Agency from a Stone:
Shelley's Posthumanist Experiments in 'Mont Blanc'

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Abstract

This article reads Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' as an extended exploration into possible modes of relationship linking the human mind to the material world. The modes of relationship considered by Shelley anticipate many of the structures and strategies developed by posthumanist theory, including structural coupling, strategic anthropomorphism, imagistic translation, and human-nonhuman assemblages. After summarizing Kantian and post-Kantian readings of 'Mont Blanc,' the essay works through an extended close reading of the poem to elucidate its proto-posthumanist elements.

Keywords: structural coupling, strategic anthropomorphism, translation, assemblage, agency

After his first encounter with Mont Blanc in 1816, Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote to a friend that

> Mont Blanc was before us [….] I never knew—I never imagined what mountains were before. The immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of ecstatic wonder, not unallied to madness. […] Nature was the poet, whose harmony held our spirits more breathless than the divinest.[1]

Presenting Nature as a poet capable of holding a human spirit 'breathless' requires an anthropomorphic understanding of Nature as well as a willingness to relinquish anthropocentric authority—strategic moves frequently deployed by more recent posthumanist thinkers. But Shelley doesn't stop with this first 'ecstatic' exclamation: the poem 'Mont Blanc' develops this first dumbfounded response into an extended meditation on the possibilities for agency and interchange between human and nonhuman forces. In the process, Shelley anticipates recent developments in posthumanist thought, such as structural coupling, strategic anthropomorphism, imagistic translation, and careful attentiveness to the vitality of 'things'. In addition, the remarkable density of connections produced by Shelley's poetic language and structure challenges us to reconsider what can be said (or thought) in poetic as opposed to essay form.

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[1] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour Through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany and Holland: With Letters Descriptive of a Sail Round the Lake of Geneva, and of the Glaciers of Chamouni* (London: T. Hookham, jun., and C. and J. Ollier, 1817), 152.

Posthuman, Post-Kant

The landscape of a decentering posthumanism takes shape largely through a series of oppositions or objections to Kantian morality: 'Mont Blanc' began to chart this landscape two hundred years ago; contemporary philosophy is still mapping its contours. An overview of this landscape may help clarify the stakes of the argument. This section works to establish a tripartite background for the reading to follow:

1) Most readings of Mont Blanc as a sublime poem are Kantian readings, assuming either that Shelley intends to demonstrate human power over the universe of things or that his attempt to privilege materiality necessarily fails.
2) Two challenges to Kantian epistemology—systems theory and speculative realism—share a deconstructive approach to the poem, presenting 'Mont Blanc' as an undoing of 'large codes of fraud and woe'.
3) The vital materialism of Jane Bennett, based on the assemblages' model of Deleuze and Guattari, has not yet been applied to 'Mont Blanc', but it offers a compelling alternative to Kantian readings of the poem and to Kantian anthropocentrism more generally.

The short version of the story is this: it is harder than we think to let a stone be a stone. Just as mountaineers experience the summit receding as they draw near, so writers trying to base a new relation to the world on Shelley's depiction of a mountain seem to lose sight of both poem and mountain as they write. If this section of the present argument strikes you as a false summit, glance forward to orient yourself in 'Where, where, where?' and beyond.

Kantian Readings of Mont Blanc

When it comes to the boundaries between subject and object, soul and matter, human and nonhuman, Kant makes a formidable gatekeeper. Kant's account of the natural or dynamical sublime, for instance, builds upon Edmund Burke's earlier version of sublimity but insists on 'humanity in our person' remaining 'unhumiliated'. [2] Both Burke and Kant describe a natural sublime in which overwhelming natural force threatens the human subject: Kant, however, insists that the human subject remain safely distant from the potential threat (of an avalanche, for instance). Shelley's 'Mont Blanc', preceded by travel writing that recapitulated many of the conventions of the sublime, including the threat of avalanche and rock fall, has traditionally been read as engaging and recapitulating the aesthetics of the sublime. Matthew Borushko offers a useful tour of sublime thinking in relation to 'Mont Blanc', but his argument presumes that the poem is primarily concerned to resist the violence and concealment (subreption) of the material world: his analysis arrives triumphantly at human mastery over that materiality. [3]

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[2] Immanuel Kant, 'Analytic of the Sublime', in *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), 101.

[3] Matthew Borushko, 'The Politics of Subreption: Resisting the Sublime in Shelley's "Mont Blanc,"' *Studies in Romanticism* 52 (Summer 2013): 225-252.

Frances Ferguson offers another Kantian reading of the poem, but her analysis begins (correctly, I think) with Shelley's attempt to allow the mountain its own agency.[4] Ferguson engages Earl Wasserman's influential reading of the poem as circling around questions of epistemology and ontology, but argues that Shelley's epistemology should be correlated not with ontology but with love. Unfortunately, in this reading, love seems to preclude any genuine understanding of the other. Ferguson charts a movement in the poem from 'epistemological questions, questions of the poet's understanding, to love language, in which all the questions are of him being understood' (SMB, 183). The story of the poem, in Ferguson's retelling, is one of unrequited love, in which Shelley 'is still looking for a mountain who will understand him' (SMB,181). In Ferguson's view, however, this love constitutes a categorical error. Ferguson argues that Shelley's poem, despite its investment in the materiality of the mountain,

> […] never allows matter to remain material but rather co-opts it or transmogrifies it by continually mistaking the activity of the material world for agency, by taking it to be as intentional as any human agency might be. Shelley insists virtually throughout the poem upon this confusion between activity and agency as he continually treats the mountain as a person. (SMB, 182-3)

For Ferguson, anthropomorphizing is an unacceptable error (a judgment not all posthumanism theorists accept). Overall, as Louise Economides notes, in Ferguson's reading, 'Shelley's "love" for the mountain […] amounts to a kind of dialectical projection, a means of asserting his own existence via an imagined antitype'.[5] The mountain as 'found object' is 'not merely matter but matter designed by its perceiver' (SMB, 183); God has been dethroned but anthropocentrism reigns serene.

More recent critics such as Economides, Greg Ellerman, and others have found Ferguson's reading compelling but ultimately unsatisfying.[6] Can we, *pace* Ferguson, move beyond Kant's subject-object divisions without making fools of ourselves? Why would we want to? Both systems theory and object-oriented ontology, the latter of which is grounded in speculative realism, suggest that Kant's own epistemology is deluded, in ways that prevent both an accurate understanding of the world and wise engagement with it.

Systems Theory

Systems theory, based on the work of Niklas Luhmann, contributes to posthumanism a self-reflexive and deconstructive strand of thought. Cary Wolfe, for instance, argues that 'the first lesson of both Derrida and Luhmann […] is that Enlightenment rationality is not, as it were, rational enough, because it stops short of applying its own protocols and commitments to itself'.[7] Systems theory participates in posthumanism's decentering rejection of anthropocentrism by arguing that 'individual human beings, or psychic

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[4] Frances Ferguson, 'Shelley's "Mont Blanc": What the Mountain Said', *Romanticism and Language* 202 (1984). Rpt. Peter J. Kitson, ed., *New Casebooks: Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996). Henceforth cited in text as (SMB, page number/s).

[5] Louise Economides, '"Mont Blanc" and the Sublimity of Materiality', *Cultural Critique* 61 (2005): 103. Henceforth cited in text as (MBSM, page number/s).

[6] Greg Ellerman, 'Speculative Romanticism', *SubStance* 44: 1 (2015): 154-174.

[7] Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xx.

systems, are no longer understood to be the central agents guiding social systems, even though social and psychic systems co-evolve and are structurally coupled' (MBSM, 94). The details of both this revised sense of agency and structural coupling deserve close attention.[8]

Luhmann's systems theory breaks the very notion of human beings into separate systems that remain closed to one another: 'systems of communication (social systems), systems of life (bodies, the brain, and so on), and systems of consciousness (minds)'.[9] Human beings don't communicate; 'only communication communicates'. Closure or autopoiesis, as defined by Chilean cognitive biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, is critical to Luhmann's presentation of these systems.[10] Closure enables development, sophistication, complexity. If the human brain were open to all sensory bombardments, for instance, it would be unable to develop complex cognition. Operational closure is not absolute, however; systems are linked through structural coupling. As Luhmann puts it,

> One cannot imagine that a consciousness could have evolved without communication. Similarly, one cannot imagine that there would be meaningful communication without consciousness. There must have been a kind of coordination, that, because it relates to different forms of autopoiesis, leads, on the one hand, to an increase of complexity within the realm of possible mental contents and, on the other hand, within the realm of social communication. It seems to me that this mechanism of coupling is language.[11]

Readings of 'Mont Blanc' frequently focus on the complexity of Shelley's language in the poem, yet the strongest systems-theoretic readings of the poem seem to emphasize the deconstructive power of that language rather than its coordinating function, its role as a mechanism of structural coupling.

Two recent readings of 'Mont Blanc' work in this self-reflexive, deconstructive mode: both Louise Economides and Christopher Hitt see the poem using vacancy to unravel a host of cultural and textual assumptions.[12] Hitt demonstrates the mind-numbing repetition of 'silence and solitude' in sublime and Gothic literature in order to ask, '[w]hat would the mountain be if, instead of imagining it in terms of such cold, dead language, we could experience it freely, as a "vacancy"? What if "the mist of familiarity" did not obscure "from us the wonder of our being"?' (SUMB, 157). Economides similarly sees the poem sketching 'a domain that lies outside of communication systems and that exceeds human perception', and suggests that 'Mont Blanc' asks us to question whether such silence is in fact reducible to 'vacancy' or whether it indirectly signifies a greater fullness to the world (MBSM, 108-9). These readings connect well with Shelley's broader sense of poetry as that which 'purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being', but they consider only the withdrawing of 'life's dark veil' as if 'Mont Blanc' had no 'figured curtain' of its own to point us to 'the wonder of our being'.

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[8] Literary critics draw most frequently on Luhmann's later *Art as a Social System*, but it may be worth considering first the basic elements of Luhmann's social systems theory.

[9] Hans-Georg Moeller, *Luhmann Explained: From Souls to Systems* (New York: Open Court, 2006), 9.

[10] Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of Living* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980).

[11] Luhmann (2002): 122, quoted and translated in Moeller, 19.

[12] Christopher Hitt, 'Shelley's Unwriting of "Mont Blanc"', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 47: 2 (Summer 2005): 139-66. Henceforth cited in text as (SUMB, page number/s).

Systems-theoretic readings can have broad social implications, but the insistence on operational closure and self-reflexivity tends to turn arguments from cultural values and political frameworks back to a poetic pointing toward aporia. Economides, for instance, stresses the importance of acknowledging 'the full extent to which material nature is only partially the product of our social constructions' in order to question 'the anthropocentric hubris that would sanction the complete erasure of nature as a material outside of culture, and the reduction of biodiversity that follows from such an ideology'. Working to counter the great species extinction presently occurring requires far more than a first step toward questioning anthropocentric hubris, as Economides would surely grant. But systems theory tends to turn away even from this step, back toward self-reflection: 'another possible response to our ecological dilemmas is to consider the value of communication that thematizes how the material world necessarily exceeds finite articulation in communication systems' (MBSM, 99). Recognizing one's own limits (communication about what exceeds communication systems) may indeed be 'ecologically instructive', but the instruction is necessarily indirect.

Thus, while both Economides and Hitt emphasize the mountain's legislative capabilities, both also highlight the poem's emphasis on repealing rather than instantiating legal codes. For Economides notes that '[i]n deconstructive terms, what the mountain 'voices' here is (from the perspective of language) an absence that can only negate, repealing discursive fraud but not grounding new forms of linguistic stability' (MBSM, 105-6). For Hitt, similarly,

> it is highly significant that the mountain itself has the capacity to repeal these codes. Or as Shelley puts it in a fragmentary line from his working notebook, '[t]he wilderness has a mysterious tongue / And teaches doubts—of all that words of—' (Brinkley, 259). That is to say, it is the unsettling, unfathomable mystery of wilderness that prompts us to doubt the comfort and familiarity of words. (SUMB, 158)

In these compelling and overlapping readings, Shelley uses words to make us doubt words; 'Mont Blanc' deploys linguistic codes to repeal discursive fraud and unsettle all linguistic stability. This kind of poetic work may help decenter readers from their humanist pedestals, but it does not seem to get us much closer to the mountain—or to a more productive sense of what poetry might do.

Speculative Realism and OOO

Luckily, object-oriented ontology (OOO) is waiting in the wings, promising to deliver the mountain. But can it do so? Object-oriented ontology, developed by Graham Harman, grows out of speculative realism, often defined in relation to the work of Quentin Meillassoux.[13] Both speculative realism and object-oriented ontology reject correlationism, defined as 'the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other'.[14] Speculative realism rejects the finitude of such Kantian correlation; object-oriented ontology argues that finite knowledge applies not only to human knowing but

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[13] Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Ropley and Hampshire: John Hunt Publishing, 2010).

[14] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 5.

to all object relations. More specifically, OOO theorists work to rebalance relations between human and nonhuman objects by giving objects their turn on stage.

In practice, however, speculative realism seems more concerned with philosophic rigor than with objects that might be known, and objects addressed through object-oriented ontology still seem fleeting, in part because they are always 'withdrawn', inaccessible to full cognition. Timothy Morton, romanticist-turned-OOO-theorist, emphasizes the relevance of object-oriented ontology both to romantic studies and to ecological thought. His ecological thought and even his concept of hyperobjects—objects so massively distributed in time and space that they cannot be specified in spatial or temporal terms—function deconstructively. For Morton, 'the world as the background of events is an objectification of a hyperobject: the biosphere, climate, evolution, capitalism'.[15] And as Chris Washington summarizes Morton's argument, '[t]he erasure of the 'world-as-it-is-for-us' will subsequently grant us the leverage to think, and act, in the face of the literal end of the world, the potential destruction of the actual Earth'. As with systems-theoretic arguments and readings, erasure—or vacancy—opens up the potential for action that seems to be always at least somewhat deferred.

Speculative realism has been invoked in recent readings of 'Mont Blanc' by Chris Washington and Greg Ellerman, but both essays seem more invested in tracing the work of Meillassoux and/or Morton than in grappling with 'Mont Blanc' *per se*.[16] Washington's essay overviews the work of Harman and Morton before offering a glancing reading of 'Mont Blanc' as exemplifying a broader 'post-apocalyptic sublime' opening out from the final question of Shelley's poem onto the landscape considered by Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*. Washington's reading finds a deManian ironic duplicity in the 'text's doubled consciousness, of a world indifferent to humanity and of a world impoverished without humanity' (RSR, 455-6)—which works better, it seems to me, with de Man's terms of analysis than with the premises of object-oriented ontology. Ellerman argues that speculative realism is useful in reminding us 'that the real gravity of 'Mont Blanc' is in its passage through correlation's "transparent cage" to an absolute outside'. But while Ellerman wishes to get to the 'great outdoors', his reading ends by finding 'power' in linguistic contingency: 'By insisting on their own status as mere words and letters – on their own fundamental meaninglessness, that is – the lines and marks that comprise 'Mont Blanc' bring into view the contingency of all things' (SR, 169). This insistence on contingency offers philosophic consistency, but it does not take me to the 'great outdoors', help reduce climate change or mass extinction, or even register the materiality of the mountain. Yet I believe, with Frances Ferguson, that Shelley's poem works hard to register ('make feel') this materiality.

Vital Assemblages

A third strand of posthumanist thought develops out of Deleuze and Guattari's model of assemblages. Jane Bennett's account of vital materialism in her book *Vibrant Matter*

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[15] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 100.
[16] Chris Washington, 'Romanticism and Speculative Reason', in *Literature Compass* 12:9 (2015): 448-460. Henceforth cited in text as (RSR, page number/s).; Greg Ellerman, 'Speculative Romanticism', *SubStance* 44: 1 (2015): 166. Henceforth cited in text as (SR, page number/s).

ties this work directly to a critique of Kantian morality.[17] First, she puts forward the Kantian argument: 'the ontological divide between persons and things must remain least one have no moral grounds for privileging man over germ or for condemning pernicious forms of human-on-human instrumentalization (as when powerful humans exploit illegal, poor, young, or otherwise weaker humans)' (ST, 12). In response, she acknowledges the force of this concern: 'the framework of subject versus object has indeed at times worked to prevent or ameliorate human suffering and to promote human happiness or well-being' (ST, 12). But she also notes that 'the Kantian imperative to treat humanity always as an end-in-itself and never merely as a means does not have a stellar record of success in preventing human suffering or promoting human well-being' and that those successes 'come at the price of an instrumentalization of nonhuman nature that can itself be unethical and can itself undermine long-term human interests' (ST, 12). Like Morton and Economides, Bennett worries about the unsustainability of the actions encouraged by our current devaluation of objects of material nature.

Bennett's alternative to Kantian morality requires both a revalorization of matter, a raising of its status, and an understanding of agency as inhering in neither humans nor nonhumans alone, but rather in 'the complex interinvolvement of humans and multiple nonhuman actants, which together form an effective assemblage'.[18] From the perspective of object-oriented ontology or speculative realism, thinking in terms of assemblages may seem like a backwards step: Morton, for instance, insists that 'OOO is realism without materialism. "Matter" is a clumsy shorthand for the unique thing that was carved, wrought, melted, entangled, to produce the object at hand. On this view, materialism is strangely 'correlationist''.[19] Still, while I am intrigued by Morton's claims that 'a poem is not simply a representation, but rather a nonhuman agent' (215) and that 'poetry simply is causality, pure and simple' (216), I find Bennett's Whitman-influenced account of poetic texts far more compelling:

> Texts are bodies that can light up, by rendering human perception more acute, those bodies whose favored vehicle of affectivity is less wordy: plants, animals, blades of grass, household objects, trash. […] Poetry can help us feel more of the liveliness hidden in such things and reveal more of the threads of connection binding our fate to theirs.[20]

This search for liveliness and for the threads of connection binding humans and nonhumans seems to me the most appropriate approach to Shelley's proto-posthumanism. Morton himself notes that 'relations are from Shelley, while objects are from Keats' (AOODP, 217), by which he seems to mean both that 'relations are like Shelley poems: vast, complex, entangled, nonlocal, atemporal, sliding hither and thither, beset with irony and illusion' and that Shelley's poems are 'constructivist machines for dissolving objectification' (AOODP, 217). Let us consider that constructivist machinery as we search in 'Mont Blanc' for the liveliness of things, for the threads of connection coupling systems, lighting up bodies, binding fates.

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[17] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2010).

[18] Gulshan Khan, 'Agency, Nature, and Emergent Properties: An Interview with Jane Bennett', *Contemporary Political Theory* 8:1 (2009): 101-2.

[19] Timothy Morton, 'An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry', *New Literary History* 2012, 43: 2 (Spring 2012): 215. Henceforth cited in text as (AOODP, page number/s).

[20] Jane Bennett, 'Systems and Things: A Response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton', *New Literary History* 43:2 (Spring 2012): 232. Henceforth cited in text as (ST, page number/s).

Where…Where…Where?

In *What is Posthumanism?*, Cary Wolfe asserts that 'when we talk about posthumanism, we are not just talking about a thematics of the decentring of the human in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates […]; rather, […] we are also talking about how thinking confronts that thematics, what thought has to become in the face of those challenges'.[21] The opening stanza of 'Mont Blanc' seems to explore precisely this question: what thought has to become in the face of a decentred humanity. Shelley asks not only how we should think but also, more unexpectedly, *where* we might think:

> The everlasting universe of things
> Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
> Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—
> Now lending splendour, where 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, among the mountains lone,
> Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,
> Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river
> Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves. (1-11)

The universe of things takes priority here, with human thought severely humbled: confronted with the power of things, existing human thought is 'feeble' and subordinate, offering its waters as 'tribute' to the greater power of the vast universal river. Human thought offers gloom but has to borrow splendour. As opposed to the self-possession often associated with the Romantic sublime, Shelley's image of human thought appears to lack full identity: its sound remains 'but half its own'. The stanza disavows knowledge of where human thought might originate (the gesture at 'secret springs' begs the question). Even the present existence of human thought remains in doubt: as Frances Ferguson notes, we may want to ask 'whether a brook is still a brook when a river runs in its channel'. Overwhelmed by thingness, mind seems to disappear under universe. So much for ensuring that the humanity in our person not be degraded: Kantian readings seem to assume that the brute materialism of this opening could only ever be a set-up for a subsequent take-down.

'Where […], where […], where […]': the stanza makes assertions rather than asking questions, yet the interrogative 'where' recurs (as an adverb) no less than three times in eleven lines. The poem ostensibly opens by answering the implied question: 'where' does the universe of things flow? Through the mind. But how are we to envision a mind through which a universe might flow? The 'dark' and 'gloom' of the river and its surroundings invite us to imagine the river flowing through a dark space: perhaps a cave, perhaps a skull. Then a comparison ('such as') takes us out into the 'wild woods,' the open spaces of mountains and forests: this, apparently, is *where* the 'real' river exists, outside of the mind. Once again, the assertions of the stanza and the brutality of the imagery—the way the lines propose to drive a raging river through the reader's brain—seem to award primacy to things rather than thinking, to matter over mind.

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[21] Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, xvi.

Nevertheless, Shelley's temporal references undermine this spatial materiality. Where, exactly, do waterfalls leap *forever* around a feeble brook? Seasonal differences in flow could explain the vast river raving over the rocks of the feeble brook, but those same differences would suggest a periodic disappearance of waterfalls during dry or cold seasons. 'Ceaselessly' creates a similar problem: if the vast river never stops raving over the rocks of the feeble brook, how could anyone ever know the feeble brook was there in the first place? Evidently, this river, too, is a river of the mind as well as a river of the universe: an abstraction of materiality. The metaphor insists, however, that we take the existence of the mind on faith: the raging river is visible; the feeble brook can only be imagined as having existed in some prior moment. Shelley inverts the target of speculative realism: instead of denying the preexistence of objects, he seems to imply a philosophical tenuousness, a fictionality, to any preexistence of human thought.

Grammar and Relationship

> It seems necessary and impossible to rewrite the default grammar of agency,
> a grammar that assigns activity to people and passivity to things.
> —Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 119

At the opening of the second stanza, Shelley pivots on the single word 'thus', applying the assertions of that opening stanza to the many descriptions to come. But do those assertions still apply? 'Thus thou' implies that the ravine is somehow the residue of the feeble brook, the figure of the human mind; that the 'ceaseless motion' that 'pervades' the ravine is somehow connected to the 'ceaseless' raving of the exemplary river in the first stanza. This implied continuity of metaphor or frame of reference is underscored by the speaker's confession midway through the stanza that gazing on the ravine seems like musing on his own, his human mind. 'Thus thou,' pointing back to the first stanza, implies 'Thus thou and I'. Perhaps Martin Buber is now lurking in the wings.

Thus *thou*: Frances Ferguson, following Harold Bloom on the importance of 'thou,' takes the pronoun as a sign of loverliness in Shelley, a romancing of the ravine which slides quickly into a pursuit of the indifferent mountain. Yet a ravine is not a mountain: more like the antithesis or inversion of a mountain. Note too the troubling mix of sexuality and familial narrative implied at the beginning of this second stanza. Where would the poet-as-suitor find his place in this 'awful scene'?

> Thus thou, Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine—
> […] awful scene,
> Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down
> From the ice-gulfs that gird his secret throne,
> Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame
> Of lightning through the tempest; —thou dost lie […] (12-19)

The threat originally attributed to the ravine shifts rapidly to the river, or rather to '[p]ower in likeness of the Arve'. Shelley here appears to abandon metaphor, turning to the capitalized abstractions of eighteenth-century allegory. But allegory rapidly exceeds its bounds: the glacial river (the vehicle of what might have been a feeble metaphor) is itself overrun by the Zeus-like associations of secret throne and lightning through the tempest. Water becomes fire in the imagistic excess that bursts and raves through these lines. And the feminized ravine lies still, thinking perhaps of England. This stanza of

'Mont Blanc' reminds us that the default grammar of agency, at least under the sign of sublimity, assigns activity to men and passivity to women, even when both power and passivity are presented as nonhuman. John Dennis, writing of the Longinian sublime, describes it in terms very similar to Shelley's imagery here as 'an invincible force which commits a pleasing Rape upon the very Soul of the reader; […] whenever it breaks […] like the Artillery of Jove, it Thunders blazes and strikes at once, and shows all the united force of a Writer'. [22] Edmund Burke echoes this language, asserting that the sublime makes (male) readers fear 'lest this enormous strength should be employed to the purposes of rapine and destruction'. [23] In Dennis, Burke, and here in Shelley, 'the reader's' (alleged pleasure in) being raped positions male readers and thinkers as feminized and passive beneath the activity of the rhetorical and/or natural sublime. The Kantian sublime may insist on a triumphant return to power for human subjectivity, but 'Mont Blanc' resists or at least suspends such triumph.

Instead, having evoked the image of rapine vis-à-vis the ravine (another dark pun?), Shelley turns again to the languages of domesticity and religion:

> —thou dost lie,
> Thy giant brood of pines around thee clinging,
> Children of elder time, in whose devotion
> The chainless winds still come and ever came
> To drink their odours, and their mighty swinging
> To hear—an old and solemn harmony. (19-24)

The ejaculatory force of Power bursting through dark mountains like flame seems utterly inappropriate to the domesticity of the children, even the possibly adult children of elder time, clinging to their mother. And that domestic scene turns so rapidly to religious associations—one can practically hear Keats's later 'chained censor swinging'—that the implied rape vanishes before it fully appears.

Despite the polarizing gendered separation of activity and passivity, by the end of this lengthy riff, Arve and ravine are nearly indistinguishable, closely allied in an account that could be seen as preempting the structural coupling of cognitive biology and systems theory. The sound patterns create a kind of standing wave that both unifies and holds separate the Arve and the ravine, the ravine-mind and the human-mind:

> Thy caverns echoing to the Arve's commotion—
> A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;
> Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,
> Thou art the path of that unresting sound. (30-33)

In these echoing caverns, 'loud' expands into 'sound' which echoes twice; 'thou art,' 'thou art,' offers another echo, even as the Arve's 'commotion' is repeated as 'motion'. 'Pervaded' rather than 'invaded' by ceaseless motion, the ravine becomes neither the destination nor the source of 'that unresting sound', but rather a path for that sound to travel elsewhere. In the process, the ravine also seems to expand, becoming more than the physical bed of the river. Where does the sound travel? The *History* may offer a gloss:

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[22] John Dennis, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (London: George Strahan and Bernard Lintott, 1704), 79.

[23] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1968), 65.

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—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.[24]

The ravine/ the sublime belongs to its perceivers to the extent that those perceivers make others perceive what ravages them, but Shelley here performs a reverse subreption, claiming ownership of the ravine before (or in the act of) creating or implanting those impressions in the mind of his reader(s). In the poem as well as the travel letter, Nature and poet operate according to the same principles: the two are difficult to distinguish—as the stanza promptly acknowledges.

> Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee
> I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
> To muse on my own separate fantasy,
> My own, my human mind, which passively
> Now renders and receives fast influencings,
> Holding an unremitting interchange
> With the clear universe of things around. (34-40)

Operational closure separates the human-mind from the ravine-mind, but structural coupling through language and poetry brings them into 'interchange'. The 'universe of things' is back, but no longer as either a raging river or a Jove-like Power of thunder and lightning. With explicit acknowledgement of the human mind's 'passivity', that universe (now clear rather than dark or glittering) has become a trading partner involved in 'unremitting interchange', or perhaps an evolutionary partner involved in symbiotic inter-change—a process of transformation situated between mind and universe that might change both mind and universe.

   Where, where, where does this interchange happen? Back in the dark and the ghostly shadows, 'in the still cave of the witch Poesy'.

> One legion of wild thoughts, whose wandering wings
> Now float above thy darkness, and now rest
> Where that or thou art no unbidden guest,
> In the still cave of the witch Poesy,
> Seeking among the shadows that pass by
> Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee,
> Some phantom, some faint image; till the breast
> From which they fled recalls them, thou art there! (41-48)

Shelley's grammar in these lines deforms what we might take to be the default grammar of relationship and agency. Pronouns are particularly opaque: as Shelley notes in his fragmentary 'On Life',

The words *I, you, they*, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated […]. The words *I*, and *you*, and *they* are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement, and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them. […] We are on that verge where words abandon us, and

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[24] Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour Through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany and Holland*, 152.

> what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of how little we know! The relations of *things* remain unchanged, by whatever system.[25]

Shelley's prose stresses assemblage, arrangement, relationship—connections that his poetry performs. We may well grow dizzy, looking down on the dark and dizzying ravine and grasping at pronouns: 'that', 'thou', and 'they' are *there*, evidently. Where? The close of the stanza asserts that as long as the poet's wild thoughts seek for the ravine in poetry's shadows, the ravine is present *with* those wild thoughts in the cave of poetry. These lines anticipate Luhmannian structural coupling as a juxtaposition that resists superimposition.[26] Where Luhmann sees language as the mechanism that allows the structural coupling of cognition and communication, Shelley presents language and poetry as a mechanism that allows the inter-change of mind and universe. Despite the adjectival assertion, however, that mechanism is not entirely 'clear'. One might wonder what it means to be a 'bidden guest'—if one obeys another's bidding, does that not make one a subordinate rather than a guest? The stanza's last lines invite a different query: If there are no wild thoughts present in the cave of poetry to perceive a ravine (or a universe), can the ravine be present? Where does the ravine go when the speaker's breast recalls its legion of wild thoughts? Shelley glances at a conundrum that would invert the not-yet-invented puzzle of Schroedinger's cat.

Anthropomorphism and Love

Where are we, then, at the beginning of the third stanza? Wrapped in sleep, or perhaps with Schroedinger's cat? Are we alive or dead? The stanza opens with yet another strophic turn, combining the passivity of sleep imagery with a series of words and images otherwise associated with Mont Blanc and with Power. Readings of intertextuality in 'Mont Blanc' tend to focus on precursor and contemporary texts—the failing spirit and the homeless cloud evoking Wordsworth, for instance—but the poem also cites itself obsessively. The phrase '[g]leams of a remoter world' seems to point forward to Mont Blanc which first appears remotely in the middle of this stanza, 'far, far above' and later (in stanza 5) 'yet gleam[ing] on high' (127). Therefore, is it Mont Blanc (perhaps also known as 'Power in likeness of the Arve') that visits the soul in sleep? Is the soul in sleep the same as the human-mind and ravine-mind being affected by 'the strange sleep/ Which when the voices of the desert fail/ Wraps all in its own deep eternity'? If 'death is slumber', is this earlier deep eternity also death? Is the 'I' that 'lies' here the same as that associated with the ravine that 'dost lie' beneath sublime violence in the second stanza? The fourth stanza will assert that 'Power dwells apart in its tranquillity, / Remote, serene, and inaccessible' (96-7) suggesting again that Power and Mont Blanc are both associated with 'the mightier world of sleep' that spreads 'inaccessibly/ Its circles'. These verbal echoes within the poem, not dissimilar from the commotion of the Arve echoing within the ravine, create a paradoxical portrait in which Power appears as Jove-like thunder and lightning when it descends 'in likeness of the Arve', but as slumber and tranquillity when at home in its remoter world. The antitheses coexist in a (loosely considered) quantum uncertainty encoding too much information.

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[25] Shelley, 'On Life', in *The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley in Verse and Prose*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880), 8 vols., 6: 157.
[26] For a different reading, see MBSM, 105.

In this uncertain, data-rich, paradoxical context, Mont Blanc first appears, as supreme (and notably ungendered) materiality, absolute monarch of 'subject mountains' who pile 'their unearthly forms' around it. The rhyme scheme pairs opposites—steeps and deeps; a peak that is 'serene', with 'broad vales between'—as the stanza shudders forward, jerking back and forth against the task of describing 'unearthly forms' and 'shapes'. Dashes point out an interjection that restarts the effort of description:

> —how hideously
> Its shapes are heap'd around! rude, bare, and high,
> Ghastly, and scarr'd, and riven.— (69-71)

The intimacy of 'thou' and 'thy' seems far removed from this uninhabitable desert, this hideous object of description—but no sooner have we worked our way through this heap of abstract adjectives than domesticity arrives amid further uncertainty:

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

The stanza seems to pause in expectation of an answer. We have to be reminded that 'None can reply—all seems eternal now' (75), in a phrase that returns us to the 'deep eternity' associated with strange sleep and thus with death as slumber. If the second stanza echoed the sexualized language of the sublime as rape, juxtaposed with an account of children clinging to their mother, here we have a single mother working to raise children who might live up to their capacity for ruin.

What do we make of this Earthquake-daemon? As with the ravine, where the speaker notes the narcissism of seeming to see his mind in the landscape, Shelley carefully constrains the anthropomorphism with the form of the question. The poet does not tell us that the foothills of Mont Blanc are the toys of Earthquake children; rather, he wonders aloud, seeking 'some phantom, some faint image' of what could have created this scene. And Shelley's specific language here suggests that anthropomorphism can transform human affective response to what seems utterly alien: 'hideously' and 'ghastly' imagery here gives way to that of children's toys in the space of a line and a half.

Pace Ferguson, Shelley begins by noting the impossibility of an answer to his questions, though that lack of a reply perversely seems to produce an assertion that a reply is possible. And the imagined reply moves into a religious and political realm, leaving the family scene far behind:

> The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
> Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
> So solemn, so serene, that man may be,
> But for such faith, with Nature reconcil'd;
> Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
> Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
> By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
> Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel. (76-83)

The two claims are yoked by a semi-colon, inviting us to see the 'mysterious tongue' of the wilderness shaping the 'voice' of the mountain—but the result is oddly

anticlimactic. Shelley's published 'but for such faith' revises the earlier, unpublished but simpler formulation ('man may be / *In* such faith, with Nature reconcil'd') in ways that make reconciliation harder to achieve. But even as faith blocks reconciliation, the speaker urges reconciliation more fervently, through a more intimate address: in the second clause, it is the mountain rather than the ravine that is suddenly 'thou,' an intimate addressee. Ferguson would say that Shelley is trying to get the mountain to notice him. But Jane Bennett sees anthropomorphism as a critical tool for re-valuing materiality and acknowledging the creative agency of nonhuman actors. [27] While Ferguson sees Shelley looking for love in all the wrong places, we might also see Shelley self-consciously struggling to overcome a Kantian subject/object divide, trying to strike a chord between person and thing in the face of a fundamental rift.

What follows from that rift may be more ruinous for humankind than for materiality. The most hopeful readings of this passage are given by Hitt and Economides, who both note that the voice of the mountain has here the power to repeal, but not to create, legal codes. But it is also worth asking why Shelley backs away from what appears to be the poem's central claim here. This sequence categorizes human virtue (wise, great, good) in an apparent descent, and the very form of the divided list is worrying. By the time he writes *The Triumph of Life* (1822), Shelley will wonder why 'God made irreconcilable/ Good and the means of good'; the divisions of subject and verb in this stanza already point toward an ethical self-division. At the midpoint of the poem, the third stanza seems to gesture towards the great potential of what political ecologists such as Bruno Latour have envisioned as a 'new collective', even as it re-inscribes the social divisions that block any hope of reform. [28]

Dwelling

To recapitulate: at the opening of the fourth stanza, we have worked our way from a river that makes the preexistence of human thought seem a fiction (as practitioners of OOO would argue), through a ravine-mind that reflects human-mind while shadows of each dreamily meet in the cave of the witch Poesy (enacting the structural coupling of cognitive biology and systems theory), to a mountain that seems to represent both death and the summit of earthly desires for reconciliation (political ecology), both a consummation devoutly to be wished and the vanishing point of a perspectival drawing (as in the withdrawal of the object in OOO). And we have travelled this route via different modes of anthropomorphism working to show us (à la Jane Bennett's vibrant matter) the liveliness of less wordy beings.

Can we actually experience the voice of the mountain as a partner in a new collective? In the fourth stanza, the poet, gazing on the mountain, implicitly bids it speak through his own voice. As the lines of the stanza seek for a dwelling place, replaying words and images already canvassed, the mountain's voice may rest, with our wild thoughts, in the cave of Poesy. The fourth stanza turns back from questions to assertions, back to the kind of descriptive clauses and tenuous grammatical connections we saw in the second stanza.

> The fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams,

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[27] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter,* 120.
[28] See for instance Bruno Latour*, Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

> Ocean, and all the living things that dwell
> Within the daedal earth; lightning, and rain,
> Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane,
> The torpor of the year when feeble dreams
> Visit the hidden buds, or dreamless sleep
> Holds every future leaf and flower; the bound
> With which from that detested trance they leap;
> The works and ways of man, their death and birth,
> And that of him and all that his may be;
> All things that move and breathe with toil and sound
> Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell. (84-95)

Grammatical groupings strain at the seams, exceeding their boundaries. If you were asked to summarize the meaning of this passage, the obvious move would be to jump to the last two lines: the rest exceed requirements. And even the last two lines contain unnecessary material: 'toil and sound' interrupt the forward motion of the lines, making them hard to read. Toil and sound—the twinned heart of poetry—together distract from the basic concept that 'all things that move and breathe are born and die'. Of course, one could argue that distraction—poetry—toil and sound—is the point here. Shelley's list of all things that move and breathe is an epic *ekphrasis*: a (massive) microcosm of the world, replaying Hesiod's *Works and Days* as the works and ways of man. Resisting his own rude and bare and ghastly summary, Shelley reverses the traditional sequence of birth and death ('death and birth') and adds a cadence, one that may even attempt to reverse entropy, as all things 'revolve, subside, and swell'.

After the *daedal ekphrasis* of the stanza's opening comes an assertion of separation that the remainder of the stanza will undercut: 'Power dwells apart in its tranquillity/ Remote, serene, and inaccessible' (96-7). The adjective 'serene' glances back at the third stanza's 'faith so solemn, / So serene' that it blocks the reconciliation of man and nature, while 'remote' replays the 'remoter world' whence dreams visit human sleepers. Dwelling apart, this inaccessible Power seems to maintain and underscore existing theology and divisions. Yet the very next claim asserts the possibility of connection through attention or education:

> And *this*, the naked countenance of earth,
> On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains
> Teach the adverting mind. (98-100)

This third appearance of the verb 'to teach' shifts the focus of instruction. When the poem speculated about old Earthquake-daemon teaching ruin to her young, 'ruin' operated a little oddly as a curricular course of study. Immediately afterwards, the mysterious tongue of the wilderness more solemnly appeared to teach either awful doubt or solemn faith: again, one could imagine an entire course of study in sceptical philosophy or Anglican theology. But in these lines, the naked countenance of earth evokes a response that blurs subject-object divisions: here, the 'adverting mind' may be either the indirect object of the sentence (the mountains teach whom?) or perhaps the direct object (the mountains teach what? to advert, to turn to the primeval earth).

Once the adverting mind appears, the stable divisions that maintain Power apart in its tranquillity seem to vanish. Object-oriented ontology as propounded by Timothy Morton suggests that objects can only translate one another, and the fourth stanza proposes a series of translations through simile and metaphor. Glaciers creep 'like snakes', their formations become 'many a precipice' shaped as

> dome, pyramid, and pinnacle,
> A city of death, distinct with many a tower
> And wall impregnable of beaming ice (102-6)

all paradoxically and anthropomorphically constructed by 'Frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power'. Abstract Power apparently dwells in a city of death shaped by religion (Egyptian pyramids, the domes and pinnacles of cathedrals and mosques) and war (towers and impregnable walls) to which mortal power can only aspire. Yet this likeness is neither fixed nor stable: no sooner named than translated into another form.

> 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 destin'd path, or in the mangled soil
> Branchless and shatter'd stand; the rocks, drawn down
> From yon remotest waste, have overthrown
> The limits of the dead and living world,
> Never to be reclaim'd. (107-14)

So much for Power's remote inaccessibility. We are back amid the relationships implied by the first stanza, but they appear through a mirror darkly, revised into something like this apocalyptic assertion: an everlasting flood of ruin overthrows the limits of death and life. Power in its remoteness seems to be chucking rocks at the living world; the children of Earthquake-daemon have learned their lessons well. As subsequent lines make clear, erasing the boundary between death and life does not serve the interests of the living: 'so much of life and joy is lost' (117). A flood of ruin claims the 'dwelling' and the 'place' of men and of 'insects, beasts, and birds' as 'its spoil' (115), though the glaciers have little obvious use for either food or retreat. As 'the race/ Of man flies far in dread', it lacks the serenity to 'advert' to the 'naked countenance of earth'. The perpetual stream of ruinous change, the ceaseless vulnerability of the living: these contingencies make it nearly impossible to replace the Wordsworthian 'faith that looks through death' or acquire the 'philosophic mind' of the Intimations Ode.

However, the conclusion of the stanza does appear to look through death by turning death back into life, transforming the linear flood of ruin back into the cyclical natural patterns described in the stanza's opening account of the 'daedal earth'. Human thought and imaginative power return at this point of transformation, as the phrasing evokes the Coleridge not of 'Hymn before Sunrise, in the Vale of Chamouni' with whom Shelley has been arguing, but rather of the unpublished imaginative tour-de-force 'Kubla Khan'.

> Below, vast caves
> Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam,
> Which from those secret chasms in tumult welling
> 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,
> Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air. (120-6)

The first stanza gestured at the secret springs of human thought; here, that feeble tributary has swelled to 'rushing torrents' from 'secret chasms in tumult welling'. Mind and river seem to meet in the vale, reaching out alike to the ocean and the circling

waves. The act of breathing reinscribes a kind of structural coupling of mind and material world, as long as one accepts 'distant lands' as synecdoche for the human and nonhuman life supported by all the ecoservices provided by the majestic River. Mind and river together support 'the breath and blood of distant lands' even as the vapours exhaled by the river point toward a nonhuman water cycle of transpiration and evaporation into the 'circling air'. Perhaps the human mind can roll along with the universe of things; perhaps rather than being destroyed by a flood of ruin, we can turn to the naked countenance of earth and start to see the interrelatedness of death and life, along with their cyclical patterns of renewal.

Agency from a Stone

While the first stanza of 'Mont Blanc' focused obsessively on the adverbial 'where, where, where' of human thought and human-nonhuman encounter, the poem's final stanza offers its own repetitive tolling of location: there, there, there. However, despite the apparent insistence on separation, the question implied by this stanza highlights connection and outreach: how can the human mind reach the 'there' of materiality? What would be the inverse of the universe of things flowing through the human mind?

> 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)

Such separation offers no traction, no imaginative transport to the human mind. This opening sounds like a bored museum docent gesturing vaguely at a collection: here you have our many sights, and many sounds, and much of life and death. If the wise, the great and the good are to interpret, make felt, and deeply feel the voice of the mountain, they are going to have to do better than this.

To make us feel the mountain, Shelley evokes multiple senses, setting a varied scene of shifting weather and times of day. This stanza replaces eternal time with some of the variation possible on this 'daedal earth,' and the dominant action—the snows descending—closes the water cycle suggested at the end of the preceding stanza:

> In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,
> In the lone glare of day, the snows descend
> Upon that Mountain; none beholds them there,
> Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,
> Or the star-beams dart through them. Winds contend
> Silently there, and heap the snow with breath
> Rapid and strong, but silently! (130-6)

This description moves beyond the generality of 'many sights, and many sounds,' but only to cast doubt upon that opening description, since no one is there to see the snow, and the action occurs silently. The awkward repetition of 'silently'—in its second appearance, the adverbial form only makes sense applied back to the verb 'heap' even though the word appears as if a continuation of the adjectives describing 'breath'—underscores its importance. And the anthropomorphism of the winds heaping the snow with their breath does so little to humanize either wind or snow that the rhetorical gesture is itself muted. Shelley unsubtly contradicts the third stanza's anthropomorphic

insistence on the mountain's voice. The thunderous appearance of Power in likeness of the Arve is similarly silenced in this conclusion; instead,

> Its home
> The voiceless lightning in these solitudes
> Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods
> Over the snow. (136-9)

Instead of water bursting like flame in the second stanza, here the voiceless lightning broods like vapour. In lieu of the dwelling places of insects and animals (including humans) destroyed in the previous stanza, Shelley here sketches the 'home' of lightning and the habitation of 'the secret Strength of things'. Thematically, the poem is still working to imagine geological processes and attend to the geological determining causes of human life: the consequence of the heaped snow, we recognize now, will include the destruction brought by the moving glacier becoming the productive river, the 'breath and blood of distant lands'.

Why then the insistent obscurity of the poem's concluding assertion and rhetorical question? By laying out a puzzle rather than making a straightforward assertion, Shelley engages his readers in interpreting (and making felt and deeply feeling) the voice of the mountain. Explicit references to secrecy need not be treated with excess reverence. 'The secret Strength of things / Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome / Of Heaven is as a law' might be relatively simply glossed as physical law, or a set of scientific generalizations based upon empirical observation. In 'Mont Blanc,' the adverting mind watches snows descend to form glaciers and then follows the path of the glacier to see it produce both destruction and life-giving breath and transpiration. The laws of the physical universe govern thought and define what we can imagine of heaven's 'infinite dome'—but human imagination is deeply bound up in the articulation of those physical laws.

> And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
> If to the human mind's imaginings
> Silence and solitude were vacancy? (142-5)

This closing question has been read both as an assertion of the human mind's triumphant mastery over mountain, earth, stars and seas, and as a more sceptical open question. I want to insist once again on the importance of connection in this conclusion to the poem: I see the closing assertion and question as a rhetorical assemblage mimicking the human-nonhuman collective Shelley has been struggling to create and describe throughout the poem. The Ravine, the Arve, the mountain and the mind all come together in this poem dedicated to transforming our sense of political agency and collective possibility.

Conclusion

Shelley's proto-posthumanist poem works to expand the circle of human discourse and consideration to include nonhumans—and carefully considers the challenge to human thinking that this expansion poses. 'Mont Blanc' experiments with many of the strategies taken up by various recent proponents of posthumanist thought: decentering, structural coupling, grammatical deformation, anthropomorphism, translation, and

more. Shelley's first stanza, driving the universe of things as a raging river through the human mind, drastically displaces human thought and agency, unseating humanist assumptions of centrality. The second stanza of 'Mont Blanc' dismisses the violent heterosexism inherent in the Romantic sublime and develops instead a tale of structural coupling in which the shadowy cave of poetry allows the human mind to encounter not only its solipsistic self but also the universe of things. The third stanza challenges the value and meaning of that point of interchange by exploring the boundaries of vitality (sleep, death, dream) and working to imagine, through carefully framed anthropomorphism, the political agency of a mountain. Stepping back from this anthropomorphism, the fourth stanza shifts the poem's focus from 'codes' and pronouncements to object-oriented translations and process: rather than the preceding options of ruin, awful doubt or serene faith, attention (the 'adverting mind') may be all the wilderness can teach. Finally, the last stanza, recuperating ruin with habitation and replacing voice with adverbial silence, requires a radical reimagining of human-nonhuman agency and collaboration. The dense patterning of Shelley's language in 'Mont Blanc' allows the poem to engage each of these strategies in considerable depth and complexity, highlighting various points of overlap and difference in recent posthumanist scholarship. Nevertheless, the poem, like the mountain, teaches us that the most important and most challenging step is perhaps the first: to ad-vert, to turn to the material world, to open one's mind to the nonhuman and the not-so-secret strength of things.

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Instanțe [agency] ale unei pietre [stone]. Experimentele postumaniste ale lui Shelley în „Mont Blanc"

Rezumat

Acest articol tratează poemul lui Shelley „Mont Blanc" ca pe o explorare extinsă spre posibile relații care leagă mintea umană de lumea materială. Aceste relații pe care Shelley le-a stabilit anticipează multe structuri și strategii dezvoltate ulterior de teoria postumanistă, incluzînd cuplarea structurală, strategii antropomorfice, traducerea imagistică, și asamblarea uman-non-uman. După rezumarea lecturilor kantiene și postkantiene ale poeziei „Mont Blanc", articolul propune o lectură nouă prin care autoarea descoperă elemente proto-postumaniste.