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Berkeley Redux: Imagination as Ethical Power in Shelley's "Mont
Blanc"

The great instrument of moral good

is the imagination . . .-A Defence of Poetry.

And he carried me away in the spirit

to a great and high mountain . . .-Rev. 21:10.

The wind blew away the clouds hiding Mount Blanc's massive peak before which Shelley stood looking up. He later described the scene in a letter: "The immensity of these aerial summits . . . suddenly burst upon the sight . . ." (Jones 497). The powerful event was soon followed by what Jerrold Hogle calls a "meditative lyric" ("Shelley," 111) named for the mountain. Although an ode, the poem (1817) is neither an ode to nor an apotheosis of the alp. In fact, the actual Mont Blanc is rendered in the poem mostly as abstract generalization. In the third and fifth sections it is "seen" impressionistically, and again in the third its voice is the subject of a single apostrophe. The bulk of physical description in the poem concerns the river Arve, its ravine and associated caverns, and the surrounding landscape, including the lesser mountains. These

scenes or "seems" are all virtually hypothetical, that is to say, imaginary. The mountain of the title, if not exactly erased, is conspicuously absent from the work. What, then, is the subject-matter? There has been a large amount of commentary on this poem, judged by C. E. Pulos to be "a key work to the understanding of the mature poet's philosophy" (63)¹; and, according to Frances Ferguson, "Critics seem to have agreed on one thing about Mount Blanc—that it is a poem about the relationship between the human mind and the external world. After that, the debates begin . . ." (202). In my own reading, the debate should begin before that, since the poem's central concern may be shown as regarding the imagination as a therapeutic agency, a concomitant of its articulating a functional relationship between the human mind and the divine mind that borrows from George Berkeley's idealism; thus the locus of the poem's vision is empyrean rather than alpine. Shelley's initial abjuration of Berkeley was succeeded, in Mary Shelley's words, by his becoming a "disciple of the Immaterial Philosophy of Berkeley," a discipleship that, ". . . gave unity and grandeur to his ideas, while it opened a wide field for his imagination" (Ingpen and Peck, V, "Mrs. Shelley's Preface to Essays, Letters from Abroad" ix; hereafter cited as CW.). In this poem the immaterialism of Berkeley provides both an epistemological starting point and a framework for Shelley's own

idealism, even as he rejects some of Berkeley's theological and epistemological conclusions. In "Mont Blanc" the applications of this philosophy are humanistic, having two distinct but complementary expectations: the enrichment of aesthetic endeavor and the promotion of ethical amelioration, each to proceed from individual imaginative experience. I hope to show that the poem realizes its aim by postulating a unified view of life with all phenomena under the control of a single conscious power, a unity that in turn provides a positive sense of universal self-control for mankind.

Though generally acknowledged to be an important work, "Mont Blanc" has at times been treated as a flawed statement, internally troubled and concluding—literally—with lacunate uncertainty. The presumed disjunctive instability of its five numbered sections has frustrated analysis. As Hogle puts it, "The reader of 'Mont Blanc' is . . . tossed perpetually between strict order and total chaos, centering and decentering, recurrence and irregularity, tradition and revolution, or sameness and difference in choosing the best assumptions by which to interpret what 'comes down in likeness' toward the vale of Chamouni" (Shelley's Process 83). If indeed the assumptions we choose to honor enhance our understanding of a work, I have

found that by illuminating the philosophical context Shelley is valorizing, the poem's rifts may load with ore of new meaning.

Although "the dominant trend of Shelley criticism has been toward establishing the coherence, consistency, and originality of [his] thought" (Roberts 129), Shelley's dynamic intellectual development has at times engendered a willing suspension of belief toward the validity of his ultimate philosophical position in both his theory and his practice, represented, in the present poem, by three enduringly influential studies of "Mont Blanc." In each case, the most damaging (damning?) assessment concerns the poem's ending:

1) I. J. Kapstein posits a disjunction between what he sees as the poem's climax (lines 139-41) and its conclusion (lines 142-44) created as a result of contradictions and shifts in logic. Shelley's "evasions, equivocations, and ambiguities" inevitably perform another (pseudo-) "climax," "the ambiguous and ironical anticlimax of 'Mont Blanc'" (1047, 1057, 1060).²

2) Earl R. Wasserman asserts that by ending with "a question" rather than an "affirmation," the poem exhibits "skeptical incertitude," a merely poetical (or fictional) epistemology based on "an experience of trance and death-like dream" (238).

3) Lastly, John Rieder states that "[a]lthough the section's final lines achieve a prophetic aura, the poet's revelation

concerns, not a divine manifestation, but the very absence of such a presence; the experience is an anti-epiphany" (794). Here I propose a reading that replaces the surface chaos with order, incertitude with philosophical certainty, and, with reference the third study cited, anti-epiphany with a post-epiphany to be seen in the poem's final movement. This point can only be reached, however, by reinterpreting a central term in "Mont Blanc," which I will come to momentarily.

An epiphany suggests a divine manifesting, and though confessedly unreligious, Shelley is never irreligious, and it would be wrong to say he was not interested in religion per se. In his study of Shelley and therapeutic idealism Hugh Roberts calls him "an excellent biblical scholar . . . particularly fascinated by the figure of Christ" (83). In such essays as The Necessity of Atheism (1811), A Refutation of Deism (1814), and his fragmentary draft On Christianity (1817) we see the central place religion occupied in his thought. In the first of the three texts just mentioned, for instance, he writes: ". . . our knowledge of the existence of a Deity is a subject of such importance that it cannot be too minutely investigated . . ." (Murray 3; hereafter cited as PW). His unqualified recognition of divine power and his piety in speaking of God coincide with the epistemology developed in his poem:

We live and move and think, but we are not the creators of our own origin and existence, we are not the arbiters of every motion of our own complicated nature, we are not the masters of our own imaginations [i.e., not originators of the raw materials, the data, of them, as I take it]. . . .There is a power by which we are surrounded, like the atmosphere in which some motionless lyre is suspended, which visits with its breath our silent chords, at will. Our most imperial and stupendous qualities, those on which the majesty and power of humanity is erected are, relatively to the inferiour portion of its mechanism indeed active and imperial; but they are the passive slaves of some higher and more omnipresent Power. This power is God. And those who have seen God, have, in the periods of their purer and more perfect nature, been harmonized by their own will, to so exquisite a consentaneity of powers, as to give forth divinest melody when the breath of universal being sweeps over their frame.

(PW, "On Christianity" 251-52).

As the product of Shelley's speculations into the nature of the real, the poem elaborates and rationalizes a radical epistemology to explain the relationship of reason and

imagination to a super-sensible reality. A Judeo-Christian biblical presence in this poem is palpable; yet ever wary of dogmatizing, Shelley has chosen the highly figured language of poetry over prose. What Monika Lee observes of Queen Mab applies here as well: “. . . Shelley uses rational language and affective language with and against each other in order to avert the dangers of language codifying rigid structures of thought” This allows to Shelley, “the bringing of reform without the institution of new dogma and the desire for spiritual reassurance in a world bound by history . . . ,” thereby [avoiding] “the authoritarian stance and the rigid logocentricism that can be implied by a belief in a strictly rational utterance” (172).

While the poem develops in five sections, its overarching structure may be regarded as Attic, tripartite, and odic, the first section—mostly—a (curtal) strophe of choric-like exposition; sections II through IV an antistrophe, both choric and individual in character; and section V an epode, furnishing a progression from collective commentary to individual response and circling back to the collective. An inexplicit if not exactly suppressed correspondence with classical tragic form may also be felt, providing a similar choric bracketing: following the prologue an actor speaks to the central “question” and

describes his/her anagnorisis/recognition/epiphany, the exode providing closure, thus achieving a confluence of poetry and theater. Such a structural shadow here seems instinctively apropos, as "[t]he drama," writes Shelley in the Defence, is "that form under which . . . the connexion of poetry and social good is more observable" than in other forms, particularly in "tragedies of the Athenian poets" reflecting as a mirror "the internal type of all that [a spectator] loves, admires, and would become" (521; 520). The five sections may be sketched as follows:

I (1-11). Opening syncretic statement contrasts the epiphany with the pre-epiphany.

II (12-48). Pantheism, deism, and dualism³ rejected; human and divine collaboration affirmed; nihilism denounced.

III (49-83). A clarified view of nature awakens man from mental apathy, supplanting a regressive skepticism with "faith" in a betterment of the human condition.

IV (84-126). The destructive forces and moral stupor of a mythical world are contrasted with the sublime stillness of actual Power, rebuking the ice-bound distortion of an Eden destroyed.

V (127-44). Imagination in the service of moral choice rejects mindless "vacancy" and opens the way to a renovated man and world.

The red wheelbarrow of the poem is its opening statement: the first nine words of "Mont Blanc"—the first line and a half, to the caesura—may be the poem's most important, a choric declaration of ontological truth deserving close examination.

The everlasting universe of things

Flows through the mind, . . . (1-2)⁴

The term which will determine the poem's direction is mind. Because that which is "everlasting" or eternal must be divine not human, the designated context of all things is also divine—the "things" being the thoughts of a supreme, conscious being. Etymologically, universe means "turned toward [the] one," establishing the unitary character of noumenon/phenomenon, a mind's exclusive awareness of its own activity, its thingness of expression. "By the word things," writes Shelley, "is to be understood any object of thought . . ." (SPP, "On Life," 508). With this, Berkeley concurs; for while things has a resonance as being "of the earth, earthy," the term has an equivalence for

him with ideas (as well as being metrically more congenial to Shelley's line): "The ideas imprinted on the senses by the Author of Nature are called real things . . ." Berkeley's statement continues, making a hierarchical distinction between sense and imagination: ". . . and those excited in the imagination . . . are more properly termed ideas, or images of things, which they copy and represent" (Luce, A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, II 33; hereafter cited as Works and Principles. References to Berkeley's writings are by section numbers, except for Three Dialogues, where they are by page number.) Berkeley's points elsewhere are germane:

I own the word idea, not being commonly used for thing, sounds something out of the way. . . . [I]t is now commonly used by philosophers, to denote the immediate objects of the understanding. . . . [T]here are only things perceiving, and things perceived; . . . every unthinking being is necessarily, and from the very nature of its existence, perceived by some mind; if not by any finite created mind, yet certainly by the infinite mind of God. . . . I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things. . . . (Works, II, Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous 235-36, 244; hereafter cited as Three Dialogues).

Following upon this powerfully concentrated declaration a supersubtle change takes place halfway through line 2, the strophe having yielded to an antistrophe now voicing relative truth, doing so to the end of the fourth section. This syncretical shift to a (roughly) parallel material "universe" is an augmentation of the poem's opening statement: the universe exists as an energetic flow of ideas, a fluid, fluent energy that

rolls its rapid waves,

Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—

Now lending splendour, . . . (2-4),

imparting (lending) its own progressive mental development to its creation ("things"). Reflecting, in the sense of restful thinking, if understood as governing all three attributes in line 3, reveals a dynamic intelligence whose visual properties comprise a spectrum of light waves in a metaphorical representation of the entire range of aesthetics ("splendour"): darkness, brightness, and mixed light (gloom related to gloom/gloaming, the "glow" of sunrise or the twilight of sunset [OED]). The repetition of now—four times—emphasizes the

eternality of divinity, the ultimate source, which having neither past (beginning) nor future (ending) exists spontaneously in an eternal present.

After a caesura in line 4 a mimetic universe is presented through simile:

. . . 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. (4-11)

This richly complex segment of section I re-presents the pre-epiphany, the received, common philosophical context out of which the poem emerges, placed before the reader in order to expose the ambivalence of the human mind regarding its own

capacity to create as well as destroy, imagistically relying on the essential points of Berkeleyan idealism: Because I know only myself and my experience, it follows that all things are really my ideas, including what I perceive as my fellow-men and my sense of God. Yet, as my perception is ultimately passive, my sense-data being based upon the involuntary, unwilled "things" of experience ("imprinted" on my mind by God, according to Berkeley's copy-theory of epistemology), I am forced to admit a creative source other-than-myself. As Berkeley writes:

Did men but consider that the sun, moon, and stars, and every other object of the senses, are only so many sensations in their minds, which have no other existence but barely being perceived, doubtless they would never fall down, and worship their own ideas; but rather address their homage to that eternal invisible Mind which produces and sustains all things. (Works, II, Principles, 94)

This section of the poem may indeed seem epistemologically ambivalent if "mind" is interpreted as being that of a human. For the universal creative source itself Shelley uses a variety of terms at different points, the two used in "Mont Blanc" being Power and Mind (the second term being capitalized in this discussion to distinguish it from human mind), respectively the

potentiality and intelligence of immaterial divine causation. As the activity of a mind is to think, thinking implies ideas about which to think. A divine Mind is the creator or source of its ideas, endogenous; a human mind thinks about the things which come to it, essentially unbidden. Thinking to self-sourcing Mind is creating or willing; thinking to human mind is solely reasoning (in tandem with imagining, in Shelley's view), even when called willing. In human idealism, acting must also be a form of thinking, making the mind appear to be creative: the human mind does "create" structures, ideational or material, through rearrangement of perceived things, and, with regard to life-forms, can procreate and (apparently) annihilate—making it seem to be an originator or a "source" of its own "thought." But since to the human mind those things comprising its sense-data are recognized as involuntary, unwilled, a recognition of ultimate passive dependency can never be far behind: as the rapid waves of actual thought are rolling in a veiled where, a locus divine, the true source of the "source" (5) is the divine Mind, with all real thoughts (things) deriving ultimately from the flowing energy of the divine spring, or potential, of itself. The splendor, however, is only lent, not shared. The perceived springs of the real source are "secret," not understood by and invisible to the human mind, which here in consequence acts in mimesis as an hypothesized "source" of its

own activity, figuratively rendered as water. If such a stream were to be regarded pantheistically as a tributary, the tribute being brought would necessarily be Other-directed, in acknowledgement of a supposed power-share with an archetypal mind existing in another realm or state of being. Yet, inherently aware of its own greatness, the actual source must be exclusively and inevitably Self-tributizing in fullness of power; thus, following a dramatic pause, a stumble of ambivalence (l. 6), the present tribute is described as an aural event of mimicry, a symbol of activity expressed in understatement as being "but half its own": the enfeebled half-sound of "tribute" (5) is the human mind's self-directed gesture, a self-ironizing bathos. Such a subversion (subversion) fits Shelley's object in this poem, which involves discrediting an epistemology that regards the human mind as an autonomous creative and destructive agency.

The anxiety of dualism is now depicted in the metaphor of a fluvial binary, the inferior flux feebly passive to the other's bursting and raving in an implicit indictment of an hypothetical deistic source of inherent indeterminacy expressing itself in chaos—a self-absorbed, unstable deity of cruelty and capricious indifference to depredation and depression. Uncomprehending of any functional relation to its divine source,

human thought is rendered in an extended simile ("Such as"): a brook shown pathetically anemic through juxtaposition with a vast river that produces contending—rather than flowing—things. For Berkeley communication between the two "conscious" states of Creator and created is uni-directional, strictly a result of God's imprinting activities and selectively occurring de-veiling acts of omniscience. In the poem Shelley's elaboration of this connection will serve to bring moral empowerment to man: by emphasizing the epistemological ambivalence concerning the source of human thought Shelley's poem sets the stage for examining more closely an actual functional relationship between the two "minds"—the one powerfully creative, the other passive—which will be the task of the second section. In addition, the extended and entirely naturalistic simile involving mountain streams has served to reintroduce the sublime landscape evoked by the title, necessary to the poem's subsequent exposition, as well as to anticipate cannily the solitudes and vacancies at the heart of the poem through having the water gurgle "among the mountains lone" with presumably no one there to hear it.

In section II the raving of line 11 is reified and localized:

Thus thou, Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine—

Thou many-coloured, many-voiced vale, . . . (12-13)

In the previous section, Mind is an active intelligent principle whose contemplation of itself is expressed as a euphonious flow of subjective ideas. Here in a contrasting inversion, a ravine becomes a passive receptacle for a river of thought. As Ferguson has noted, the river over time in-fluences the ravine's shape, and in turn the vale, although passive and recumbent ("thou dost lie," 19), reciprocally imposes a design upon the streaming (46). In "On Christianity" Shelley would write, "God is represented by Jesus Christ as the [Power] from which or thro' which the streams of all that is excellent and delightful flow: The power which models as they pass all the elements of this mixed universe to the purest and most perfect shape which it belongs to their nature to assume. . . . the fountain of all goodness" (PW 255; brackets in original). But this interaction is not strictly mutual: while the ravine has been semi-permanently modified, gravity inexorably recalls the water, exerting a leveling and straightening force upon it that thereby constantly returns it to an "archetypal" state—which in a sense it never really left. In this representation can be seen the interplay of human imagination and reality: the human mind is continually reacting to unwilled sense-percepts of life, which it

imaginatively alters, but never actually changes. The ravine will come to stand for the poem's persona or individuated personality while the lesser concavities ("caverns," 14) represent other persons (i.e., "Thou . . . many voiced-vale"), inferior in size to the persona as their existence/consciousness cannot be experienced directly by him/her but known only by inference, through what Berkeley calls notions or the use of "reason" (Works, Principles, II, 89). Each, having responded individually to the water pressure, has an individual shape, a unique consciousness formed as a "separate phantasy" (35).

Spiritual things flow "through" Mind, whereas the Arve, the symbolic source of material ideas, plunges "down," gravitationally, in hypothetical deflection and interment of spiritual "Power"—an assumed interpenetration of the human by the divine requisite to an ontology of pantheistic dualism. A vicious ambivalence pervades: naturalistic climatic events resulting in either reduced flow (as in drought) or total stoppage (as in freezing) are ever potential threats. The assumed mixing of two disparate realms has a further price: the temporal ravine shows its age in encrustations of hoary pine trees lining its banks; and though sublimely picturesque these same trees will be crushed and strewn about when the formerly inspiring water becomes glacial ice, suggesting the destructive cyclical pattern fully developed in section IV. Moreover, in

undergoing freezing and cessation, unlike the ever-flowing true universe, this water further becomes a fluvial debasement of its original, a paradox of "icy Springs, stagnant with wrinkling frost" (Prometheus Unbound I: 62). This vale is the psalmist's valley of the shadow of death where a break in the thought-flow implies death, the annihilation of consciousness, a state literally un-thinkable.

In the preceding section the real universe, being actually "secret" (invisible) was presented in a scant three and a half lines of verse, an abstraction of its qualities—for "the deep truth is imageless" (Prometheus Unbound II:4:116).

Suppositionally monarchical, the Arve too has its inception in a "secret throne" (17), but only so because its origin above the clouds cannot readily be viewed and because of the improbability of any easy access to it. Here material nature is shown with strident edginess, being a place of "craggs . . . and caverns" (14), whose "throne" is roughly "gird" with vacuous "ice gulphs" (17), from which the river comes "Bursting through" like "lightning" in a "tempest" (18, 19). Pine trees are found "clinging" to the ravine in a "brood" (20), birdlike but also depressed (and pining); "caverns" reverberate with the water's "commotion" (30), a noise that is "loud" and "unresting" produced by a wearying "ceaseless motion" (14-23). Temporal, mutable trees are aging giants, "Children of elder time" (21)

swept by eolian winds in merely an "old" rather than eternal "harmony" (24). The "scene" is indeed "awful" (15) or disagreeable, a legitimate pun in Shelley's day, in so many ways a departure from the ideal, and has a "strange" (35) effect upon the poet—the thought commenced in line 30 is bitten off in 33, the break marking an introspective turning:

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

Although earlier the winds were personified in the act of quaffing the piney scents, the anticipated pathetic fallacy of a dizzy ravine is suddenly revoked: the scene is profoundly dizzying, a stone (to add a metaphor) in the pool of the poet's consciousness, creating widening ripples of understanding, as

the poet—simultaneously—becomes this ravine, dizzied by the fullness of recognition. The mental state is not a literal trance, as the use of simile makes clear. Rather this is the moment in which the poet (the chorus reduced to its coryphaeus) begins to chronicle his/her epiphany, as in a self-reflection (the pronoun "I" only occurs in sections 2-4, the "narrative" portion of the poem, or argument) he/she gazes entranced "on thee" (his/her own soul or conscious self), muses on his/her "own separate" "human mind," and acknowledges his/her symbolic identity as one understood to be "passively" participating in an eternal intercourse with a suddenly clarified "universe of things." At this moment of heightened understanding, passivity here means only that the human mind is a receiver not a creator, and does not imply the apathy that will be so strongly described in section III. The separateness or distinction being elaborated is not that between human and human, between the poet's consciousness and that of countless other mortal minds represented by the suppositional (i.e., known only through Berkeleyan notions) subaltern caverns, but between human and divine, the sculpturable and the unsculpturable—that which is eternally distinct from material representation since it exists entirely in a fourth dimension—together with the functional connection that exists between the two. In recognition of humanity's inability to be intellectually self-sourcing, Shelley

makes a pointed devaluation of merely human pronominal individuation:

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. It is difficult to find terms adequately to express so subtle a conception as that to which the intellectual philosophy has conducted us. We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of—how little we know.

(SPP, "On Life" 508)

In this connection, quietly at work on another level of this section are three significant terms germane to the epiphany and adjunctive to explaining the poem's epistemology: veil, cave, and shadow. Discussing mankind's inability to understand God, Berkeley writes:

It is said the faculties we have are few, and those designed . . . not to penetrate into the inward essence and constitution of things. Besides, the mind of man being finite, when it treats of things which partake of infinity, it is not to be wondered at,

if it run into absurdities and contradictions; out of which it is impossible it should ever extricate it self, it being of the nature of infinite not to be comprehended by that which is finite. (Works, Principles, II, "Introduction" 2)

Indeed, exalted thoughts, refractions of the pure light of divinity, expressed spectrally (or spectrometrically) as "earthly rainbows" (25) lead not to the merely metaphorical "waterfalls" (9) of the previous section but to "the ethereal waterfall" (26; my italics), the unbreachable divide between mortal and immortal, whose flow veils "some unsculptured [unsculpturable] image" (27): functioning with literal ethereality, it conceals the actual idea of the divine Mind. In the Judeo-Christian tradition—a context impelled by the terminology, by a communing that involves a mountain, and by the reverential nature of the poem—while there are instances aplenty of spiritual inspiration, guidance, fulfillment, and the like, a profound substantive distinction exists between matter ("flesh") and spirit, neither ever represented as subject to intermixing or, in the case of spirit, transmutation. The birth of Jesus Christ could be cited as an exception in which "the Word was made flesh" (John 1:14), although there is far from broad agreement on the literal meaning of the phrase. In Hebrews, Jesus' "flesh" is referred to as a "veil" (10:20), validating

the traditional flesh/spirit distinction. Following his death by crucifixion "the veil of the temple was rent in twain" (Mk. 16: 38), providing man with conceptual clarification of an everlasting universe of deific things. A rainbow is an important biblical symbol of divine compassion, as in God's speech to Noah: "I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth" (Gen. 9:13). A covenant or contract is not the same as direct communication between two distinct realms of consciousness—"for there shall no man see me, and live" (Ex. 33:20)—but can imply an unveiling of purpose heretofore obscure. Isaiah expressly connects ascending thought with unveiling: "And he [God] will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the veil that is spread over all nations" (25:7). 16. "Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni," the poem's subtitle, plays on vale/veil, since vale can also mean "world"; i.e., the physical world (or universe) of things misrepresents the spiritual reality. The poem's monism concerns just such an unveiling of divine purpose.

Caves, like caverns, represent a vacuity or the absence of some thing or idea; shadows represent the supposition of an idea, one that is everlastingly exclusive (veiled in the ethereal). In analyzing Shelley's use of these figures some concepts in common number theory may be applied, particularly since for him imagining as distinguished from reasoning is the

mind acting upon . . . thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them as from elements, other thoughts, . . . considering them, not in their integral unity, but as the algebraical representations which conduct to certain general results. . . . Reason is to Imagination . . . as the shadow to the substance. (Defence 510-11)

For instance, an integer is a natural number (i.e., an element in the set {1, 2, 3, . . .}) including its negative counterpart. The common definition of number being "a sum of units"—a sum of "ones" (unum)—the natural number one possesses a special potentiality, providing a base for all other numbers, whether wholes, fractions, or negatives; in a sense, all numbers exist as suppositions concerning aspects of one: two, supposes one combined with itself; one-third, that two-thirds of one are not present; and zero, in an act of total erasure, that one does not exist. Thus ravines, "gulphs,"⁵ and caves stand for the "number" zero, total vacancy. Zero has its uses, however, and human ideas floating imaginatively "above thy [the Ravine's, the human mind's] darkness" (42) may settle "Where that [legions of human thought, 41] or thou [Mind] art no unbidden guest" (43), in Poesy's cave of enchantment, or the faculty of imagination, thereby implying a basis for human aesthetic collaboration with

the divine, since "the office and character of a poet participates in the divine nature as regards providence, no less than as regards creation" (Defence 521). Berkeley seems to concur: "a beautiful idea" can only have proper "design" when "Providence doth . . . preside" in its formation and "[a] man is conscious that his will is inwardly conformed to the divine will, producing order and harmony in the universe . . ." (Works, III, Alciphron 11). A poem functions as a therapeutic, corrective activity. ". . . Poetry," writes Shelley in the Defence "is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted" [515].

In monism, moreover, harmony is an everlasting principle; conforming to the "divine will" means perceiving real things with increasing clarity. Shelley states that "harmony" as distinct from mere "melody" is achieved not through lyre-like passivity but volitionally, "by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them" (Defence 511). The number "minus one," while mathematically useful as a hypothetical vacancy, could not exist in the realm of the real—a merely hypothetical "thing" flowing through Mind—since it represents a denial (much as a brook's half-sound does) of the one of divine unity or integrality, and therefore is in essence merely a supposition—metaphorically a shadow. In "Mont Blanc," the passive human mind, or

consciousness, itself a shadow of the divine—being a thing in a state of attenuation much like a “feeble brook”—seeks “among the shadows [shadow-thoughts or shadows of thoughts]” (45) that pass through its cavity, “Ghosts of all things that are” (46; my italics), a “shade of thee [Mind]” (46), a “phantom” or “faint image” (47). When “the breast,” the source, “From which they fled recalls them,” recognition of ultimate and absolute cause is announced in the affirmation that “thou [Mind] art there!” (47-48). The “substance” of a shadow is in a state of continual recall, just as a cave exists as an instance of continual undermining, in both senses of that term. In ignorance of its own negative existence, the cave-consciousness rarely rises above its self-perpetuating distortions. In his Principles, Berkeley defines “Matter” as “an inert, senseless, unknown substance . . . entirely made up of negatives,” the perfect instancing of a “non-entity” (Works, II 68). Sense-data absorb all our reasoning and desires, he writes, “till intellect begins to dawn, and cast a ray on this shadowy scene,” leading us to “the true principle of unity, identity” and proving material things “to be but fleeting phantoms” (Works, V, Siris 294). Similarly Shelley argues that metaphysics is best employed in discovering the “source of negative truth; . . .” that is, “the ascertaining of what is not true . . .” (CW, “Speculations on Morals,” VII 71)—

easier said than done perhaps, for "The caverns of the mind," he recognizes

are obscure, and shadowy; or pervaded with a luster, beautifully bright indeed, but shining not beyond their portals. . . [i]f the passage from sensation to reflection— from a state of passive perception to voluntary contemplation [of the actual] were not so dizzying and so tumultuous, this attempt would be less difficult. (CW, "Speculations on Metaphysics," VII 64; my italics)

Berkeley associates dawning intellect with delight in nature: ". . . God seems to choose the convincing of our reason of his attributes by the works of Nature," and the proper activity of the philosopher lies in "the searching after, and endeavouring to understand those signs ["this language," in another manuscript—e.g., Mont Blanc's "voice"] . . . by the Author of Nature" (Works, II, Principles 63, 66).

A shadow having no existence except as a negation, the "thoughts" formed in its cave—consciousness—are negatives as well. Like zero, a shadow has its uses. Reasoning inductively, I know my consciousness as a fact—in fact, it is the only one I truly have. It can have no idea(s) extrinsic to itself. Thus I can never directly experience "another's" thought—human or

divine. Furthermore, consciousness, to be consciousness, must be conscious of something. That something is essential to it, or else it could not remain as consciousness. Therefore consciousness is a cause (actually so in the real, imaginatively so in the mimetic) as well as a fact, and presupposes an effect—an expression or idea coterminous with itself. A mind is the subject of the conscious state, or consciousness; the idea does (performs) what consciousness is. As with the number one, an idea is fundamentally singular, though multiform in expression. A tulip is a single idea. If a field contains, say, 2,000 of them, each in some way individually distinct, the basal idea remains as tulip. If one imagines a bisected tulip, the original unitary concept is unaffected, whole. If in the womb of Poesy's cave a poet, as shadow, produces or births an "original" poem, he or she is "seeing" its archetype, some individuated "splendor," merely a mimetic, hypothetical act rather than an actual (and impossible) mind/Mind collaboration, for "Poets," writes Shelley, are "those who imagine and express this indestructible order," those "who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion" (Defence 512).

By way of contrast Berkeley's "spirits" (men), though likewise not the source of their own ideas, exist as individual beings

having "indivisible" "active" minds that not only perceive, but think, act, and (in a sense) will—in a seeming sea of independent parallel universes in common with other spirits (Works, II, Three Dialogues, 231-32). Shelley's idealism differs from this, however, because existence to conscious self, as a shadow of the one divine Self, can only be singular, as he concludes:

[T]he existence of distinct individual minds similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is . . . found to be a delusion The words I, you, they are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind.

Of which "mind," he adds, he is "but a portion" (SPP, "On Life" 508). Although this portion (the poet) is a shadow and although inevitably any such "thinking" shadow is a distortion, and distorter, of its original, it yet shares with its archetype immunity from erasure, an important issue for Shelley to whom man is "a being of high aspirations . . ." who "disclaim[s] alliance with transience and decay, incapable of imagining to himself annihilation . . ."; and who has "a spirit within him at enmity with change and extinction [nothingness and dissolution]"

(SPP, "On Life" 506; brackets show Shelley's uncanceled changes). Tilottama Rajan's comments on the "terrifying vacancy" experienced by "the Poet" in Alastor in relation to the role of Shelleyan imagination fit the present discussion: "Because the need to imagine an ideal arises only from the fact that this ideal is not possessed, because the imagination thereby posits its object as absent or even nonexistent, the imagination must enter its own nothingness to disclose the very reality that it seeks to transform." She adds, "A troubling ambiguity about whether the source of vision is internal or external is of crucial importance here" (77, 78). "Mont Blanc's" performed epiphany concerning the actual source of inspiration provides a resolving of the ambiguity, "Poetry," and those who make it being "a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted" (Defence 515).

In Three Dialogues Berkeley's surrogate Philonous designates persons by the oxymoron "finite spirits" whose "existence" begins when through divine decree they "become perceptible to intelligent creatures" in "a relative, or hypothetical existence . . ."; an epistemological position allowing him to imagine a concomitant hypothetical annihilation, as when straight-man Hylas asks: "Supposing you were annihilated, cannot you conceive

it possible, that things perceivable by sense [the shadow of sense] may still exist?", to which Philonous replies: "I can; but then it must be in another mind . . . wherein they exist, during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them: as likewise they did before my birth, and would do after my supposed annihilation" (Works, II 253; 230-31).⁶ Unlike a shadow, whose extinction cannot affect its archetype (Peter Pan's trepidation notwithstanding), the annihilation of a real being, as a "portion" of a whole, would be an event of mental depletion inconceivable in an everlasting universal consciousness. Existing in mimesis, the activities of a shadow are as infinite as those of a divine original, with which it is "unified" though not through absorption. "The view of life presented by the most refined deductions of the intellectual philosophy," Shelley writes with perfect literalness, "is that of unity [oneness]" (SPP, "On Life" 508). The concept of absolute unity, however, occasions Earl Wasserman's deepest misgivings toward Shelley's monism, since, he argues, "philosophic idealism tends to merge mind and universe totally. . . . Such an absolute Existence or universal Mind is neither a God apart from man nor an abstraction, but the unitary reality into which all apparent parts, distinctions, and relations dissolve" (140). Must they? In reality, effect can never become cause, nor phenomenon noumenon. Fear of fusion, or absorption, stems from the

hypothesis of separate parallel consciousnesses (universes), in which the greater is an ever-threatening subsumer of the lesser, causing its termination, an impossibility in the poem's monistic ontology of infinite, eternal individuation, wherein the principle of oneness expresses itself through individuated things just as a tulip could be red, yellow, variegated; a human James, Sarah, Ernesto; and so on, ad infinitum, in unblurred uniqueness (no two tulips can be exactly alike, nor can a tulip ever become a cabbage, and so forth), everlastingly. The poet's "human mind," albeit a shadowed "phantasy," is nonetheless "separate," individual, having fulfillable purpose, as a result of the "unremitting interchange" it enjoys with creative Mind. Even though all such "shadows" are distortions they are not susceptible to annihilation (I remain unconcerned if someone treads on my shadow), and through "realignment" with their archetypes via the imagination (the bent oar in the water I understand to be actually straight) are capable of becoming enhanced representations of the truth, thereby invoking the faith of the third section.

Some say that gleams of a remoter world

Visit the soul in sleep, . . . (49-50)

To Shelley there is no difference between dreams and the thoughts referred to as ideas (CW, VII, "Speculations on Metaphysics" 59). In the poem, the "dream" (55) that accompanies sleep is an ultra-distortion of an umbral existence, an utterly passive state of consciousness. In fact, "[h]uman life" itself, he writes, "with all its unreal ills and transitory hopes is as a dream which departs before the dawn leaving no trace of its evanescent hues" (PW, "On Christianity" 256). "Death" (50), an even more slumberous passivity, is the acceptance of the "theory" of annihilation, a caverna erasa—defined in Queen Mab as "The transient gulph-dream of a startling sleep" (IX:175; my italics)—that foists itself in the many "shapes" (51) it assumes upon waking, living beings. Rhetorical questions here yield meaning: the supposedly distinct states of "life and death" (54) are recognized as merely varieties of the same thing, as "omnipotence" (53) unfurls (i.e., upfurls; see Hutchinson 533n53) the veiling ignorance separating them; and the I-human, by looking "on high" (52), in courageous "voluntary contemplation," grasps the entrapping circularity of the entire mortal dreamscape. A speech in Hellas by Ahasuerus concisely conveys the same sense:

—this Whole

Of suns, and worlds, and men, and beasts, and flowers

With all the silent or tempestuous workings

By which they have been, are, or cease to be,

Is but a vision—all that it inherits

Are motes of a sick eye, bubbles and dreams;

Thought is its cradle and its grave, nor less

The future and the past are idle shadows

Of thought's eternal flight—they have no being. (776-84)

Though the "spirit fails" (57) in the presence of the epiphany, utter passivity abates and the broad mountainscape of Mont Blanc's cold sterility reasserts itself, an objectification of speculative vacancies—"A desert peopled by the storms alone" (67). In "Ozymandias," written about the same time (c. 1817), Shelley, preferring to avoid the tautological problem of an unpeopled desert, uses a perceiver as part of the sonnet's frame, "a traveler" "Who said—" (1, 2). Here, however, taunting tautology by imagining emptiness, his only "witnesses" to a "Ghastly" (71) scene are an "eagle" (68) and a "wolf" (69), both merely hypothetical. To rhetorical questions on the geologic

birth of Mont Blanc, "none [no man] can reply" (75) since the event preceded his-story—another hypothetical vacancy leading not to the poem's "climax," of which there is none, but to its moral and literal center. Nature, epitomized in the "voice" (80) of the mountain (a sermon in stone), can conduct to either spirit-crushing a-theism ("awful doubt") or epistemological clarity ("faith so mild" [77]), the latter having a reconciliatory function sufficient to begin a repeal of the "Large codes of fraud and woe" (81). The wing-clipping tendency of much prior criticism, I feel, has been a result of the reading of the large codes of fraud and woe line as merely referencing the topicalities one critic calls "the evils of contemporary politics and religion" (Leighton 68), rather than representing the tyrannizing determinism of personal annihilation, everlasting punishment, and theories of divine election—the last two being conspicuous in theologies of Shelley's day and of ours, the inevitable consequence of (apparent) collective (large) amoral reasoning based upon uncorrected shadows of reality—perhaps symbolized in the (self-) destructive cycle of predation acted out upon man (here reduced to "some hunter's bone" [68]) by eagle and wolf.

The practical implications of the vision turn on the function of the imagination. Berkeley and Shelley would both agree that

for any thing (and anything) to exist it must be perceived; that the human mind cannot create; and that the will of God is absolute (and, to Shelley, good, in contrast to Necessity's moral neutrality in the Queen Mab days). "Mind," Shelley declares, "as far as we have any experience of its properties . . . cannot create, it can only perceive." (SPP, "On Life," 508).

In his Principles, Berkeley distinguishes between ideas—non-thinking, passive, and inert objects—and spirits—active, thinking beings, the latter not themselves ideas, but "that which perceives ideas, and wills, and reasons about them." An act of creation is a willing for some thing to be; and since God's "will constitutes the Laws of Nature," it follows that "the whole creation is the workmanship of a wise and good agent," the originator of "the final causes of things." Yet Berkeley freely uses the term will as applied to humanity in the sense of its also being an "agent" serving solely for acts of imagination: "I find I can excite ideas in my mind at pleasure, and vary and shift the scene as oft as I think fit. It is no more than willing, and straightway this or that idea arises in my fancy: and by the same power it is obliterated, and makes way for another." Although he possesses this power over his "own thoughts," he has no volitional control over "ideas actually perceived by sense. . . ." In the same book he explains this:

When in broad day-light I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or no, or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my view; and so likewise as to the hearing and other senses, the ideas imprinted on them are not creatures of my will. There is therefore some other will or spirit that produces them." (Works, II, 89, 139; 32, 107; 28, 29)

For him, willing, in the human mind, is hypothesizing, applying "what if" reasoning, experiencing one's life activities as a compound of imaginative performances, an entirely mental activity, an arranging of those "particular objects" including language that ultimates in situational constructs, susceptible either of being mediated internally or expressed in modes of virtual reality. Because God's will is for each individual to promote "the universal well-being of mankind," right reasoning must be guided by "conscience," which is produced by "infallible" divine law (Works, VI, "Passive Obedience" 11,12).

Yet Berkeley's championing of conscience-governed free-will is often subverted by his determinism, as when certain unbidden percepts, such as distortions or abominations, contrary to mankind's "well-being," are to be tolerated: although "monsters,

untimely births, fruits blasted in the blossom, rains falling in desert places, miseries incident to human life" all argue against a wise and good God, such "methods of Nature are absolutely necessary" to the workings of that "mighty machine" whose larger purpose is unperceivable to flesh and blood. This same God cannot experience pain; yet "all things" are known and understood by Him, including "what pain is, even every sort of painful sensation, and what it is for His creatures to suffer pain . . ." (Works, II, Principles, 151; Three Dialogues 240), a view wholly denied in aqueous metaphor by Shelley: "Thus much is certain, that Jesus Christ represents God as the fountain of all goodness, the eternal enemy of pain and evil: the uniform and unchanging motive of the salutary operations of the material world"; adding, ". . . it is foreign to [God's] benevolent nature to inflict the slightest pain" (PW, "On Christianity" 255). Imagination involves the agency of conscious choice, conceiving situations classifiable as amoral, immoral, or moral—the latter two values implied in the biblical exhortation from Deuteronomy for a corrective vision: "See, I [God] have set before thee this day life and good, and death ["woe"] and evil [fraudulent "codes"] . . .," which a few verses later is expressed in a juxtaposition as of one and minus one: ". . . life [+1] and death [-1], blessing [+1] and cursing [-1] . . ."; followed by the divine remedy: ". . . therefore choose life [+1,

one], that both thou and thy seed [your lifework] may live . . .
 ." (30:15, 19). The pattern evokes Shelley's own description of
 the imaginative process as being "algebraical."

Neither the voice nor, in a secondary sense, the codes
 themselves, have been generally "understood" (81) by mankind;
 yet through the poem's universalizing vision every individual
 hearkening to the benign will and motive behind the voice, has
 the moral capacity to become "wise, and great, and good" and
 "[i]nterpret, or make felt, or deeply feel" (82-83) the
 benevolence of creation—the triple task performed here, in fact,
 by the poet/philosopher of "Mont Blanc." Seen this way, the poem
 becomes a statement of fruition of what Hugh Roberts calls
 Shelley's "therapeutic idealism," adding that such poets are

interested in a complex of Christian motifs that are central to
 the more or less sublimated theology of the therapeutic
 imperative. One such motif is the search for grace identified by
 [Harold] Bloom, which implies both the desire for a sustained
 contact with a divinity, or Absolute, and our fallen condition,
 which renders that contact frustratingly inconstant; another is
 the apocalyptic accession to a new order that will heal our
 fallen and divided state, which many critics have detected in
 Shelley's liberal borrowings from Revelations [sic]." (83)

Writing to Elizabeth Hitchner five years earlier, Shelley had vigorously stated that "perfection in morality appears now far removed from even the visionary anticipations of what is called 'the wildest theorist.' I, then, am wilder than the wildest" (CW, VIII 131). A radical philosophy faces resistance. In 1817, speaking of the oratory of Jesus, who "[accommodated] his doctrines to the prepossessions of those whom he addressed," Shelley felt that a reformer must use "[the] art of persuasion" (for him the universalizing aesthetic of poetry) so that his "judges

. . . should be free from those national and religious predilections which render the multitude both deaf and blind"; and that Jesus feared not to "[trample] upon all received opinions, on all the cherished luxuries and superstitions of mankind," exhorting men to "cast aside the chains of custom and blind faith by which they have been encompassed from the very cradle of their being, and become the imitators and ministers of the Universal God" (PW, "On Christianity" 261-62). Conscience shares roots with consciousness, even to having the same meaning archaically; failure to exercise conscious moral choice calls forth God's censure: "[M]y people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them

out cisterns [mental caverns], broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13). Finally, all inhumanity is human, not divine.

In 1 Kings the Lord, discovering the prophet Elijah hiding from pursuers in a cave of Mount Horeb, commands him to ascend the mount of vision for a view of reality:

. . . Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

(19: 9, 11-12)

Similarly, un-Godly distortions of "lightning, and rain, / Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane," as well as an annual "torpor," invest the mythical "dædal earth" (86-88) of mankind in the self-consciously flat first third of this fourth section. Man, ideally the "being of high aspirations," is here entrapped in a dull, repetitive pattern of existence with

"things that move and breathe with toil and sound / Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell" (94-95). At this moment, nonsequentially, a powerful voice breaks in upon the mundane:

Power dwells apart in its tranquility

Remote, serene, and inaccessible: . . . (96-97)

This expression of divine authority, uttered as a super-choric intrusion, its still tone resembling the voice heard by Elijah, serves to bring a corrective focus to the "adverting mind" (100)⁷ of the poet, and the distortions inherent in the present mountainscape are understood to be erroneous resemblances of the real,⁸ known only through the senses but ratified, Berkeley notes, as "[a]ncient and rooted prejudices [which] do often pass into principles" that over time become "privileged from all examination." Furthermore, he adds, "there is no absurdity so gross, which by this means the mind of man may not be prepared to swallow" (Works, II, Principles 124). Similar biblical episodes, such as the "voice out of the cloud" during the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt. 17: 5), also entail injunctions to correct one's vision; as in Isaiah:

Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be

made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. (40: 3-5; see also Luke 3: 4-6)

The balance of the section describes the mountain as "a city of death" (105) that is "Yet not a city" (107) but a sterile self-destructively violent misrepresentation of the actual, "a flood of ruin" (107) much ratified by "ancient and rooted" dogmas as symbolized by "dome, pyramid, and pinnacle" (104)—eastern, pagan, and western religion. In a distortion of the flowing universe, "glaciers" at the mountain's top "creep / Like snakes that watch their prey" (100-01), Eden-serpents presiding over lost paradise⁹ ("So much of life and joy is lost" [117], and "The race / Of man, flies far in dread" [117-18]); while at the lower level where the Arve is in motion "vast caves" (120) of hectic negativity "Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam" (120-21) as the river "Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air" (126) of an endless dream.

The "restless gleam" of the preceding section is transmuted by the opening lines of this fifth section:

Mont Blanc yet gleams on high (127)

Paradoxically, though life flows, the nexus of Power symbolized by the mountain is serenely "still" (128), without "variableness [mutability], neither shadow of turning" (Jas. 1:17), ever present, even "In the calm darkness of the moonless nights" (130). Berkeley states, "[i]f we mean by things the sensible objects, these, it is evident, are always flowing; but if we mean things purely intelligible, then we may say on the other hand, with equal truth, that they are immoveable and unchangeable" (Works, V, Siris 349)—that is, the central stillness, the Power, the "still small voice," of Mind itself. It is the "still and solemn power" that is behind the "many sounds, and much of life and death" (128-29) comprising the shadow that is human "existence"; and in mimicry, the human mind of man "is at once the centre and circumference" of its own cosmos (SPP, "On Life" 507). Returning to its central paradox, the poem affirms of the "many sights" (128) that might be imagined as occurring on Mont Blanc, "none"—that is, no human—"beholds them there" (132). To imagine—make an image of—some thing is an act of reason not creation, for "mind cannot create, it can only perceive." To imagine a tree falling noiselessly in an unpopulated forest is no less hypothetical than is picturing "voiceless lightning" (137) on a mountain's peak. Whether one thinks of such "solitudes" (137) in pictorial images or simply

in linguistic terms, they are nonetheless equally imaginary constructs, neither assertions nor proofs "pure" vacancies exist. The shadow-man of Mind is alone able to indulge hypothetical (distorted) "thought"—as in Berkeley's hypothesis of annihilation—because imagining (passive) is not the same as knowing (active): that which knows never speculates. To imagine vacancies is to perceive, "through a glass, darkly,"¹⁰ that which already exists, known to divinity as a divine construct. In discussing Shelley's Intellectual Philosophy, Wasserman points out that in that system the "supposed entities" of "pure time or space cannot be perceived" (146). Such a judgment inadvertently supports Shelley's position since both concepts are pure tautologies, the former a circumlocution for "eternity," the latter an impossibility in idealism, because even what we might take for emptiness must be so conceptualized in a consciousness. The assumption that pure time/space can exist externally to and independent of conscious knowing is the very position "Mont Blanc" is refuting. "[A]bsolute space," as Berkeley sometimes refers to it (here doing so in direct reference to its use in Newton's Principia), is to him indeed a suppositional entity, purely an imaginative fiction: the concept of "pure space" is a "dangerous dilemma," a belief "that there is something beside God which is eternal, uncreated, infinite, indivisible, immutable," a notion that is "pernicious and absurd"; and

theologians as well as "philosophers of great note, have . . . in conceiving either limits or annihilation of space, concluded it must be divine" (Works, II, Principles 111; 117). Concerning philosophy, Shelley writes that it "has much work yet remaining as pioneer for the overgrowth of ages. It makes one step towards this object however [sic]; it destroys error, and the roots of error. It leaves, what is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy" (SPP, "On Life" 507)—precisely what has been done at the poem's conclusion: an hypothesized vacancy has been left to be evaluated within the context of the poem's epiphanic epistemology¹¹:

The secret strength of things

Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome

Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, If to the human mind's imaginings

Silence and solitude were vacancy? (139-44)

The concept of a pure vacancy, like that of a pure space, conjectures an effect without a cause—something literally unsubstantiated. By contrast, in an all-encompassing monism, a product of imagination is linked to primal cause. Here, imagined vacancy stands in the relation of zero to number one, because here “thee” is the mountain of sense, ostensibly sublime, replete with hypothetical “solitudes,” but nonetheless a shadow of an archetype inhabited (constituted) by invisible divine law.¹² A sphere is the symbol of perfect, self-contained Mind, which as divine cause (noumenon) is represented as a dome or hemisphere eternally completing itself in the everlasting flow of effect (phenomenon).¹³ In line 142, the poet looks through the material mountain to its creative source: “thou,” or Mind. To assert that “thou” is Mont Blanc as Wasserman does (238) is to accept an illogical sequence—since a mountain is, finally, no more than earth—big earth indeed, yet still subject to geological recession—that forces a reading of earth-earth-stars-sea. The rhetorical question plainly affirms that if imagined silences and solitudes were devoid of any existence, then thou/Mind and its cosmic shadow (earth-stars-sea) would be too. The phrase silence and solitude invites two complementary readings, first as used in a relative sense to imply qualities of quiet and peace—commonly, peace and quiet—twin aspects of sought tranquility that have ever been within the reach of

humanity broadly and often depicted in and as aesthetic themes. Such balm exists because pure vacancy does not exist. Where it is believed to exist the same concepts become distorted into religious "codes" that "gleam" in broken cisterns and validate, for instance, a range of hypothetical evils.

"Mont Blanc," far from being the record of a "trance and death-like dream," is Shelley's poem of dream-denying pure reason based on "[t]he most refined abstractions of logic" that develops an ontology, "which, though startling to the apprehension . . . strips . . . the painted curtain from this scene of things" (SPP, "On Life" 506). Shelley believed there to be a "true solution of the riddle" of life (CW, III, "Shelley's Notes on Hellas" 56); though, according to Cameron, his "own efforts to solve [it] had been in vain" (157), a judgment disallowed by a thoughtful monistic reading of the poem. This is a poem with a moral center that challenges materialism's "shocking absurdities of the popular philosophies of mind and matter" (SPP, "On Life" 506) that Shelley found so detrimental to humanistic principles. Looking "on high" and accepting the undecaying goodness of the universe as the fact and evil and annihilation as the dream provides a powerful impetus to individual self-correction; for before "Love [burst] in like

light on caves," as Shelley writes in Prometheus Unbound, "Man,"
had been

a many-sided mirror

Which could distort to many a shape of error

This true fair world of things,"

but is now beheld as an individuated being, a portion of "a
chain of linked thought, / Of love and might to be divided not,"
that is, neither divaricated ("oh, not men!") nor fragmented
("one harmonious Soul"); Man, who consciously exercises through
conscientious choice a "nature" that "is its own divine
controul," and to whom "all things flow . . . as rivers to the
sea"; renovated Man to whom

Labour and Pain and Grief in life's green grove

Sport like tame beasts—none knew how gentle they could be!

(IV, 355, 382-84, 394-95, 400-02, 404-05)

Speaking of the foregoing poem, Donald Reiman says that "[g]iven
Shelley's ethics and his theory of knowledge (epistemology), it
seems likely that he believed that when human beings viewed the

universe correctly, it would appear to be beneficent rather than hostile" (SPP, 203). A changed perspective can provide more than just a rosy view. As "wise" men, Berkeley advises,

[w]e should propose to our selves nobler views, such as to recreate and exalt the mind, with a prospect of the beauty, order, extent, and variety of natural things: hence, by proper inferences, to enlarge our notions of the grandeur, wisdom, and beneficence of the Creator: and lastly, to make the several parts of the Creation, so far as in us lies, subservient to the ends they were designed for, God's glory, and the sustentation and comfort of our selves and fellow-creatures.

(Works, II, Principles 109)

An ontology based on unity expressed through individuation repudiates hierarchy through the inevitability of unique difference in all "things," including people. The "gifts" possessed by individuals and the negotiated contexts in which the gifts are allowed fullness of expression—in other words, the enthroning of liberty as a life-principle—form the basis of an all-encompassing fairness doctrine.¹⁴

Shelley remarks with approbation the affirmations of Greece's "most eminent" philosophers concerning "[t]he universality and unity of God, the omnipotence of the mind [i.e., the noumenon] of man, the equality of human beings [as individuations of the One] and the duty of internal purity [conscience] . . ." (PW, "On the Doctrines of Christ" 273). "Mont Blanc" implies that the world can become progressively bettered through the conscious practice of ethical choice. "Poetry," Roberts points out, "was one of the principal 'therapeutic' tools by which the Romantic reengagement with the world was to be achieved" (49). With his deep distrust of organized religion Shelley would be understandably cautious of promoting his views in prose as tenets of any kind: "An established religion turns to deathlike apathy, the sublimest ebullitions of most exalted genius, and the spirit stirring truths of a mind inflamed with the desire of benefiting mankind" (PW, "On the Doctrines of Christ" 273).

It may have been Shelley's hope to reach through this epiphanous poem, in the words of Berkeley, "only a few speculative persons"; that philosopher continues, expressing a sentiment that, I feel, Shelley would have approved:

But, if by their speculations rightly placed, the study of morality and the Law of Nature were brought more into fashion

among men of parts and genius, the discouragements that draw to scepticism removed, the measures of right and wrong accurately defined, and the principles of natural religion reduced into regular systems, as artfully disposed and clearly connected as those of some other sciences: there are grounds to think, these effects would not only have a gradual influence in repairing the too much defaced sense of virtue in the world; but also, by shewing, that such parts of revelation, as lie within the reach of human inquiry, are most agreeable to right reason, would dispose all prudent, unprejudiced persons, to a modest and wary treatment of those sacred mysteries, which are above the comprehension of our faculties.

(Works, II, Three Dialogues, "The Preface" 168-69)

Finally, when imagination is governed by conscience, progress in aesthetics and morality will be forwarded by the structuring influence of a benign actuality.

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NOTES

1. Kenneth Neill Cameron notes that fundamental "changes" in Shelley's epistemology "took place in 1816-1817"—the precise period in which he wrote and published "Mont Blanc" (157).

2. The poem would have been clearer, Kapstein argues, had it been written "in tranquility" (1046), citing Shelley's oft-quoted statement from the preface to the History of a Six Weeks' Tour that the poem "'was composed under the immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects which it attempts to describe . . .'" and is "'an undisciplined overflowing of the soul'" (1046). Even if the remark aspires to be more than just a press release, it does not absolutely commit Shelley to a state of excitation during actual composition. William Keach's study of the poem's masterful prosody gives the lie to "undisciplined." Doubtless Shelley felt strong emotion when viewing the mountain; but the more deeply powerful emotion of ontological recognition he subsequently experienced was clearly recollected and skillfully described in a state of tranquility, as I shall herein argue.

3. The term dualism has a number of meanings, as in the Lockean categories of mind and matter. In this essay I use it to mean two distinct minds, human and divine.

4. The texts of "Mont Blanc" and of Shelley's other poems and of A Defence of Poetry quoted in this essay are from Reiman and Fraistat, hereafter cited as *SPP*.

5. Gulph, or gulf, is akin to Old English hwealf, "vault," quite literally a dead end of negativity.

6. After the kindly railway purser asks the character Coral Musker in Graham Greene's novel Stamboul Train to "remember" him, she articulates a universal human yearning: "She thought for the first time, with happiness: perhaps I have a life in people's minds when I am not there to be seen or talked to" (10, 40).

7. Adverting (turning to) is so close to averting (turning from) that I often catch myself in a misreading. Resistance to divine injunction—to universing (turning to the one)—does seem implied, as throughout the Bible man, initially at least, often resists God's commands, epitomized perhaps by that great averter Jonah.

8. Shelley's position here has biblical support: ordinary, earthly priests only "serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things" according to the "law" of materialism as even Moses began to do, until he was "admonished of God" to "make all things according to the pattern shewed to [him] in the mount" (Heb. 8:4, 5; my italics).

9. "Upon the whole," Berkeley writes, I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers, and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to our selves. That we have first raised a dust, and then complain, we cannot see" (Works,

II, Principles, "Introduction" 3). The "man of the dust of the ground" in Genesis (2:7) is largely myopic from the beginning.

10. 1 Cor. 13:12.

11. The "vacancy," according to Christopher Hitt, is Shelley's "key . . . to behaving ethically . . ." (150); though, unfortunately, he characterizes the closing rhetorical question as "unanswerable, ambiguous, and obscure—and perfectly consistent with the rest of the poem" (154)!

12. ". . . the law [materialism] having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things . . ." (Heb. 10:1).

13. The Arve's ravine presents a grotesque, semi-collapsed under-dome.

14. While a mountain furnishes a traditional symbol for a dualism-based aspiration of reaching up to the divine, the poem is all about denying any such two-way intercommunication, and seems impertinently conscious of the irony of its title: as has often been observed, Mount Blanc per se is blank, a non-intelligent nullity revered in an enshrining or a mounting (trophy-like) of nothingness; we need to confront and sur-mount blankness or vacancy wherever found by seeing through this mountebank of a false ontology which together with its erosive hydraulic tributary, the Arve, declares the human mind to be

both preserver and destroyer. After all, one "thing" is as good as another to evoke an epiphany.

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