

Shelley's "Mont Blanc" as a Poetic Manifestation of his Pamphlet, "The Necessity Of Atheism"

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"Mont Blanc," Percy Bysshe Shelley's meditative poem discussing the implications of experiencing the titular French mountain, can be read as a reflection of his earlier pamphlet, *The Necessity of Atheism*. The poem can be read so that each stanza leads up to the description of one of Shelley's atheistic "degrees of excitement" as defined by the pamphlet. This direction towards atheistic thought leads the reader to conclude that the poem must therefore be a manifesto of the power of nature to support atheism.

"The everlasting universe of things" is both the phrase and the concept that begin Shelley's "Mont Blanc" (1). The phrase can be dissected to serve as the basis of Shelley's existential and atheistic argument. The poem begins with this symbol of the source of human thought because "everlasting" implies a timeless flow through the mind, encompassing all good and bad, embracing the entire metaphysical surrounding or "universe of things." The "universe" can be read as a metaphor for things greater than understanding, a realm for imagination and untethered human thought—a sort of creative haven where the potential for ideas is as unlimited as the universe itself. At the time Shelley wrote, the universe was beyond scientific calculation, something only to be speculated about. To discuss an "everlasting universe of things" is to discuss all things greater in magnitude than the physical self, which by definition is limited in both space and time. Therefore, the nature of the universe's eternal existence serves as a way for the poet to immortalize himself in thought and verse. In the next line, however, Shelley notes that this everlasting universe "Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves, / Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom" (2-3). This relocates the everlasting universe within the mind of the individual experiencing it, and the description of

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the metaphysical concept of eternity is defined, literally, through the experience of it, and transcribed into poetry. By “[flowing] through the mind,” the “everlasting universe of things” is experienced and recorded by the imagination. This directly relates to one of the three degrees of excitement defined by Shelley in *The Necessity of Atheism*: “The senses are the sources of all knowledge to the mind, consequently their evidence claims the strongest assent.” Shelley is making the claim through these three lines that the “knowledge” derived from the “everlasting universe of things” is a meeting of rationalization on the one hand, as described in the second and third lines in relation to the first, and the imagination that causes that rationalization on the other. The “knowledge” derived this way is therefore the most powerful sort, because the senses are responsible for processing it, and the “evidence [derived from the senses] claims the strongest assent.”

Absent any knowledge of Shelley’s atheistic background, these three lines could of course be read in a religious context. An “everlasting universe of things” alludes to the idea of God, especially as God is seen to be “everlasting” and transcendent. Shelley’s atheist manifesto wasn’t printed until his time at Oxford. As a child in nineteenth century England, he would have received a religious upbringing that might have influenced his ultimate decision towards atheism. The “everlasting universe of things” therefore could have been a sarcastic reference to God as opposed to a serious connection of the imagination and metaphysical thought. This could also be a reference to a more mystical aspect of religion, as opposed to the traditional monotheistic Christian conception of God. Atheism is defined as “the theory or belief that God doesn’t exist.” The “everlasting universe of things” could refer to a Neoplatonic school of thought, where the individual soul can be united with all of the universe around it through a sort of mystical connection. Reading the first line from this perspective allows the reader to then view Shelley’s verse as a manifestation of the connection between individual thought (expressed in the second line by the concept of “flow” and “rolls its rapid waves”) and the Neoplatonian One, or God, who is everlasting. This interpretation serves as a hybrid between atomistic individual rationalism and a mystical connection to

an undefined religious figure, thereby providing a somewhat religious undertone to Shelley's verse. The second part of stanza one continues,

*Now lending splendor, where from secret springs
the source of human thought its tribute brings
of waters—with a sound but half its own,
such a feeble brook will oft assume
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
where waterfalls around it leap forever,
where woods and winds contend, an a vast river
over its rocks ceaselessly burst and raves.*

The idea of “lending splendor” is an arresting one; in conjunction with the previous part of the stanza, the idea of “lending splendor” implies the intellectual exercise of giving value to something by virtue of experiencing it; this in turn invokes the second degree of excitement as defined in *The Necessity of Atheism*. “The decision of the mind founded upon our own experience derived from these sources [of all knowledge to the mind].” The mind “lends,” or allows, an idea of greatness, or overpowering sense, to the presence of the mountain. The “secret springs, / the source of human thought its tribute brings,” refers to the process by which human thought must develop in order to progress from the first degree of excitement to the second. The mountain catalyzes human thought, like a spring to its source. Since “tribute” here could have a double meaning with “tributary,” the springs and tributaries are the foundations of reason and reality that lead to the human ability to synthesize and imagine the presence around us. Throughout the rest of the stanza, water is used as a continuing symbol for the rational train of human thought; images of “waterfalls” and a “vast river” represent the course of human rationality, or the journey of living through moments that allow for an experience of knowledge (9,10). The last line of the stanza, “And a vast river / Over its rocks ceaselessly burst and raves,” refers to the difficulty of the quest for the second degree of excitement (10, 11). Once again using the river as a metaphor for the rush of human thought, Shelley connects the power of the natural world to the power of human rationality, eschewing

the relevance of any higher power in favor of the influence of what is tangible and created by corporeal beings, here on Earth.

The metaphor of the river, which, while natural, still runs in a confined space, could imply that religion serves as the boundary for human thought. The waters possess a “sound but half its own,” implying that there’s something greater at work than just the physical elements of nature and humanity (6). Later in the second stanza, Shelley refers to the river as a “many-voiced vale,” which could have the connotation of human thought being influenced by the voice of God (13). In line 16, “Power” is capitalized in the same way that “God” would be, again implying an intrinsic connection between the two words and the two concepts. The notion of this Power is preceded by a reference to an awe-inspiring scene of nature (15); the combination of these two ideas results in a seeming reference to the beauty of God’s creation and the power of human thought to synthesize His work. Further on, Shelley makes reference to the “unsculptured image” of the waterfalls and rainbows on Mont Blanc (27). The poem’s footnote notes that “unsculptured” means what was “not formed by humans” but might have been formed by God instead, especially since the description is of awe, power, and beauty—three traits of the Christian God’s creation. In *The Necessity of Atheism*, Shelley explains that evidence must be used to determine whether or not a God exists. The first step of evidence is “evidence of the senses,” meaning that if one feels the presence of a God, then the belief in that God is strengthened. The underlying reverence for nature in “Mont Blanc” comes across as a godly experience. Had Shelley not declared himself an atheist, the reader could be led to believe that his experience with nature is a profound and religious one. However, since Shelley is, through his pamphlet, convinced against any experiences with God, it must be concluded that this reverence is only for his own rational process, the one that led him to be able to synthesize the beauty of Mont Blanc.

“Dizzy Ravine! And when I gaze on thee/ ... my own, my human mind, which passively / now renders and receives fast influencings, / holding an unremitting interchange / with the clear universe of things around,” continues the second stanza (34, 37-40). The connection of the “human

mind” with the “clear universe” suggests the ability of human thought to “receive fast influencings” and thus to “clear” the obfuscating nature of the “universe,” as defined earlier. “Reason,” Shelley declares in *The Necessity of Atheism*, “claims the 2nd place, it is urged that man knows that whatever is, must either have had a beginning or existed from all eternity, he also knows that whatever is not eternal must have a cause...” This demand for reason to explain natural beauty argues against any previous speculation of a religious viewing of nature. Instead, it further substantiates the concept of the “clear universe” as a symbol of how rational human thought can make sense of the confounding beauty of nature. The “ravine” refers to the metaphor of water as human thought, continuing as a strand through the poem to serve as a manifestation in words of the way Shelley’s mind keeps running through thoughts, somehow loose yet consistent, throughout the poem.

In the third stanza Shelley asks, “Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled / the veil of life and death? Or do I lie / in dream, and does the mightier world of sleep / spread far around and inaccessibly / in circles?” (53-57) Here Shelley imagines the presence of a God-like figure responsible for heaven’s beauty. He also considers that his own mind could have conjured up the same images; both, however, are seemingly non-existent environments, as if Shelley doesn’t believe the setting before him and is forced to choose between God’s grace and his own mind’s creation. This presents an interesting dilemma. In *The Necessity of Atheism*, Shelley states that, “Truth has always been found to promote the best interests of mankind.” But when even Shelley doubts the truth, or reality, of his situation, where does that leave his atheistic argument? By default, it seems that this questioning contradicts his previous faith in empirical truth as the basis for all belief. Because he even entertains the idea that something more is at work than just the natural world, as cited in the second degree of evidence, Shelley is relinquishing the poem’s status as a purely atheistic manifesto.

“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) This personification of Mont Blanc, giving it a mystical voice that speaks to its viewer with a

moral undertone (eschewing “fraud” and “woe”), seems to imply that the Mountain is almost a religious figure in and of itself. The question then is: does that proffer a religious or an atheistic context for the poem? From a religious standpoint, the mountain serves as a moral guide in the way that faith does, serving as a manifestation of God in the natural world. By doing so it provides the deep feeling that one would normally gain from a religious experience such as the act of worship. From an atheistic perspective the mountain is a thing whose existence can be empirically proven, ascribing to the second place of evidence in *The Necessity of Atheism*. However, it provides the sense of religious existence that one must test with the first locus of evidence (“If the Deity should appear to us, if he should convince our senses of his existence, this revelation would necessarily command belief”). Because the mountain appears with such emotional force, it commands belief in its power, but from more a reverent standpoint of the ability of humans to witness and understand its magnitude. The mountain gives beauty to the world, therefore paling issues of “fraud and woe,” making the truly wise, and those who are most able to articulate and experience the process of human thought and emotion, “deeply feel” the power of the mountain’s beauty.

“Power dwells apart in its tranquility / remote, serene, and inaccessible: / and *this*, the naked countenance of earth, / on which I gaze, even these primeval mountains / teach the adverting mind” (96-100). Here again, in the fourth stanza, we find a reference to the power of the mountain. However, because the power derives its meaning from a state of being “serene and inaccessible,” it seems that it is too remote for any sort of God, as God is inherently accessible (if He weren’t, the idea of prayer and religion as a whole would fall apart). The use of “countenance” also brings with it an interesting connotation: the naked face of the earth is powerful. It is from nature, raw nature, that humans are able to draw their rationality. Therefore, Shelley makes the argument that human thought rests in the power of nature, of the nakedness, the unaltered, pure simplicity that feeds the constantly hungry and curious “adverting” mind. The mountain’s beauty and sheer presence give power to Shelley’s thought process, and his rationalization of the mountain’s beauty in turn makes it even more beautiful, as he’s able

to be grateful to it for giving him the power to experience the purity of human thought. This relationship can be viewed from a modern standpoint as protodialectical, as the implication that freedom for both nature and man exists once man realizes that *he* is synthesizing nature, and not using it as his lifeline for synthesis.

As a counter to such a protoMarxist interpretation of the poem, it could be read rather as fuel for the classical liberal conception of human nature as rational. Man is able to understand the world around him through a rational thought process, one that can be replicated in other situations outside of staring at an awe-inspiring mountain. This theory transcends dialectics, as it finds the ability of man to validate the surrounding beauty within himself. More likely, the relationship between man and nature is a combination of protoMarxist and classical liberal thought. The dialectic exists between man and nature, but the process of man rationalizing nature's beauty, the "liberation" stage of the dialectic, occurs more quickly due to the inherently rational nature of man.

Since Marxism holds that there can be no God, Shelley's atheism could serve as a means to better fit the protoMarxist bill, particularly through the study of Shelley's underlying dialectical relationship between man and God present in both his poem and his *Necessity of Atheism*. Man initially relies on God as a means to protection and survival, and God relies on man in order to exist, as his existence is a function of a failure to acknowledge rationality. Once man discovers his rationality, he not only frees himself from the misconception of religion, but he frees God as well from existing as a figment that traps humans from experiencing the full extent of their rational potential. In support of this, Shelley notes that, "From on remotest waste, have overthrown / the limits of the dead and living world, / never to be reclaimed." (112-114) The "limits" are transcended through the acknowledgement that the mountain, not man, is what remains, and that understanding allows for man to be free of the need for God; if the beauty of the mountain remains, then there's a legacy of beauty that comforts him in a way that an afterlife couldn't. This epiphany relates back to the first step of evidence in Shelley's *Necessity of Atheism*, as the feeling of the mountain as the omnipotent

presence, versus God, is an instance of the evidence of the senses that allows man to free himself of religious constraints.

The final stanza of Shelley's poem offers wisps of mystical intimations. The first inclination of this concept lies in the line, "Mont Blanc yet gleams on high." This line seems to be a biblical reference to the Kingdom of Heaven, implying that the only way to describe the beauty of Mont Blanc is to compare it to the known pinnacle of beauty. This connection is Shelley's way of framing the mountain in language that allows the common reader to understand the magnitude of his reverence for it without having seen it for herself (127). "Winds contend silently there" seems to refer to the peace of the mountain, its stability, and the seemingly intangible nature of its peak. It should be noted that the mountain was first climbed in 1798 and the poem written in 1816. This, then, could again serve as evidence against the existence of God: even the most intangible beauty Shelley can describe has been physically conquered by man, has been felt thoroughly by both reason and body, creating a melding of physical, metaphysical and emotional levels to create a new kind of spirituality, the spirituality of human reason, the mystical nature of being able to prove existence through rationality. In this sense, the philosophy Shelley posits is a very objectivist one.

The closing lines of the poem, "And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / if to the human mind's imaginings / silence and solitude were vacancy?" serve as a final question to the reader (142-144). Because of the final echo—"silence" and "solitude" matched with "stars" and "seas," creating a parallel alliterative structure—the intrinsic connection between the two concepts of human emotions towards earth and the natural parts of the universe are linked in an "everlasting universe of things," one that begets the question of the existence of nothingness. The final lines challenge those who don't believe in the power of nature to re-examine their beliefs. If seeming absences of emotion such as silence and solitude were seen as vacancies instead of tools to convey power, then where would human rationality be? These lines serve not only as a question but as a warning to believers in God and religion, a warning that one must take the time to appreciate

the silence and solitude of the natural world and of rational thought. Without that appreciation, the evidence of the senses described in *The Necessity of Atheism* fails, leaving humankind in darkness.

The description of nature as an almost mystical beauty could likely be Shelley's attempt to capture in words natural beauty and the transcendent experience of viewing it. Transcendence is not always a religious emotion, Shelley's words argue; because all of the awe-inspiring things he is viewing are part of a natural, scientific world, it's man's responsibility to synthesize them, to attempt to understand them through the parameters of rationality, however difficult it may be. Since poetry is a medium through which beauty may be immortalized, Shelley's almost religious reverence for the beauty of Mont Blanc serve as a testimony to the growing existential crisis within those who experience nature and are struck with the question of whether or not a God could have created such a scene. This crisis is captured in Shelley's verse and poses the reader with the same question he faced: is there a God? Therefore, the controversy among religious, dialectical, and atheistic readings of the poem is itself necessary in order to convey the struggle of Shelley's emotions, and is what allows readers to experience a more raw set of emotions in Shelley's verse than they otherwise would. We are able to experience the power that nature has in converting believers into nonbelievers, or, if not quite to that level, to get a glimpse of the power of the combination of natural beauty and human rationality working together.

Human thought and human rationality determines action, synthesis, and emotion on a level that religion never can. The combination allows atheists to understand the magnitude of beauty on a level that wouldn't be quite so profound if they explained it away merely a creation of a God rather than a natural occurrence. Perhaps that is what is most striking about Shelley's "Mont Blanc." A creation of the human mind, an instance of transcribed reasoning, it is a manifestation of emotions nearly impossible to articulate. *The Necessity of Atheism* and "Mont Blanc" serve as two parts to a whole. They complete each other, with the pamphlet serving as the explicit appeal to reason and the poem as

the emotional river, staying within the course of the pamphlet's banks, running swiftly, finding its way to where it needs to go. ●

Works Cited

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