response – the mind participates in a world too great for human comprehension:

the very spirit fails,
Driven like a homeless cloud from steep to steep
That vanishes among the viewless gales! (lines 57–9)

Here the perspective is shifted to the point of vertigo.

In writing the poem, then, the problem that Shelley has set himself, one that faces any writer expressing a response to a sublime situation, is to find a language adequate to the task, one capable of conveying a sense of the sublime to the reader – how, in brief, to translate the natural sublime into the poetic sublime. In doing so, the poet must have recourse to a language that breaks into and disrupts the reader's standard assumptions – in other words, a language that demonstrates foregrounding. To examine the resources on which Shelley draws, I return to the four features I identified in the letter: I show how these are developed in the poem. My argument will be that the sublime here, unlike Kant's formulation, rather than raising us above nature is nature speaking in us through the power of foregrounded language.

The four features that I mentioned in Shelley's letter were: (1) being overwhelmed, that is, the sense of defamiliarization; (2) disrupted or unusual syntax; (3) the senses being under pressure; and (4), figures that suggest a merging of mind and nature. Of course, two or more features often occur together, as I will show.

In the first section of the poem, in just 11 lines, Shelley develops his understanding of the mind participating in nature; he compares the human mind to a small stream surrounded by waterfalls and a river. Then, turning as if to the scene before him (the one first seen on the Pont Pellisier), he says:

Thus thou, Ravine of Arve – dark, deep Ravine –
Thou many-coloured, many-voiced vale,
Over whose pines, and crags, and caverns sail
Fast cloud-shadows and sunbeams: awful scene,
Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down
From the ice-gulphs that gird his secret throne,
Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame
Of lightning thro' the tempest; (lines 12–19)

The Arve, represented as a vehicle for the Power, the universal realm of thought, surprises us by ‘Bursting’ into view like lightning (a highly defamiliarizing experience). As Bode puts it, ‘The ravine – all passive – is run through by a river that is the symbol of an active power’ (1997: 334). Also, in the last two lines we have the sensory confusion of comparing a river to a lightning stroke, while earlier we are subjected to the rapidly changing scene made vivid through repetitions: ‘many’ in the second line, ‘and’ in the third, while the enjambment at ‘sail / fast’ helps to evoke the changing sky. The syntax of these lines is unusual, with ‘Thus’ apparently introducing confirming evidence for the theoretical claim of the opening lines – which leaves us a good deal to infer. We find sentence fragments making up the whole passage, the use of dashes, even the word order of ‘dark, deep’ that reverses typical locution (higher vowel first) (Tsur, 1992: 25). Finally, consistent with Shelley’s letter, is the animation with which the scene is endowed: the Ravine is addressed as if it were animate (‘Thus thou’), while the Arve descends as Power from ‘his secret throne’.

It has become common to dismiss such animating metaphors as a Romantic illusion. John Ruskin in a well-known phrase termed this practice the ‘pathetic fallacy’, criticizing a number of types of poetry that he considered weak or morbid because the emotion expressed was false or misplaced (1897: III, 161–77). Yet in his own descriptions of natural scenery Ruskin’s language animates nature in highly evocative terms. For example, he recommends the painter to give careful attention to the formation of precipices. ‘With its own patient and victorious presence’ a precipice ‘will always talk to us when we are inclined to converse’ (1897: IV, 275–6). Or, in his account of trees, he explains how they are to be seen at their best: ‘For the resource of trees are not developed until they have difficulty to contend with; neither their tenderness of brotherly love and harmony, till they are forced to choose their ways of various life where there is contracted room for them, talking to each other with their restrained branches’ (1897: IV, 370).

Whether speaking of rocks or trees, then, Ruskin suggests a presence that finds an answering response in us. So Shelley asks of Mont Blanc, particularly its summit regions, whether there is a presence here that we can partly see, or partly imagine:

Is this the scene
Where the old Earthquake-dæmon taught her young
Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea
Of fire envelop once this silent snow? (lines 71–3)

The ‘dæmon’ suggests a possible presence, but here, as elsewhere in the poem, Shelley discourages us (by the use of the question) from directly attributing an anthropomorphized spirit to the scene like the eighteenth-century’s poet’s typical use of deities and spirits.⁴ A similar intimation is evident in the metonymic figure of the next line: ‘The wilderness has a mysterious tongue / Which teaches awful doubt’ (lines 76–7), or a faith that will renovate the world. We do not

have to accept Shelley's political hopes⁵ in order to recognize the power of his perceptions, and his ability to forge a language that surprises us into conceiving of the mountain as the site of a consciousness, something like (if also alien from) human thought. What Shelley's sublime calls on in us, as readers, is an answering expansion of the imagination and its bodily correlates. As the 18th-century theorist Alexander Gerard put it, 'We always contemplate objects and ideas with a disposition similar to their nature. When a large object is presented, the mind expands itself to the extent of that object, and is filled with one grand sensation' And he adds, in terms that seem to speak of the body as well as the mind, 'it finds such a difficulty in spreading itself to the dimensions of its object, as enlivens and invigorates its frame' (1780: 12).

The implication of Shelley's sublime, and Ruskin's examples, is that there is a disposition in us to animate the world around us that is enabled by sublime language, a disposition activated not only in the mind but embedded within the body. The sublime builds in this respect on a capacity that arguably has evolutionary roots: in the survival stakes in the ancestral environment, for example, it paid to endow a distant bush or a rock with life in case the bush or rock turned out to be a predator, even though this renders us liable to the 'false positives' involved in reading the signs of a predator, as Fodor points out (1983: 71). But this tendency calls attention to a larger capacity – our ability to empathize (as I will term it, for want of a better word), not only with other human beings but with the environment around us. Thus Shelley, to give examples from 'Mont Blanc', sees the winds 'drinking' the odours of the pines (lines 22–3); he endows the 'hidden buds' of winter with 'feeble dreams' (lines 88–9); the glaciers 'creep / Like snakes that watch their prey' (lines 100–1). My argument is that these are not only figures of speech. Whether an object is animate (a cat, a bee) or inanimate (a tree, a precipice), we have the capacity to reconstitute in our own minds the forces that make it what it is, whether animate or inanimate, which, in turn, makes it more likely that we will anticipate correctly what it may do or become next. As David Abram puts it in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, in this perspective, mind itself is a part of the surrounding world, a participant with the land: 'Intelligence is no longer ours alone but is a property of the earth; we are in it, of it, immersed in its depths' (1997: 237, 262).⁶

It is this empathic capacity, I argue, that the language of the sublime characteristically evokes, doing so through the agency of the different kinds and levels of foregrounding. While the principal and most obvious feature is the animating metaphor, the central structuring device of Shelley's poem, the empathic impulse is present in less obvious ways at other levels: the metrical pattern or rhyming pattern that subverts normal discourse, imposing on us a different pulse, a different centre of attention; the cross echoes and eddies of internal rhyme or rhythm that seem to animate momentary energies across the lines of a poem, as I suggested, for example, in considering Shelley's use of repetitions and enjambment above (lines 13–15); the unusual syntax that strips away the conventional framework of expression and shows thought in its

crucible, in the process of being made. The sublime language of Shelley's poem, then, calls on us to re-imagine, to 'prove upon our pulses', as Keats would say (1958: I, 279), the power that has created Mont Blanc and the valley of the Arve, and to recognize its resonance in ourselves as creative beings, to see ourselves and Mont Blanc as expressions of the same energies, including those aspects of the mountain that (as Shelley takes pains to show) seem inhuman and indifferent to us.

Whether the foregrounding apparent in a poem such as 'Mont Blanc' evokes now, in modern readers, the empathic capacity I have suggested is, of course, properly an empirical question. We can only know by observing the responses of readers. How we should set about this is another question, but here is one argument that may help, reminding us of the contrast of Shelley to Kant that I mentioned earlier. Recent feminist criticism of traditional accounts of the sublime have regarded it as a form of appropriation. As Barbara Claire Freeman puts it, referring to Kant, 'the central moment of the sublime marks the self's newly enhanced sense of identity' (1995: 3); in other words, through the sublime the self is said to gain knowledge of itself and greater power, and to assert its distinctive separateness. In contrast, Freeman wishes to consider the ability of the sublime 'to blur distinctions between observer and observed, reader and text, or spectator and event' (1995: 5). For example, among the readers of Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' whom we have studied (Kuiken et al., 2004), we identified several whose response to the sublime was similar to Freeman's proposal. We found that their accentuation of the sensuous properties of imagery and phonemic elements of the text suggested 'a loosening of the boundaries that normally separate conventional categories' (Kuiken et al., 2004: 188); in other words, a blurring of distinctions. As a result, readers at times identified themselves with the experiences of the poem, whether the Mariner's suffering, the patterns of the sea snakes, or the pursuing fiend, and saw their own identities in a new light. The sublime, in the light of such studies, can be expected to intensify and dramatize the distinctive effects of literary reading, which makes it an important (if currently neglected) area for empirical work. We are currently refining our empirical approaches to this and related phenomena, in order to study more specifically the effects of the sublime on readers. Shelley's poem, meanwhile, challenges us, somewhat as Shelley was challenged, to consider our understanding of a location such as the Chamonix valley, with its snow peaks, glaciers, and ravines.

A major function of the poetic sublime, as shown by the example of Shelley, lies in the special power of foregrounded language to evoke in the reader a sense of relationship with nature. There are many ways to achieve this: the rhythms and irregular rhymes of the poem help create an aural impression of the sound of the river⁷ or the wind; the sense of becoming lost in vast space is underlined by the stress patterns of a line such as this, 'That vanishes among the viewless gales!', with its five consecutive unstressed syllables ('-ishes among the').

But here I want to propose three particular categories of understanding that the sublime language of a poem such as Shelley's brings into focus: they are properties that we are enabled to perceive in nature and that, at the same time, constitute a central part of our understanding of the human realm. I refer to them as presence, community and autonomy (adapted in part from an important empirical study of ethical understanding by Shweder et al., 1997).⁸

Many passages from travel writings about the Alps involve a sense of presence: for Mark Theodore Bourrit, for example, writing in 1775, Mont Blanc, with the giant steps of the glacier before it, appeared 'the throne of some divinity' (p. 112). Shelley, in the revision of his letter from Chamonix, said 'One could think that Mont Blanc, like the god of the Stoics, was a vast animal, and that the frozen blood for ever circulated through his stony veins' (Shelley and Shelley, 1817: 167). The more familiar term, suggested by both these passages, is divinity: for Shelley, however, the reference is provisional. In his poem on 'Mont Blanc' we find expressions such as this: 'Power in likeness of the Arve comes down / From the ice gulfs that gird his secret throne' (16–17); and 'Power dwells apart in its tranquillity' (line 96).⁹ The sense of presence in proximity to the mountain is striking; how to construe it is another matter. Neither Bourrit nor Shelley are proposing a belief in divinity (Shelley is an avowed atheist), yet both are responding to the overwhelming presence of the mountain, and both writers express their sense that in this encounter human interests are illuminated as well as put in their place. Among other comments, for example, Bourrit remarks of the Cave of the Aveyron, 'I can easily believe the art of man has never yet produced, nor ever will produce, a building so grand in its construction, or so varied in its ornaments' (1775: 131); while Shelley, at greater length, comments in 'Mont Blanc' on a glacier as 'A city of death' (line 105) able both to destroy all in its path and be 'The breath and blood of distant lands' (line 124), that is, fertilizing river valleys downstream. While Shelley may, as Karl Kroeber suggests (1994: 128), be reflecting recent geological thinking in his poem, what is more apparent is the immediacy of his emotional response to the mountain, a response that also has a strong ethical component: 'Thou hast a voice, great mountain, to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe' (lines 80–1).

The ethics of presence, then, is a sensibility both cognitive and sensory to the forms of the landscape, particularly evident in writing about the Alps; it attempts to comprehend the forces that have helped to create the landscape in the past or that are operative now; it feels those forces as intelligible analogies or metaphors but resists assimilating them to human agency or placing them beneath human reason as Kant's account of the sublime would do; and it may invite reconsideration of the place of human presence in the landscape as Shelley, for example, does in suggesting that Mont Blanc has the power 'to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe' (80–81). Earlier in the eighteenth century, Thomas Gray experienced the Alps as evidence of divinity: 'Not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff, but is pregnant with religion and poetry' (1775: 66).

But the most effective romantic examples of the sublime situate us in relation to natural processes whose powers are partly unknown or hidden, what Helen Maria Williams called 'nature in all her vast, eternal, uncontrollable grandeur' (1798: 63), a grandeur that mandates an attitude of openness and humility.

Second, also in Chamonix, Shelley sees the pine trees above the River Arve as a kind of community – 'Thy giant brood of pines around thee clinging, / Children of elder time,' to which 'The chainless winds still come and ever came / To drink their odours' (lines 20–3). Later in the poem he also envisages other communities beyond the valley: 'all the living things that dwell / Within the daedal earth' in their 'life and joy' (lines 85–6, 117). These are under threat of destruction by the impending glaciers, which overthrow 'The limits of the dead and living world' (line 113). The poet's awareness of naturally occurring communities, whether of animals, trees, or even inanimate objects, provides an important precursor to our modern network models of ecological relationship.

Third, a strong image of autonomy in Shelley's poem is provided by rivers or glaciers. Shelley shows the glaciers and the river they sustain as independent and unstoppable forces, a quality he makes apparent through such verbs as 'creep', 'watch', and 'restless':

The glaciers creep
Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far fountains
Slow rolling on (lines 100–2)

while

Below, vast caves
Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam,
Which from those secret chasms in tumult welling
Meet in the vale. (lines 120–3)

Given that the glaciers were still advancing during the Romantic period, Shelley is very conscious of their destructive effect. In his letter he remarks, 'The verge of a glacier, like that of Boisson [sic], presents the most vivid image of desolation that it is possible to conceive' (1964: I, 159). At the same time, downstream the glacier-fed river provides 'The breath and blood of distant lands' and 'Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air' (lines 124–6) – additional tropes for the autonomous function. The ethics of autonomy here thus embraces not only the independence of the natural realm but also regards impartially its destructive and creative effects on human interests. Such romantic writing exemplifies the disinterested regard for the otherness of nature that our western culture has otherwise been so poor at developing. It anticipates what the theologian Sally McFague terms attention epistemology; such attention, she explains, 'assumes the *intrinsic* value of anything, everything, that is not the self.' Thus, she adds, 'knowledge of *difference*, that is, of the teeming multitude and variety of things

that comprise the universe, can occur only when we pay attention to radical particularity' (1993: 50), that is, to what makes a thing distinctive, its quiddity.

Romantic writers, in attempting to articulate the basis of their response to nature, had several specific kinds of discourse available to them from the 18th century: that of the beautiful, the sublime or the picturesque. Without disregarding these or the critical literatures that have grown up around them, I have suggested another framework based on the feelings of relationship that underlie much landscape writing: the three domains of presence, community and autonomy, which connote not only structures of feeling, but an ethical insight towards the specific features of a given landscape, that which makes it uniquely what it is. I have drawn upon them here as they seem to me to account for the ecological sense of landscape that can be seen developing during the 18th century and coming into focus in the Romantic period. Whereas earlier writers such as Denham in 'Cooper's Hill' used the features of the landscape before them to expound their moral ideas, what Coleridge called 'a perpetual trick of *moralizing* every thing' (1956–71: II, 864), the Romantic writers, as I have tried to show with the example of Shelley, were more likely to treat nature as a system with its own inherent agency and meaning. More specifically, they called into question the distinction between subject and object, observer and observed: as Bate puts it, quoting phrases from Wordsworth's poem 'Tintern Abbey', 'the same force animates both consciousness ("the mind of man") and "all things"' (2000: 147).¹⁰

The power of the poem by Shelley that I have examined clearly depends in a major way on the foregrounding resources that Shelley deploys. It would be inappropriate to look for correlates of presence, community or autonomy in a specific set of foregrounded features – attributions of power or agency are likely to underlie all three, and phonetic or metrical patterns will be shaped as they are needed. Rather, I have wanted to propose that the energies evoked by foregrounded language enable us to resonate as readers to the sublime as Shelley before us seems to have resonated to his first vision of Alpine landscape. Foregrounded language works in part as it does because the processes it enacts through sound, syntax, or semantics activate an array of energies that we share with nature. As Shelley put it in his *Defence*, the words of great poets 'unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth' (2002: 515).

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of parts of this article were first presented at the conference on 'Literature and Emotions: Text, Ideology, and Conflict', The Netherlands Graduate School for Literary Studies, University of Utrecht, 22–26 June 2003; at the Ninth International Congress of The International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature (IGEL), Edmonton, Canada, 3–7 August 2004;

and the conference of the North American Society for the Study of Romanticism (NASSR), Montreal, 13–16 August 2005. I am grateful for discussions of the article on these occasions. I also thank Willie van Peer for his many helpful comments on an earlier draft.

Notes

- 1 I would refer the interested reader to important discussions in the following: Barrell (1972); Andrews (1989); Bate (2000); Nicolson (1959); and Leighton (1984).
- 2 For a recent Kantian reading of the poem, see Bode (1997). While Bode acknowledges that in the opening lines of the poem Shelley takes pains to argue that human thought like a 'feeble brook' plays only a minor role in the 'everlasting universe of things', he insists that in the last three lines of the poem Shelley, like Kant, claims that only the human mind can endow the universe with meaning and significance. For an alternative reading that opposes the Kantian parallel, see Dunkel (2002).
- 3 Quotations from 'Mont Blanc' are taken from its first printed version in Shelley and Shelley (1817).
- 4 See, for instance, the 'Silent Nymph' that opens Dyer's *Grongar Hill* (1855[1726]), or 'Quiet' figured 'Sweetly musing', or the oak grove, 'Haunt of Phyllis, queen of love!' All occur within the first 65 lines.
- 5 Shelley was appalled by the post-Waterloo settlement that was reinstalling reactionary monarchies on the thrones of Europe. He believed that poetry like his would in the long run help dismantle the greed and class division that dominated society. 'Mont Blanc' shows us a living earth that has no place for such malevolent passions. The glaciers are perhaps emblematic of the long-term cycle that through destruction will bring about a renovation of human society.
- 6 Here a discussion of the modularity of mind would be appropriate, that is, those modules that encode assumptions about the way the world is that allow us immediate interaction with it. The empathic powers I am suggesting are comparable to the modules for intuitive mechanics and intuitive biology that Steven Pinker has proposed (1995: 420).
- 7 In these lines, for example: 'Below, vast caves / Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam, / Which from those secret chasms in tumult welling ...' (lines 120–2), note the metric contrast between the caves (three successive strong stresses: 'vast caves / Shine') and the river that emerges from them (conveyed by the rapid movement of 'the rushing torrents' restless gleam').
- 8 An appeal to the ethical here is not to return to the Kantian sublime. Although Kant claimed that 'a feeling for the sublime in nature is hardly thinkable unless in association with an attitude of mind resembling the moral', he explained this as 'exercising a law-ordained *function*, which is the genuine characteristic of human morality, where reason has to impose its dominion upon sensibility' (1952: 120). The argument I am advancing is that the sensibility evoked by the foregrounded resources of the poetic sublime not only implicates the body, but also involves a correspondence of the imagination with natural forms, a harmony of the mind as an agent of nature. I go on to sketch the ethical implications of this proposal in the remainder of the article.
- 9 Shweder et al. (1997) employ the term *divinity*. I prefer the more neutral term *presence*. This is also preferable to *animate*, since it can apply to both animate and inanimate objects, especially as in 'Mont Blanc' Shelley is careful to use the term 'Power', which avoids anthropomorphizing Mont Blanc.
- 10 For recent treatments of Romantic writing that support this approach, although not dealing explicitly with the ethics I have proposed, see Bate (1991), Kroeber (1994), and McKusick (2000).

References

- Abram, D. (1997) *The Spell of the Sensuous*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Andrews, M. (1989) *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Barrell, J. (1972) *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730–1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bate, J. (1991) *Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. London: Routledge.
- Bate, J. (2000) *The Song of the Earth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bode, C. (1997) 'A Kantian Sublime in Shelley: "Respect for our Own Vocation" in an Indifferent Universe', in K. L. Cope and L. Morrow (eds) *1650–1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*, Vol. 3, pp. 329–58. New York: AMS Press.
- Bourrit, M. T. (1775) *A Relation of a Journey to the Glaciers in the Dutchy of Savoy*, trans. C. and F. Davy. Norwich: Richard Beatniffe.
- Burke, E. (1990) *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. A. Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coleridge, S. T. (1956–71) *Collected Letters*, 6 vols., ed. E. L. Griggs. London: Oxford University Press.
- Dunckel, A. (2002) "'Mont Blanc": Shelley's Sublime Allegory of the Real', in S. Rosendale (ed.) *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment*, pp. 207–23. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press.
- Fodor, J. (1983) *Modularity of Mind: An Essay on Faculty Psychology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Freeman, B. C. (1995) *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Gerard, A. (1780) *An Essay On Taste*, 3rd edition. Edinburgh: J. Bell and W. Creech, London: T. Cadell.
- Gray, T. (1775) *The Poems of Mr Gray. To Which Are Prefixed Memoirs of His Life and Writings, by W. Mason*. York, London: J. Dodsley.
- Dyer, J. (1855[1726]) *Grongar Hill*, ed. J. Lynch, available online at <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/grongar.html> (accessed 20 December 2006).
- Kant, I. (1952) *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Keats, J. (1958) *The Letters of John Keats*, 2 vols., ed. H. E. Rollins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kroeber, K. (1994) *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kuiken, D., Miall, D. S. and Sikora, S. (2004) 'Forms of Self-Implication in Literary Reading', *Poetics Today* 25: 171–203.
- Leighton, M. (1984) *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Longinus (1965) *On the Sublime*, in *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. T. S. Dorsch, pp. 97–158. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- McFague, S. (1993) *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- McKusick, J. (2000) *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology*. New York: St Martin's Press.
- Miall, D. S. and Kuiken, D. (1994) 'Foregrounding, Defamiliarization, and Affect: Response to Literary Stories', *Poetics* 22, 389–407.
- Nicolson, M. H. (1959) *Mountain Gloom, Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Pinker, S. (1995) *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Ruskin, J. (1897) *Modern Painters*, 6 vols. London: George Allen.
- Shelley, P. B. (1964) *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols, ed. F. L. Jones. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Shelley, P. B. (2002) *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. D. H. Reiman and N. Fraistat. New York: Norton.

- Shelley, M. and Shelley, P. B. (1817) *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*. London: T. Hookham.
- Shweder, R. A., Much, N. C., Mahapatra, M. and Park, L. (1997) 'The "Big Three" of Morality (Autonomy, Community, Divinity) and the "Big Three" Explanations of Human Suffering', in A. M. Brandt and P. Rozin (eds) *Morality and Health*, pp.119–69. New York: Routledge.
- Tsur, R. (1992) *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive? The Poetic Mode of Speech Perception*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.
- Weiskel, T. (1976) *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Williams, H. M. (1798) *A Tour in Switzerland; or, A view of the present state of the Government and Manners of those Cantons: with comparative sketches of the present state of Paris*. London: G. G. and J. Robinson.
- Wilson, E. G. (2005) 'Shelley and the Poetics of Glaciers', *The Wordsworth Circle* 36: 53–6.

Address

David S. Miall, Department of English and Film Studies, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2E5. [email: David.Miall@Ualberta.Ca]