

Landscape and the Sublime

I live not in myself, but I become
Portion of that around me; and to me,
High mountains are a feeling, but the hum
Of human cities torture: I can see
Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be
A link reluctant in a fleshly chain,
Class'd among creatures, when the soul can flee,
And with the sky, the peak, the heaving plain
Of ocean, or the stars, mingle, and not in vain.

(Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto 3, stanza 72)

In addition to Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein*, two major poems were conceived in the Geneva Canton in Switzerland in the summer of 1816: the third canto of Lord Byron's romance poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni'. Both poems reflect their authors' keen interest in the aesthetics of the sublime. When Byron writes of his wish to 'mingle' his 'soul' with the mountains, the ocean and the stars, he echoes over a century's worth of thought about the relationship between human beings and the grand or terrifying aspects of nature. In the 1690s John Dennis, Lord Shaftesbury and Joseph Addison made separate journeys across the French and Swiss Alps that led to the publication of a series of influential accounts of wild and 'wasted' landscapes. In *The Moralists* (1709), for example, Shaftesbury blends delight with repulsion in describing a mountain as a 'noble ruin', and in 1712 Addison describes 'the heavings' of the ocean as the source of 'a very pleasing astonishment' (*Spectator*, 489, 20 September, 1712). The sense of 'agreeable horror' that the vast and the irregular in nature instils in Addison is sustained in Edmund Burke's description of that 'delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime'. Written in 1757, Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* includes among its repertoire of sublime objects and events the 'noise of vast cataracts, raging storms' and 'thunder'. Byron's poem, with its focus on the dizzying sights and sounds of the alpine landscape, culminates in an account of a thunderstorm that shows the influence of Burke's *Enquiry*. Arrested by the raging noise of the thunder, and by the contrasting sight of lightning in the 'glorious night', the poet wishes to become a 'sharer' in the storm's 'fierce and far delight, – / A portion of the tempest and of thee!' (93).

Mind and mountains

The desire to become 'a part' of the 'mountains, waves, and skies' (75) is an important aspect of romantic-period writing. In Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' the boundaries between mind and nature are deliberately blurred. Gazing on the Ravine of Arve 'in a trance sublime' (35) the poet reflects on the stream of sensations passing through his mind

which passively

Now renders and receives fast influencings,

Holding an unremitting interchange

With the clear universe of things around [...] (36-9).

Shelley's identification with the vast and overpowering aspects of the alpine landscape may be read in several ways. Unlike Coleridge, whose 1802 'Hymn Before Sun-rise, In the Vale of Chamouni' depicts the 'sky-pointing peaks' (70) as emblems of God, and differing also from Wordsworth, whose 1805 *Prelude* makes related claims for mountains as symbols of the connection between the human and the divine, Shelley's Mont Blanc is defiantly remote and 'inaccessible' (97). Like J. M. W Turner's watercolours sketches of the area around Mont Blanc, which depict human figures dwarfed by vast, over-hanging precipices and barren swathes of ice [figure 1: *The Vale of Chamouni*], Shelley's visionary landscape is forbidding and austere. In the absence of God, the poem seems to suggest, mountains have meaning solely as a result of the animating power of the human imagination.

Land and Freedom

Importantly, for Shelley, Mont Blanc is also a symbol of political freedom, strong enough in its immensity 'to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe' (80-1). The links between sublime landscapes and ideas of liberty were forged in the eighteenth century. Where enclosed gardens symbolised notions of aristocratic confinement and control the wild, untamed landscapes beyond the country house represented freedom and release. But while earlier topographical poets, such as James Thomson, sought to accommodate the potency of the sublime within manageable, picturesque settings (see, for example, the description of the snowstorm in 'Winter' from Thomson's *The Seasons*, 1730), later romantic writers seem more willing to explore the radical implications of extreme natural phenomena. Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches* (1792) departs from the conventions of landscape poetry in its apocalyptic account of 'mountains, glowing hot, like coals of fire' (299). Combining elements of Virgil's fourth eclogue, of 2 Peter 3: 10-13 and of the Book of

Revelation, the burning landscape gives birth to 'another earth' (783). Like Joseph Wright of Derby's terrifying image of the eruption of Vesuvius [figure 2: *Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples, 1776*] Wordsworth seems here to be fascinated by the pleasing horror of sublime violence. But Wordsworth's apocalyptic vision is informed also by recent memories of the failure of the French Revolution. Writing as a political radical seeking to rescue the Revolution from its collapse into despotism and terror Wordsworth appeals 'to Freedom's waves to ride / Sublime o'er Conquest, Avarice, and Pride' (792-3). The poet's later rejection of revolutionary politics was denounced by Shelley and Byron, yet in many respects both 'Mont Blanc' and canto 3 of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* may be read as a continuation of the aesthetics of landscape and liberty explored by Wordsworth in his younger incarnation.