“Mont Blanc”:
Finding Faith in Shelleyan Skepticism

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Percy Bysshe Shelley is remembered as the most "radical" of the Romantic poets.[1] He overwhelmingly resisted the dominant structures of 19th-century England, not only as a self-proclaimed "atheist," but also as a vegetarian and animal rights activist. While Shelley's resistance was progressive, it was never aggressive; after all, Shelley was neither a symbol of virility like Byron nor a symbol of durability like Wordsworth. Despite his death at 29, Shelley did not even symbolize tragically unmet potential, as Keats did. Instead, Shelley's short life magnified the subtle complexities of the Romantic endeavor to find faith within the natural world. His career was uniquely defined by skepticism.

The word "skepticism" is colloquially synonymous with doubt; however, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, skepticism is also considered philosophically as "the opinion that real knowledge of any kind is unattainable." In this way, Shelley was famously a skeptic of institutionalized religion[2], expressing epistemological doubt about God's existence as early as 1811 in his pamphlet, "The Necessity of Atheism." The pamphlet was certainly an uncommon publication in the 19th century; however, in the same time period, Romantic poetry commonly operated outside the confines of religion—at least according to an accepted definition of Romanticism: "a belief in the power of, and necessity for, humans to construct their own meanings out of the known facts of nature rather than the unknowable postulates of religion" (Priestman 6). While Shelley, as a Romantic poet, ultimately searched for meaning in the external world, his later poetic meditations upon nature did not ever recreate religion or resolve his early religious skepticism. Most notably, Shelley never accepted the Wordsworthian "natural piety" that is characteristic of English Romanticism. This particular poetic mode that Shelley resisted will hereafter be considered, "traditional Romanticism," reflecting a generational gap between the younger Romantic poets, like Shelley and Keats, and the older, more pious Romantic poets, like Wordsworth and Coleridge.

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[1] Princeton University Press even published a book, titled *Radical Shelley.*

[2] Although, "religious skeptic" is somewhat of a redundant classification if we consider an alternate definition of skepticism from the OED: "unbelief with regard to the Christian religion."

Essentially, Shelley's skepticism exposes a spiritual vacancy that is irreconcilable by traditional Romanticism. Thus, Shelley's poetry, in its most distilled form, is a constructive response to his own destructive doubt; he deploys distinctively non-religious, non-pious rhetorical modes to find metaphysical truth in the physical world. With his youthful skepticism serving as a foundation, Shelley ultimately engages in, what I will call, "skeptical modes of belief"—or, as Coleridge puts it, a "willing suspension of disbelief[3] for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" ("Biographia Literaria" 174). Primarily, Shelley, the skeptic, exposes the unbelievable; secondarily, Shelley, the poet, suspends this disbelief (if only "for the moment") to find faith. The compound concept of "skeptical modes of belief" appropriately reflects Shelley's complex position as both a Romantic poet and a skeptic.

Shelleyan skepticism and poeticism most powerfully intersect in 1816, in his poem, "Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni." As a skeptic, Shelley attempts to unveil the "naked countenance of earth" (98) while, as a poet, he discovers a metaphysical "Power"[4] in the brute physicality of nature. Shelley, given his background of religious skepticism, is unwilling to name this "Power" using the language of religion. Nevertheless, Earl Wasserman, a well-respected Shelleyan, boldly states: "*Mont Blanc* is a religious poem, and the Power is Shelley's transcendent deity" (232). The former statement is indeed true, although only in an inverted way: the poet's deliberate resistance to religious discourse exposes "Mont Blanc" as a poem inherently concerned with religion. However, the latter statement is wholly false and demonstrates a common, reductive analysis of "Mont Blanc." The poem's metaphysical discoveries do not and cannot fit into the very same religious structure that Shelley consistently rejects; thus, Shelley's "Power" is not and cannot be a "transcendent deity." In fact, in direct opposition to many critical readers of "Mont Blanc," I assert that the poem does not mark any fundamental conversion in Shelley's career from early skepticism to mature belief. By carefully reading "Mont Blanc" through the lens of Shelley's early prose pamphlet, "The Necessity of Atheism," the poem emerges as a complex work of mature skepticism, instead. "Mont Blanc" challenges both institutionalized religion and traditional Romanticism while simultaneously finding faith in the "human mind's imaginings" that Romantically unite man with nature.

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[3] Consider the modern connotations of awe and wonder for 'disbelief.' The word itself has been transformed to epitomize skeptical modes of belief.

Shelleyan skepticism and poeticism have always been somewhat inseparable. After all, Shelley's career as a poet officially began when he established himself as a skeptic, publishing "The Necessity of Atheism" in 1811 at the age of nineteen and earning expulsion from University College, Oxford.[5] Considering this early pamphlet to be his first skeptical statement, Shelleyan religious skepticism will hereafter be used interchangeably with "Shelleyan atheism," a term that is soon be defined more completely. The consequence of expulsion certainly places the pamphlet at the start of his iconoclastic career; however, the content does not exactly illustrate "atheism" in the most fundamentally radical sense. In fact, many critics (most notably, Gavin Hopps) claim that "The Necessity of Atheism" is actually closer to a pamphlet on modern agnosticism. Another critic defines Shelleyan religious skepticism as "close to what we might now call agnosticism, but with a harder edge to it" (Priestman 9).[6] Indeed, in "The Necessity of Atheism," Shelley's agnostic opinions surface in his claim that God is unknowable; moreover, Shelley considers religion to be "a veil woven by philosophical conceit to hide the ignorance of philosophers even from themselves" ("There is No God" 99). Thus, Shelleyan atheism essentially exposes the construction of institutionalized religion.

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[4] Hereafter, the metaphysical "Power" is capitalized. Not capitalized "power" indicates something intrinsic to the poet or, simply, a common use of the word.

Using three major arguments in the pamphlet, Shelley specifically and methodically demonstrates that no man can prove the real existence of God. Foremost, Shelley describes "the evidence of the senses." Essentially, since "the senses are the sources of all knowledge to the mind," God must be available for sensory perception in order to be known. Thus, God is unknowable (38). In a different essay, Shelley further exposes God's invisibility by restating Holbach's chilling question: “If God has spoken, why is the universe not convinced?” (“I Will Beget A Son” 105).

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[5] Shelley scholar, David Lee Clark, acknowledges Thomas Jefferson Hogg as a dear friend involved in the scandal, but not as a co-author of the pamphlet. On the other hand, Gavin Hopps—and most standard sources, like Wikipedia—consider Hogg a co-author. Regardless, Hogg was also expelled.

[6] Skepticism, atheism, and agnosticism appropriately combine under the umbrella of OED definitions for "skepticism" given on page 1.

Secondly, Shelley demonstrates how religion is simply unreasonable. In fact, religion is a futile attempt to supply reason where reason is absent, as in the mystifying creation of the universe:

> …we admit that the generative power is incomprehensible, but to suppose that the same effect is produced by an eternal, omniscient, Almighty Being, leaves the cause in the same obscurity, but renders it more incomprehensible. (“The Necessity of Atheism” 38)

The human imagination inserts religion to make sense of the nonsensical; ultimately, however, a creative deity only adds to the unknown. Even so, most of England in 1811 still considered an “eternal, omniscient, Almighty Being” to be more acceptable than simply admitting “that the generative power is incomprehensible.”

Finally, Shelley claims that the testimony of others is “insufficient to prove the being of a God” (39). In this case, insufficiency is, once again, directly related to irrationality. In other words, Shelley cannot believe in God based on the belief of others because others believe in an irrational God, a Christian God who “proposed the highest rewards for faith, eternal punishments for disbelief” (39). To Shelley, the reward system of the Church epitomizes irrationality because it relies upon an entirely false assumption that belief is an act of volition. Instead, Shelley claims that belief is a passive passion (even though the mind is active in its investigation of the three arguments). Therefore, Shelley asserts that his “atheism” is not an act of punishable volition, but rather a state of being unconvinced.

Of course, the title itself does not embody this complex, borderline-agnostic argument of religious skepticism; instead, the title simply states "The Necessity of Atheism," not only immediately implying unbelief, but also claiming the *necessity* to be unbelieving. Critically, "Necessity" in this setting extends beyond its colloquial use and actually carries significant philosophical weight for Shelley. The philosophy of Necessity originated in Spinoza and is highly pertinent to the works of Hume, Holbach, and even Godwin. All four philosophers bore significant influence upon Shelley's intellectual development. In the most basic sense, Necessity is considered the governing force of the universe. Essentially, it is one flavor of scientific determinism that doesn't totally discount human agency: "motive is to voluntary action in the human mind what cause is to effect in the material universe" (Clark 109). Everything exists as it should and everything (at least, everything that we know) is connected. Thus, the title of the pamphlet can be read as an acknowledgement that the doctrine of Necessity is inherent to atheism. After all, the doctrine of Necessity fundamentally opposes the hierarchical, anthropomorphizing construct of Christianity. Since religion satisfies anxiety about the unknown by interjecting an imaginative deity, the institution effectively disrupts the interconnectedness of Necessity. Thus, for Shelley, "the doctrine of Necessity tends…utterly to destroy religion" ("Necessity! Thou Mother of the World!" 111).

This profound philosophical background was likely not available to most 19th-century readers; thus, the title was probably read more colloquially (and correctly) to mean that atheism is necessary. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the reaction from Shelley's contemporaries was particularly fierce, as demonstrated by Dr. Richard Saumarez, a London physician and part-time philosopher: "These misguided men have very properly been expelled from the university, and the wretched trash which they had written has been suppressed" (Peterfreund 27). Despite his response, historical evidence suggests that Dr. Saumarez never even read the pamphlet, indicating just how powerful the title is alone.

Still, as mentioned before, the subversive and suggestive title does not accurately reflect the content—at least, according to a contemporary understanding of atheism. After all, Shelley "does not here, nor did he ever, flatly deny the existence of God" (Clark 37). How, then, can "atheism" be appropriately defined for Shelley in 1811? Colin Jager explains that atheism, as a practice, developed from a fundamental split within Christianity itself—a new dualism between soul and body that placed religion in the mind as an epistemological rather than ontological question. Atheism, as a concept, was born either from genuine doubt or from belief anticipating doubt. Thus, the opinion is either a "heroic resistance to the reactionary forces of Christendom, or…simply one of the ways that Christianity ushers in the modern age" (Jager 618). Although Romanticism certainly marked a modern age, Shelleyan atheism undoubtedly behaves as the former, as a "heroic resistance" to Christianity.

In a later essay, which elaborates upon the pamphlet and acts as a note to the 1813 poem, "Queen Mab," Shelley paraphrases Lord Bacon's view of atheism: a system that stands opposite superstition and beyond the tyranny of religious institution ("There is No God" 99). In this sense, atheism is the practice of philosophical freedom and clarity; after all, "for Spinoza, 'religious freedom' is virtually an oxymoron" (Jager 620). If the reader considers both Jager and Bacon, "Shelleyan atheism" can be defined as an epistemological stance that rejects the repressive forces of institutionalized Christianity and expresses disbelief in the man-made God. Defined this way, Shelley's statement is actually not so unlike a modern statement of atheism. After all, in 19th-century England, a lack of belief in the Church effectively implied a lack of belief in anything; there was simply no room for religious debate because there was no other religion to turn to when challenging Christendom.[7] Instead, the skeptic or the atheist had to resort to science, as Darwin and Huxley did later, perhaps explaining Shelley's own scientific approach in the pamphlet.

To Shelley, "God is an hypothesis and, as such, stands in need of proof" ("There is No God" 98); therefore, Shelley's pamphlet does indeed demonstrate a scientific lack of evidence—it even concludes with "Q.E.D." (39). Through a systematic approach, Shelley asserts: "The mind *cannot* believe the existence of a God" (39). However, it is precisely this lack of believability that invites faith. With the limits of human knowledge defined, the opportunity for spiritual transcendence is presented. Importantly, for Shelley, there is a subtle distinction between belief and faith: the former is a logical perception while the latter suspends logic altogether. In his essay, "There is No God," Shelley defines belief: "When a proposition is offered to the mind, it perceives the agreement or disagreement of the ideas...A perception of their agreement is termed *belief*" (97). On the other hand, faith is the "willing suspension of disbelief." The distinction between (dis)belief and faith parallels the complex relationship between Shelley, the skeptic, and Shelley, the poet.

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[7] One cannot help but wonder: if Shelley had access to Eastern religions, would he still have claimed atheism? See footnote 11 on page 33 for further consideration of this question.

Five years later, in 1816, a pivotal union between Shelleyan skepticism and poeticism, between disbelief and faith, occurred when Shelley visited the Chamonix Valley in the Savoy of modern southeastern France. The valley stands at the foot of Mont Blanc and is hydrated by the rushing Arve River (*Norton Critical Edition,* 96). It is here, far from Oxford, that Shelley wrote some of his most critical lines. Foremost, he deposited his enduring skepticism in the hotel register, signing in Greek as "Democrat, Philanthropist, and Atheist" (Jager 611). Secondly, he wrote "Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni." Informed by his doubt, Shelley was able to transcend his atheism in this poem and in this valley, unusually engaging in skeptical modes of belief. In fact, "Mont Blanc" purposely turned away from a religious discourse altogether; five years after publishing his infamous pamphlet, Shelley seemed to recognize how "atheism's fixation on religion furthers its consolidation" (Jager 629). Therefore, combatting theism with atheism does not eclipse the former, but rather demonstrates how each is only a fragment of the other.[8]

Nevertheless, his history of religious skepticism is what decisively distinguishes Shelley's poetry from his counterparts; Shelley's early declaration of atheism seems to sensitize him to those pious modes of traditional Romanticism that "generally had to do with rediscovering the truths of religion through Nature or the Imagination, or else a particular fusion of the two" (Priestman 2). His "Romantic atheism"[9] never becomes synonymous with traditional Romanticism. That is to say, his disbelief as a skeptic and his faith as a Romantic do not ever coalesce into, what Abrams designates, "Natural Supernaturalism," or "the general tendency…to naturalize the supernatural and to humanize the divine." Abrams continues on, illustrating the weakness of traditional Romanticism in the face of institutionalized religion:

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[8] This inverted logic, by which Shelley resists religious discourse, can also be applied to this very resistance, explaining why "Mont Blanc" is still a "religious poem" in the larger context of his career (as seen on page 3).

> T.E. Hulme recognized this tendency and appraised it, in his blunt way, a half century ago: "Romanticism, then and this is the best definition I can give of it, is spilt religion." Hulme, who thought it an act of courage to take one's dogma straight, scorned the Romantic endeavor as a failure of nerve. (Abrams 68)

Shelleyan atheism, however, does not invite a poetic mode that simply replicates religion as "a failure of nerve." On the contrary, by eliminating the language of religion, Shelley hopes to courageously resist "spilt religion" in his poetry and, instead, unveil raw and unmediated nature. In this way, "Mont Blanc" effectively rejects not only traditional Romanticism, but also the generally propounded cliché attached to Romantic poetry: "The eighteenth century was an 'age of prose and reason', from which we were saved in the nick of time by the 'renaissance of wonder' which constituted Romanticism" (Priestman 1). While the poem certainly leaves Shelleyan prose and reason behind, it does not offer a renaissance of wonder either. Instead, "Mont Blanc" strives to confront only the brute physicality of Europe's highest mountain.

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[9] This is the title of Martin Priestman's book, exploring atheism in the Romantic era.

The poem's persistent resistance to religious discourse becomes apparent in the subtitle itself. In an earlier version, the subtitle read, "Scene – Pont Pellisier in the vale of Servox." The revision, however, explicitly positions "Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni" in relation to Coleridge's earlier poem, "Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouni," a work which repeatedly "credits God for the sublime wonders of the landscape" (*Norton Critical Edition* 96). Interestingly enough, historical evidence suggests that Coleridge, unlike Shelley, never actually visited the valley. Nonetheless, Coleridge imaginatively engages with the same setting and, almost in anticipation of Shelley's career, famously writes in the accompanying headnote: "Who *would* be, who *could* be an Atheist in this valley of wonders!" In fact, the Chamonix Valley was a main tourist attraction in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century particularly because it was thought to produce irresistible "religious awe, even perhaps to cure atheists of unbelief" (Jager 612). Coleridge's "Hymn" certainly partakes in this tradition of "conventional piety" (Jager 613). The religious assuredness of Coleridge is suspicious, however. For example, his ecstatic tone borders on hysterical:

> God! let the torrents, like a shout of nations,
> Answer! and let the ice-plains echo, God!
> God! sing ye meadow-streams with gladsome voice!
> Ye pine-groves, with your soft and soul-like sounds!
> And they too have a voice, yon piles of snow,
> And in their perilous fall shall thunder, God! (58-63)

The repeated exclamation points certainly display enthusiasm, but also appear manic. With the repeated use of "God," Coleridge is clearly not shy about announcing his belief; at the same time, the repetition might function as desperation—Coleridge recurrently announces "God" in what sounds like a desperate attempt to insist upon God's existence.

Although Coleridge's emphatic religious language stands apart from Shelley's poem, both poets ask similar epistemological questions "in the Vale of Chamouni." Foremost, both poets carefully observe and describe the scene in similar ways. In fact, the language is indistinguishable at times: the river Arve will "rave ceaselessly" in Coleridge (5) while it "ceaselessly…raves" in Shelley (11). In the silent Chamonix Valley, Coleridge goes on to ask, "Who sank thy sunless pillars deep in Earth?/Who fill'd thy countenance with rosy light?/Who made thee parent of perpetual streams?" (36-38). In a similar way, Shelley asks, "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?" (71-75). Both poets wonder about the creative role traditionally filled by God. Of course, for Coleridge, God is predictably found; however, for Shelley, "God" is not the answer, replacing the obviously mythical, "old Earthquake-daemon."

While Coleridge's poem immediately confronts the natural scene and engages in "natural piety," Shelley begins his poem with a type of preface. In the first eleven lines, Shelley builds a philosophical foundation. This section immediately distinguishes "Mont Blanc" from the traditional Romanticism of Coleridge while still simultaneously locating "Mont Blanc" within the Romantic tradition, striving for unity between man and nature:

> 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)

Shelley's complex poem succeeds, in part, because this initial stanza is so philosophically fertile. Despite (or perhaps, as a result of) his expulsion from Oxford, Shelley had rigorously studied the work of many prominent philosophers early in his career—"these he read assiduously in preparation for his avowed purpose of reforming the world" (Clark 103). By 1816, in the year of "Mont Blanc," his engagement with philosophy blossomed into an actual marriage with Mary Godwin, the daughter of philosopher, William Godwin. The personal relationship between the Godwins and Shelley certainly affected the latter's philosophical orientation; however, Shelley's stance extended far beyond Godwinism. Most critics agree that a company of thinkers influenced him, including the philosophers of Necessity, Hume, Holbach, and Spinoza, as well as additional thinkers, Berkeley, Locke, Drummond, and even, Plato.

In his essay "On Life," Shelley labels his philosophical amalgamation of these sources as "intellectual philosophy." Writing the essay after 1811, Shelley seems to offer this term as a disguise of scholastic maturity for his younger skepticism:

> 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. ("On Life" 174, emphasis added)

Certainly, “how little we know,” or epistemology, is one central tension of Shelley’s career, emerging fiercely in “The Necessity of Atheism” as man’s inability to know God’s existence. Of course, in 1811, it was *not* “difficult to find terms adequately to express so subtle a conception”—after all, Shelley simply called it “atheism.” Five years later in “Mont Blanc,” however, Shelley resists a religious discourse as he “look[s] down the dark abyss.” As a Romantic poet, Shelley now searches for a constructive response to his destructive skepticism; he attempts to “construct [his] own meanings out of the known facts of nature rather than the unknowable postulates of religion” (Priestman 6). Avoiding “natural piety” and moving beyond prose, Shelley approaches “that verge where words abandon us.” This fundamental shift from atheism to no-theism, from pamphlet to poem, distinguishes Shelley’s youthful skepticism from his mature skepticism, his “intellectual philosophy.”

In the former, Shelley is fixated upon fragmentation; however, in the latter, “the view of life presented by the most refined deductions of intellectual philosophy, is that of unity” (“On Life” 174). Suddenly, there is no wholly external, objective universe and no wholly internal, subjective mind; instead, the two are entirely interdependent without negating one another. Despite his attempt to approach the scene noumenally, the first two lines immediately present a symbiotic relationship between mind and universe that inevitably disallows Mont Blanc to exist as a thing-in-itself:

> The everlasting universe of things
> Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves, (1-2)

Right away, Shelley’s failed attempt to experience the Chamonix Valley in an unmediated mode demonstrates the poem’s Romantic relationship between man and nature: "[the poem] attempts to think of the mountain as physical and without metaphysical attributes, and fails; it attempts to imagine a gap between the mountain and the significances people attach to it, and fails" (Ferguson 336). Indeed, Shelley's brute materialism is an attempt to reject the myth of "natural piety" ascribed to Mont Blanc; however, ultimately, "Shelley does not destroy the mountain's symbolic value but merely inverts it" (Ferguson 336). Although Shelley successfully evades Coleridgian religiosity and traditional Romanticism, the very failure to imagine a physical mountain without metaphysical qualities exposes the fundamental, Romantic unity between the human mind and the natural world.

The interdependence is linguistically made possible by the water imagery. Shelley's language (flows, rolls) describes fluidity between the universe and the mind; he places both on one liquid continuum "as if [his] nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into [his] being" ("On Life" 174). In fact, the text enacts this very nuance on the page: "the everlasting universe of things" and "the mind" exist as two separate phrases, yet are physically united by the phrase, "flows through." Furthermore, the unity is paradoxically emphasized by the line break, which creates the opportunity for dramatic enjambment of the external and the internal—again marked by the verb, "flows." Quite cleverly, the "universe of things/Flows" into the next line just as the universe "flows through the mind."

Despite the denotation of continuity for the verb "flow," the movement of the external world is described as rather erratic. The "*rapid* waves" (emphasis added) certainly move like rapids, with velocity and turbulence:

Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—
Now lending splendour, (3-4)

The repetition of "now" generates immediacy and demonstrates a frantic pace. Between "dark" and "glittering," no time and little physical space elapses; in fact, the two adjectives are only separated by the adverb "now," emphasizing just how instantly the metaphorical river is changing. Additionally, the repeated hyphens physically separate each phrase, producing a staccato aesthetic as well as a staccato tone that further highlights the abrupt mutability of the external world. Crucially, the settings oscillate between shadow and light, darkness and illumination; thus, not only is the universe of things in rapid motion, but it is also moving maximally, through polar opposites.

Although the external world is in acute flux, it is still tagged as "everlasting." Conflicting concepts of transience and permanence collide; how can the universe be mutable, yet eternal? The contradiction relies on a distinction between "the mind" of line 2 and "human thought" of line 5:

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, (1-6, emphasis added)

In Wasserman's analysis, the former "mind" refers to the "One Mind,"[10] a term borrowed from Shelley's earlier prose; it is distinct from, yet composed of the latter

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[10] Shelley's "One Mind" is not entirely dissimilar from Coleridge's "One Life"; however, unlike "One Life," the "One Mind" unites man and nature *in the mind itself* and thus, disproportionately relies upon humanity. While he proposes the concept, Shelley still modestly recognizes himself as but another contributing human thought: "Let it not be supposed that this doctrine conducts the monstrous presumption, that I, the person who now write and think, am that one mind. I am but a portion of it" ("On Life" 174).

"human thought." The continued use of water imagery certainly supports this reading: "where from secret springs/The source of human thought its tribute brings/Of waters." The phrase, "from secret springs," indicates a private, individualized source. Additionally, the word "tribute" is already laden with symbolism in its etymological connection to "tributary," meaning a river flowing into a larger river. In this way, discrete and individual "human thought" contributes to the greater "One Mind" through which the universe of things already flows.

Thus, the "One Mind" emerges as a receptacle for both thought *and* things, pointing to the synonymy between the two and giving way to, what Wasserman calls, the "thought-thing universe." His concept derives directly from Shelley's essay, "On Life":

> The relation of *things* remain unchanged by whatever system. By the word *things* is to be understood any object of thought, that is, any thought upon which any other thought is employed, with an apprehension of distinction. The relations of these remain unchanged; and such is the material of our knowledge. (174)

By this definition, there is clearly no noumenal thing-in-itself; our knowledge only consists of the phenomenal thing that exists as an object of thought. To make this even more clear, Shelley continues on: "Nothing exists but as it is perceived." Despite Shelley's preoccupation with materialism as an opposing force to "natural piety," Shelley eventually admits, "This materialism is a seducing system to young and superficial minds…[materialism] allows its disciples to talk and dispenses them from thinking." By 1816, Shelley "shift[s] from materialism to idealism," discovering the philosophical intricacy of the thought-thing universe (Jager, 614). In particular, the thought-thing interdependence is intricately marked by permanence: the "relations of these remain unchanged." Charles H. Vivian labels this complex concept as the "Principle of Permanence." Vivian claims that "Mont Blanc" is a twofold struggle to understand the real nature of experience and to understand something more enduring—"an intuitive awareness of something permanent, something apart from the flux of sense experience" (Vivian 56). Certainly, Shelley is attempting, in vain, to register the enduring noumenality and brute physicality of Mont Blanc.

Even so, the "universe of things/Flows through the mind" with transience; the "things" do not remain unchanged in the mind despite the intransient thought-thing relationship:

> Shelley in fact sought a philosophy which was primarily experiential, to account for not 'the nature of reality in the light of absolute truth, but reality as it is phenomenalistically determined, reality as our minds truly experience it, even though in the aspect of eternity that reality may be only illusory.' (West, 77)

The flux occurring within the mind, "now darkness—now glittering," reflects an inconsistent reality, the "reality as our minds truly experience it." Although it is mutable, although it "may be only illusory," this phenomenal reality is all that truly exists for man. Noumenal reality, "reality in the light of absolute truth," cannot actually endure; the thing-in-itself is impossible to grasp because thought and thing always already collaborate in the "One Mind." Thus, the everlasting thought-thing universe actually necessitates the flux of a "phenomenalistically determined" experience.

Of course, not all critics agree that the Shelleyan "One Mind" can appropriately be extracted from "Mont Blanc." For example, Jonathan Wordsworth presents some resistance: “if Shelley had intended us to see the mind in question as the One Mind, wouldn’t he have made it a little more obvious?” To be sure, Shelley was capable of being quite explicit (as he was in “On Life”); however, in 1816, during the fundamental fruition of his skepticism, Shelley abandoned prose and reason. Cleanth Brooks offers one explanation for this shift from obvious to ambiguous, from prose to poetry: “poet after poet…choose[s] ambiguity…rather than plain, discursive simplicity…[because the poet] triumphs over the…conflicting elements of experience by unifying them into a new pattern (194-195). “Mont Blanc” is absolutely a work that generates unity by rewriting, beyond “plain, discursive simplicity,” the traditional dualisms of “mind against world and thought against thing” (West 76). Additionally, in “A Defence of Poetry” published in 1821, Shelley himself wrote: “[Poetry] awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” (282). In this way, the very nature of poetry always already morphs the mind, making it quite obvious, regardless of Jonathon Wordsworth’s criticism, that “the mind in question” is indeed the “One Mind.” Thus, the concept provides an invaluable tool in analyzing the first section of “Mont Blanc” and, therefore, in analyzing the rest of the poem. The first stanza acutely distinguishes Shelley’s poem from Coleridge’s “Hymn”: the former is a skeptical, albeit unifying, meditation upon *the relationship between* the human imagination and the natural world while the latter is simply a pious meditation upon nature itself.

In fact, “Mont Blanc” is an extended metaphor that actively employs the physical scene as the vehicle and “the perceiving mind” as the tenor (West 76). The simile, presented in lines 7-11 of section I, crystallizes this metaphorical reading. Immediately, thought, thing, and mind are compared to a “feeble brook,” “vast river,” and “mountains lone”:

> 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. (7-11)

Thus, natural markers in the rest of the poem are always already representative of the mental landscape, once again linguistically unifying the external and internal. In fact, the initial simile not only provides a comparison, but it also produces critical connotations. For example, human thought is “with a sound but half its own/Such as a feeble brook will oft assume.” Vivian, in a somewhat conservative reading, maintains that, since thought and thing are interdependent, mind and nature must have an equal partnership. Interestingly, he acknowledges and then refutes the suggestion that the simile implies a compromise somewhat less than fair—the mind’s brook is “feeble” while the river bursts and raves. Both are water, both contribute, both can be heard; thus, for Vivian, the mind and environment are equal. This is an oversimplified approach to a complicated problem. Many other critics consider the language more carefully, and more correctly: human thought is likened to a *feeble* brook rather than a *vast* river precisely because the relationship between mind and nature is *not* equal. Human thought truly is a weak tributary, flowing into the larger physical scene.

In section II, the actual Arve River does indeed emerge as the “vast river” of brute physicality. Similarly, “many-colour’d, many voiced” assigns multiformity to the valley while the “fast cloud-shadows and sunbeams” seem to echo the “now dark—now glittering” sentiment of section I. Thus, the language of the poem continues to capture and reenact both the vastness and the inconsistencies of sensory experience. In the search for, what Vivian calls, the “Principle of Permanence,” the reader must continue on:

> 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)

Here, Shelley’s external gaze turns inward through the metaphor presented in section I; the “Ravine of Arve” is the vehicle while the “human mind” is the tenor. In his poetic recreation of the river, the poet becomes aware of his own processes of perception; thus, he is able “to muse on my own separate fantasy,/My own, my human mind.” Ultimately, this self-awareness enables permanence because the mind is “holding an *unremitting* interchange/With the clear universe of things around” (emphasis added). Once again, the “thought-thing universe” generates fixity in a “flux of sense experience.”

Nonetheless, this sensory fluctuation is precisely what provides the poet with awareness of his mental landscape. For twenty-two lines, without a full stop, Shelley, “in a trance sublime and strange,” describes the physical scene—its scent, its sound, its sight. The final lines describing the Arve also metaphorically describe the perceiving mind: “Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,/Thou art the path of that unresting sound—/Dizzy Ravine!” (32-34). In fact, there is an echo between "Dizzy Ravine!" and Shelley's prose statement, "…and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of—how little we know." Through this lens, the adjective, "dizzy," in the poem appears to modify both the river and, symbolically, the poet. After all, it is the poet who is growing dizzy gazing upon the "dark, deep Ravine"; the Ravine is dizzy*ing* and the poet, dissolved in the details, becomes inseparable from it. Essentially, "Dizzy Ravine!" is an exclamation that once again unites mind and nature by subtly enacting epistemological doubt. While the extraordinary detail with which Shelley encounters the Chamonix Valley emphasizes how much he experiences, it also highlights just "how little we know." Knowledge is limited to "likeness," a "veil," and "caverns echoing." Just as Shelley cannot prove the existence of God, he cannot grasp the noumenal reality of the Arve.

In fact, throughout the poem, the Chamonix Valley is only perceived through the "ceaseless motion" of details. While the natural phenomena are perceived by the senses, even seemingly raw sensory perception still indicates a type of mediation. For example, the "aetherial waterfall, whose veil/Robes some unsculptur'd image" (26-27) is a seemingly bare description of the scene, yet it also signifies man's inability to engage "some unsculptur'd image" without a "veil."[11] No phenomenal description can achieve noumenality, even though the mountain is a thing and Shelley "defiantly" treats it as such. In one fleeting moment ("I look on high"), the mountain truly does appear unveiled: "Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled/The veil of life and death?" (53-54). Neville Rogers, the editor of Oxford's

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[11] Recall Shelley's statement that religion "bears every mark of a veil woven by philosophical conceit to hide the ignorance of philosophers even from themselves."

The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, suggests that 'unfurled' means 'drawn aside', as in 'upfurled', which is how the word alternately appears (355). Thus, in what seems to be a "dream," the veil of human perception, "the veil of life and death," is lifted and alas, "Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,/Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy, and serene" (60-61). Of course, the seemingly "naked" perception and the seemingly exposed thing-in-itself cannot last:

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

The human mind immediately reemerges as the scholar of the natural world, once again requiring the two to merge.

Ultimately, man and nature, mind and universe become wholly inseparable; Mont Blanc itself becomes emblematic of the "One Mind," where all waters flow "among the mountains lone" (8). The language articulates isolation of the mountain while the symbolism, in contradiction, indicates the collaborative nature of the "One Mind." Ferguson reconciles the two by suggesting that "lone" can actually be read as isolation *with* the mountain and therefore, not isolation at all. This type of reading unites the poet and the scene, not only further embracing the interdependence between mind and nature, but also freshly suggesting a critical relationship between poetic voice and Power. In another instance, Shelley's language itself indicates unity: "Arve raves in the Ravine" is an anagram that not only reveals the symbiosis of things, but also "suggests the inevitability of any human's seeing things in terms of relationship" (Ferguson 338). Similarly, Shelley consistently addresses the river as "thou," exemplifying an I-thou "love language" that desires unity between poet and scene, and rejects an isolated existence. In this way, Hartman considers the poem's complex relationship between unity and isolation to be analogous to Shelley as a "spurned lover" (11).

While Shelley successfully resists traditional Romanticism, "Mont Blanc" clearly still belongs to the Romantic tradition. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Shelley occasionally does slip into religious discourse. For example, the "love language" of an I-thou relationship can just as easily be read as religious reverence. In another instance, buried in the heart of the poem, Shelley begins to ask questions about the origin of Mont Blanc:

> 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?
> None can reply—all seems eternal now. (71-75)

Shelley, in his mythological speculations, nears the realm of religion without ever intending to touch it; however, questions of origin at all are inherently religious, according to Shelley himself: "What is the cause of life?...All recorded generations of mankind have wearily busied themselves in inventing answers to this question. And the result has been…Religion" ("On Life" 174). While Shelley refuses to invent a creative deity, he still accepts that an origin must exist. Nevertheless, throughout the poem, the origin of Power remains secret. At one point, "rushing torrents" come from a hidden source, "from those secret chasms in tumult" (121-122), and, of course, in the initial section, "from secret springs/The source of human thought its tribute brings/Of waters." Thus, an origin is neither rejected outright nor invented; instead, Shelley fully accepts what he already postulated in "The Necessity of

Atheism"—the "generative power is incomprehensible." Carrying the title "Atheist" into the valley, Shelley's stance has certainly been transformed since 1811: Shelleyan atheism becomes, as Hartman states, "a refusal *to name* the unknown power he acknowledges" rather than a refusal to acknowledge unknown power (1, emphasis added). Ultimately, for Shelley, "Power dwells apart in its tranquility,/Remote, serene, and inaccessible[12]" (96-97).

Even so, immediately following his rhetorical questions about origin, Shelley slips into the religious language of doubt and faith:

> 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; (76-79)

In what seems to also be a direct response to Coleridge's "Hymn," the wilderness initially "teaches awful doubt." Crucially, doubt is not a denial of belief, but rather an interrogation of it. Therefore, while Coleridge asserts "God," Shelley, true to his religious skepticism, asks, how? The specific phrase, "but for such faith," has received extraordinary critical attention. Most Shelleyans read it as meaning 'only through such faith' as opposed to 'except for such faith' because of alternate phrasing in an earlier manuscript. Rogers writes, "In line 79 I have corrected the nonsensical 'But for such faith', which is due to Shelley's miscopying, and substituted from the draft 'In such faith'" (352). Regardless of the correction, both phrases make sense if read correctly. Given Shelley's philosophical orientation, 'But for such faith' should be read literally while 'In such faith' should be read facetiously. Thus, the only difference between the two exists tonally, where the former explicitly challenges "faith so mild,/So solemn, so serene" and the latter does so more subtly. Given Shelley's movement away from transparency in "Mont Blanc," Rogers' edit certainly seems correct. Essentially, despite his role as a Romantic poet (or perhaps, because of it), Shelley slips into religious discourse to paradoxically and emphatically explain that man must reject "spilt religion" in order to be reconciled with nature. Here, for Shelley, traditional Romanticism is conflated with institutionalized religion; he rejects "natural piety" just as he previously rejected theism. In this highly debated phrase, Shelley shows his hand as a skeptic. But Shelley also suspends his disbelief. Although "the wilderness has a mysterious tongue which teaches awful doubt," Shelley still uncovers "Power"—"Power…Remote, serene, and inaccessible," but Power nonetheless (96-97).

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[12] Here, one cannot help but recall Wallace Stevens' search for an "accessible bliss" and his ensuing discovery of an "inexpressible bliss."

Thus, in "Mont Blanc," Shelley truly does unite "the wise" skeptic and the "great" poet through confrontations with incomprehensible phenomena: "not understood/By all, but which the wise, and great, and good/Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel" (81-83). His early work is purely epistemological, working to "interpret" religion; however, in 1816, Shelley simultaneously employs this background and deploys poetry to "make felt" the permeating Power in the world:

> 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. (127-129)

Regardless of the "veil," or in fact because of it, Shelley is able to recognize Power—"the power is there"—through sensory perception, or "the evidence of the senses" ("The Necessity of Athiesm" 38). Even so, unlike his earlier pamphlet, Shelley does not generally consider this metaphysical Power through reason, but rather through poetic passion. Of course, Mont Blanc still does not exclaim, "God!" Instead, the emerging Power is the result of "a transfer from spirit of place to the poet's spirit, from genius loci to poetic genius" (Hartman, 7). To achieve this transfer, this self-awareness, Shelley again slips into a slightly religious mode, anthropomorphizing the mountain by attributing a philosophical "voice" to it—his voice, in fact:

> 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. (80-83)

Shelley claims that the voice is meant "to repeal/Large codes of fraud and woe"; thus, the mountain is inherently authoritative.

The "large codes of fraud and woe" likely implicate the Church; in this way, once again, Shelley's slippage into a religious mode functions, primarily and paradoxically, to reject religion itself. After all, in an 1813 essay titled, "I Will Beget a Son," that served as a note to "Queen Mab," Shelley points out many of the inconsistencies of Christianity, and religion more generally: praying for specific outcomes to an omniscient God, using violence to encourage peace, incomprehensible phenomena like miracles explaining more incomprehensible phenomena. Shelley even imagined the future of Christianity—to him, a wavering institution founded upon fable, violence, and oppression—as mirroring the decline of Roman theology. In this way, the voice of the "great Mountain" is meant to quash institutionalized religion and in turn, traditional Romanticism. At the foot of Europe's highest mountain, there is simply no opportunity for "natural piety."

Instead, Shelley as a poet *and* a skeptic humbly struggles with nature, ultimately revealing "the real nature of experience."

Moreover, the dominion of Mont Blanc derives from its violence, hidden in its sublimity. Thus, the violence of sublimity is two-fold: the violence itself and the concealment of it. The sublime is most dangerous because its hidden violence encourages man to invent a supernatural source. Shelley resists, given his foundation of religious skepticism; however, most poets often cannot defy the violence outright because of aesthetic distractions—mostly the sublime's magnitude and terror:

> …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. (109-114)

Ultimately, throughout the poem, the poetic mind passively accepts this type of violent sublimity and actually "becomes conditioned both to repeat the experience and to seek the pleasure of its own sublimity." Therefore, despite Shelleyan atheism and despite the Romantic unity between poet and scene, there is, to some extent, "a loss of self-possession in the Shelleyan sublime," where imaginative power submits to the mountain's Power like a feeble brook to a vast river (Borushko, 239). However, at the same time, it is precisely this meditation on "Power" that ultimately undercuts it. The poem enacts itself because the poet gains agency as the voice of the mountain, mitigating the violence of the sublime.

Thus, the interdependent relationship between poet and mountain is certainly a power dynamic. In fact, Hartman appreciatively considers the poet's courage as Mont Blanc towers over him: "[Shelley] is overwhelmed and tries bravely to 'sing in the face of the object' (I borrow the phrase from Wallace Stevens) without going under or subordinating himself to the Power he evokes" (Hartman 15). In this way, the poet translates the material object into the "found object," so the human mind itself is the designer instead of God. In his essay, "On Life," Shelley quotes an unknown author, "'Non merita nome di creatore, sennon Iddio ed il Poeta'"[13] (172). The translation is, "None deserves the name of Creator except God and the Poet." For Shelley, even the Christian God is a creative result of man; therefore, man is the ultimate creator. Thus, divinity exists within man himself:

> The secret Strength of things
> Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
> Of Heaven is as a law, inhabits thee! (139-141)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Shelley once again slips into religious language (Heaven) to describe the thought-thing interchange one final time. Ultimately, Shelley's Power is not indifferent, cruel, or superhuman; instead, it derives from humanity itself, it "inhabits thee!"

The complex power dynamic is emphasized, also, in the silence of Mont Blanc:

> Winds contend
> Silently there, and heap the snow with breath
> Rapid and strong, but silently! Its home
> The voiceless lightning in these solitudes
> Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods
> Over the snow. (134-139)

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[13] Clark claims this was written by Serassi, "but there is no record that Shelley ever read Serassi" (172).

Shelley's emphasis on silence is, once again, an emphasis upon the mountain's "thingness," carefully pointing out that the scene is, in fact, *not* "'a natural temple of the Lord and a proof of the Deity by design'" (Ferguson 336). The tension of silence is especially significant in "Mont Blanc" as a Romantic poem:

> The question that arises, of course, is, How is the mountain's silence any different from the silence of the subjects of any other poem? Grecian urns are likewise silent; and nightingales may sing, but they do not talk. In the case of *Mont Blanc,* the interest lies, curiously enough, in the palpable improbability of looking for anything but silence from the mountain, which is repeatedly seen as the ultimate example of materiality, of the 'thingness' of things, so that its symbolic significance is quite explicitly treated as something added to that materiality (Ferguson 335-336).

The scene is inherently material and, while religion is a loud imposition, the secular "symbolic significance" of Shelley's Romantic (but not traditionally Romantic) rhetoric emerges silently. Representing the brute physicality of nature, the silence is destructive; simultaneously, however, the silence is a generative force, exposing a vacancy ultimately to be filled by the poet's voice. In fact, many critics view the Power of Mont Blanc as both "generative and destructive" (Hartman, 10). After all, Shelley not only rejects God, but he also explores the imaginative power of the mind as a constructive origin in and of itself. In the Chamonix Valley, the mind finally does intuit its own power; however, at the foot of Europe's highest mountain, the poet is facing an intimidating Power. Thus, Shelley seems to conceal his newfound self-respect behind a Romantic respect for nature.

Additionally, while Shelley, to some extent, assigns the voice to the great mountain, the voice also emerges with agency in the "silent snow" to liberate him from the petrification and conservatism of religious thought. Thus, the voice of Mont Blanc truly transforms the voice of the poet. This distinctly Shelleyan embodiment also occurs in his "Ode to the West Wind": "Bethou me, impetuous one!" After all, the sublimity of power requires the work of human imaginings; even fears of destructive power "require human consciousness to give them their force" (Ferguson 340-341). Thus, the poet truly *must* carry the voice of the mountain, confusing activity with agency. This conflation becomes most apparent when the poem seems to construct itself in section II:

> 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)

Without agency, but with activity, human thought ultimately settles "in the still cave of the witch Poesy." The art of poetry gives shape to the "wild thoughts," just as Mont Blanc gives shape to wild things. Still, the language only captures likeness—dominated by "ghosts," "some shade," "some phantom," and "some faint image."

Thus, despite the quasi-religious, anthropomorphizing symbolism of "Mont Blanc," Shelley resists personification as a practice of directly "substituting a word for a thing" (Leighton 61). Instead, his rhetoric is intended, merely, to deeply feel and make felt that natural scene:

> Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,
> Mont Blanc appears—still, snowy, and serene;
> Its subject mountains their unearthly forms
> Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between
> Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,
> Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread
> And wind among the accumulated steeps (60-66)

The dilemma emerges quite clearly, however: Mont Blanc cannot be reduced to words, yet without language claiming a relationship between the mountain and Power, "the whole poem risks becoming a mere short circuit of rhetoric, a kind of empty speech" (Leighton 61). In a contemplation of language, Shelley himself writes: "How vain is it to think that words can penetrate the mystery of our being. Rightly used they may make evident our ignorance to ourselves, and this is much. For what are we?" ("On Life" 172). Although his youthful skepticism brashly demonstrates what we do not know, his matured skepticism deploys language with humility in the face of natural Power. Moreover, Shelley humbly recognizes that we have created the words themselves, just as we have created religion; however, we still need both of these constructs to operate. He realizes that we cannot assume that human perception or creation is real; however, if we accept reality as phenomenal instead of noumenal, we are in a position, at least, to "wager a belief" in the Pascalian sense.

The final line of the poem is, appropriately, a question, indicating that the incredible physical existence of Mont Blanc has not quelled Shelleyan skepticism. At the same time, however, Shelley asks rather than asserts his final transcendent discovery because he discovered it in a poetic mode, beyond the confines of reason. In either case, Shelley's rhetorical question is a final act of resistance, not only against institutionalized religion, but also against his own youthful atheism and materialism:

> And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
> If to the human mind's imaginings
> Silence and solitude were vacancy? (142-145)

Essentially, Power cannot emerge from the natural scene of the Chamonix Valley unless the mind imagines "silence and solitude" and also intuits its own intrinsic power. Thus, Shelley's imaginative capacity simultaneously rejects and redefines religion:

> The mere thought-thing universe can have, in itself, no value, and yet it is meaningful to the mind because the mind brings to it a knowledge of the transcendent Power, an atemporal and aspatial conjunction that is the gesture inherent in the closing lines. In Christian terms it is man's supernatural knowledge of a transcendent Deity that gives meaning to his existence in a world of mutability. And Shelley's term 'imaginings,' which refers to his transcendent intuitings in the successive suppositions of the simile, the trance, and the dream, is his secular correlative for Christian 'faith,' faith in the supernatural revelations of the unknowable God who is essence. (Wasserman 237)

While Wasserman once again uses religious analogy to describe Shelley's (mostly) secular language, his analysis still emphatically demonstrates that the greatest Power in the Chamonix Valley actually emerges from within Shelley himself: his own imaginings, "his transcendent intuitings." Thus, in a "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment," the poet is able to imagine and intuit the unknowable. Importantly, however, the symbols in nature can only ever be symbols, taking on meaning solely in the thought-thing universe. After all, if the Power that Shelley imaginatively intuits becomes real, then he has again succumbed to the idolatry of religion and the piety of traditional Romanticism.[14]

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[14] Recall my use of Wasserman's erroneous statement on page 3: "Power is Shelley's transcendent deity." In that reading, Power becomes real and simply replaces God, giving in to traditional Romanticism. As demonstrated here, however, Shelley is taking on the immensely complex task of rejecting religion, confronting nature, discovering Power, and still somehow avoiding "natural piety."

Thus, the poem's liberation from institutionalized religion and from traditional Romanticism inherently requires a paradox. The poet must acknowledge his own imaginative power; however, doesn't Shelley, the skeptic, vehemently reject God as man's greatest imaginative creation? This reveals a critical distinction between the imaginings in "Mont Blanc" and the mythical interjections of religion: for Shelley, the skeptical poet, "the mind does not *create* things in its acts of perception but rather keeps the things of the world from going to waste" (Ferguson 338, emphasis added). Thus, in "Mont Blanc," Shelley continues to reject the deceptively creative mind of institutionalized religion, but also acknowledges that without passive imagination, there is only "vacancy" in the physical world. This is Shelley's greatest philosophical discovery.

Moreover, according to Shelley in his essay, "On Life," this "vacancy" is indicative of reform:

> [Philosophy] leaves what is too often the duty of the reformer in political and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted, but for the misuse of words and signs, the instrument of its own creation. (173)

Thus, his Intellectual Philosophy is also inevitably intertwined with social responsibility: Shelley first exposes and then poetically attempts to fill the spiritual vacancy. His second move towards "constructive social responses" is a project only undertaken by a mind reduced to freedom (Abbey 5). Such freedom first requires the recognition that words are only an "instrument of [the mind's] own creation." Shelley begins to recognize this in 1811, but does not truly and freely move forward to find faith until 1816. After all, "Mont Blanc" does not simply reject constructs like religion or language in the way his pamphlet does; instead, the poem creates a "detailed symbolic portrayal of a private ontology" in response to this initial doubt (Abbey 26). "Mont Blanc" is an attempt to suspend disbelief through anagogic observations of nature—an attempt to be both "creator and destroyer."[15]

Ultimately, five years after "The Necessity of Atheism," Shelley freshly demonstrates mature skepticism in "Mont Blanc" by intentionally avoiding religious discourse[16] and, instead, examining the process of signification. Combining a "thing" world with a "thought" mind, Shelley illuminates the inherently veiled process of perception and the subsequent inability to capture a purely noumenal reality. For Shelley, the phenomenal reality elucidates both internal and external power, both the One Mind and Mont Blanc—Romantically merging the two. Put succinctly, "the secret Strength of things/Which governs thought…inhabits thee!" (139-141). In "Mont Blanc," Shelley unites man and nature, skeptic and poet, and ultimately, atheism and faith. While Shelley, on an intellectual level, can never believe in God, his passion seems unable to persist in youthful doubt. After all, upon the burning of Shelley's lifeless body on the beach near Viareggio, his heart would not burn; instead, it resisted and persisted, appropriately becoming the final emblem of Shelley's career.

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[15] Recall Hartman's language, "generative and destructive," on page 29. Additionally, Lloyd Abbey's concept of "creator and destroyer" undeniably refers to Brahma and Shiva, respectively the creator and the destroyer deities in Hinduism. Similarly, the title of Abbey's book is "Destroyer and Preserver: Shelley's poetic skepticism"; this title also invites Vishnu, the preserver and final piece of Hinduism's holy trinity. Abbey's references to Hinduism are particularly meaningful given Shelley's resistance to the Western Church. His early skepticism and the ensuing creator-preserver-destroyer tensions in "Mont Blanc" might indicate that Shelleyan atheism would not have extended to Eastern religions.

[16] We only see him slip into religious modes to condemn the institution of religion.

A self-proclaimed atheist, Shelley refused to accept the violence of Christianity; instead, he confronts the violence of the sublime Chamonix Valley. “Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni” marks the central poetic as well as spiritual self-discovery of his career. While the poem explicitly denies institutionalized religion and traditional Romanticism, it still achieves a type of theophany: “Shelley reclaims the matching human power of independent thought” (Hartman 15). Critically, Shelley does not humanize the divine; rather, in a confrontation with Mont Blanc, the divine emerges from humanity. Only by humbly losing control in “the wilderness,” only by losing language is Shelley able to willingly suspend his disbelief and find *faith* in Mont Blanc’s Power—and, more poignantly, in his own imaginative power.

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