Mont Blanc in British Literary Culture 1786 – 1826

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Abstract

This thesis makes an original contribution to the field of Romantic literary studies by adopting a geocritical framework alongside more conventional literary analysis to consider the relationship between Mont Blanc and British literature in the Romantic period, with a primary focus on the years 1786-1826. Essential to this approach is a methodology that focusses on the relationship between texts and both material place and the associations of material place in the mind. The geo-centred research presented in this thesis has deployed a range of strategies that has involved mapping texts, experiencing and examining material place in detail, and contextualising Mont Blanc writings within a broader understanding of mountain activity and the realities of mountain environments. Pictorial evidence has been used to support these methodologies and textual analyses. An original contribution is made towards understanding a number of major canonical and lesser-known British writings of the Romantic period, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Chamouny; The Hour Before Sunrise. A Hymn' (1802) and 'Kubla Khan' (1816), William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (1805), Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' (1817), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Last Man* (1826), and Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage Canto III* (1816) and *Manfred* (1817). While a number of previously unrecognised connections between selected Mont Blanc-oriented writings over a forty year period have been revealed, the thesis also presents an experiment that has tested the potentialities of a geocritical methodology.

Contents

Abbreviations

CL	Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vols1-6, ed. by Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971)
CP	Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Works*: *Poetical Works Poems*, ed. by J. C. C. Mays (London: Princeton University Press, 2001)
CE	Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Works: Essays on his Times in the Morning Post and The Courier,* ed. by David V. Erdman (London: Princeton University Press, 1979)
WTP	A-B Reading Text of *The Prelude* (1805) in William Wordsworth, *The Thirteen Book Prelude,* ed. by Mark L. Reed, vols I and II (London: Cornell University Press, 1991)
WDS	Wordsworth, William, *Descriptive Sketches in Verse Taken During a Pedestrian Tour in the Italian, Grison, Swiss, and Savoyard Alps* (London: J. Johnson, 1793)
Six Weeks' Tour	Mary Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany and Holland: with Letters Descriptive of a Sail round the Lake of Geneva, and the Glaciers of Chamouni* (London: T. Hookham, Jun., 1817)
PBSL	Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* vol 1, ed. by Frederick L. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964)
PBSP	Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley,* vol 3, ed. by Nora Crook and Neil Fraistat et al (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012)
MWS1818	Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, Novels and Selected Works*,* vol 1, ed. by Nora Crook (London: Pickering, 1996)
MWSL	Mary Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley,* vol 1, ed. by Betty T. Burnett (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980)
MWSJ	Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley,* vol 1, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987)
LBP	Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works,* vols I-IV, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980-1986)
LBP1	Lord Byron, *The Major Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
LBLJ	Lord Byron, 'Letters, Correspondence and Journals' including 'Byron's Alpine Journal', *Peter Cochran's Website*, ed. by Peter Cochran, 2015 <https://petercochran.wordpress.com/byron-2> [Accessed 2017-2018]

JCHD   *John Cam Hobhouse,* 'Diary - Switzerland', ed. by Peter Cochran, 2012 <https://petercochran.wordpress.com/byron-2> [Accessed July 2018]

Introduction

If the 'eternal snows' of Mont Blanc are with each passing day on our warming planet increasingly less eternal, historical footsteps can nonetheless still be followed. Leaving the books and computer in favour of field research, I set out upwards to the snows, searching for traces of the past and a renewed sense of the present. Underfoot was the same trail used by Mary and Percy Shelley in the summer of 1816 to reach Montenvers and look upon the Mer de Glace. With a decade away, the realities of Mont Blanc and the Arve Valley had become confused in my mind; I was undertaking a process of clarifying and reordering. I hiked steeply and quickly out of Chamonix in the late afternoon; my cotton T-shirt clinging tightly to my skin, saturated with sweat after only a couple minutes in a 37˚C swelter, the sweat pooling, beading, dripping from my nose to the dusty earth. Chamonix was a place I used to avoid as much as possible: it was a heat trap, a cauldron, too noisy, too busy. Despite knowing this, in the intervening years I had lost the sensory memory of quite how hot and uncomfortable it can be here in summer. My recall had instead been drawn to glimpses of frosty dawns in the upper valley, dangerous torrid storms that forced me from technical climbs, bright yet cuttingly cold ascents or freezing nights at 4000m spent camping on glaciers where numb fingers were brought back to life with burning chilblains while clasping cups of tea made from stove-melted snow. I had remembered too the crowds of Chamonix and the infrastructure and just what I had not liked about Mont Blanc, and these memories had begun to saturate the exposure and obliterate what I had liked. I laughed. I should have come back here sooner, for this hiking, this streaming sweat, these feelings of adventure, of escaping upwards, were each breaking down the refraction of time and distance. Most importantly, they were changing how I thought about the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers who had written about this place.

      This thesis is primarily geocritical in its consideration of the role of Mont Blanc in British literature over a forty year period. Yet geocriticism does not eviscerate other modes of analysis. Rather it offers another tool to open the way for new perspectives. By selecting a single mountain as a study focus, a range of different writings, many of them canonical, are drawn together in this thesis. While the resultant Mont Blanc corpus is, up to a point, distinctive from what has been collated in other critical works, most of the writings in this thesis have seen considerable critical attention. It is not my intention therefore to simply offer a survey of Mont Blanc writings during the Romantic Period and their associated criticism in order to traipse once more – beleaguered – over well-trodden ground. Rather, I will deploy geocritical readings alongside conventional critical approaches to complement

and challenge both my analyses and other critical appraisals. Such an approach has the potential to offer new insight into the British literary response to Mont Blanc in the Romantic period.

Argument

The collective poetic and literary Mont Blanc writings of the Romantic period are held in suspension by the tension arising from three broadly competing poles: material experience; imagination; and representational precedent.
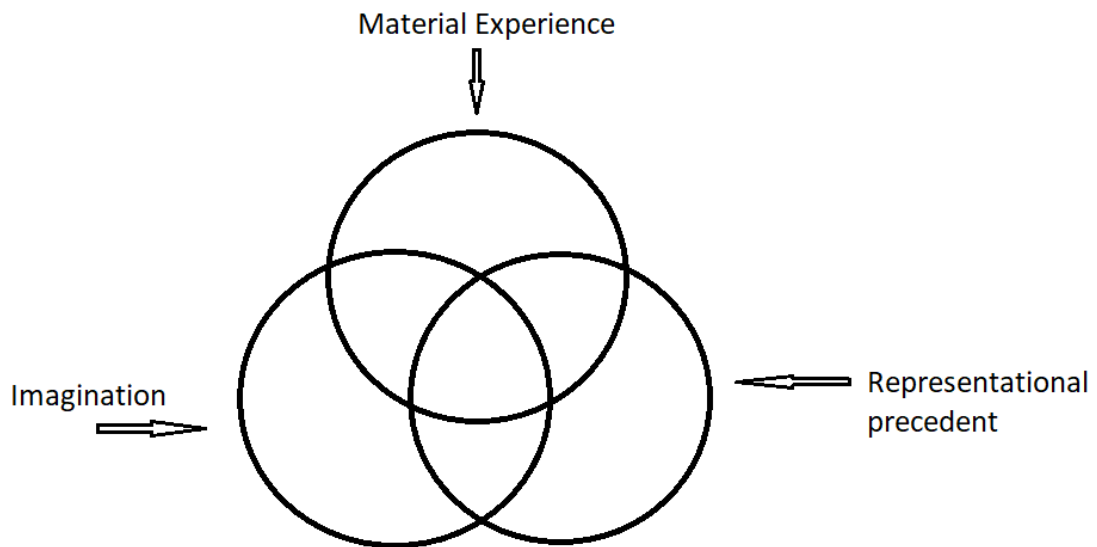
Figure 1 Tri-Venn diagram visualising how the competing poles exert fields of influence.

In an individual text the bias might be towards the power of any one given pole. Likewise it might show a balance between two or even all three poles. However, the geographical realities concerned in the Mont Blanc writings of the Romantic period have, up to a point, been overlooked or diminished in critical analyses. My central argument contends that by focussing more fully on those physical geographical realities, we can better understand the relationship between the three competing poles suspending Mont Blanc writings and, as a result, the importance of Mont Blanc in British literature during the Romantic period.

While I make a case for the empiricism of material experience, it is not one without the conditioning influence of other forces. Representational precedent has long been acknowledged as a profound influence on the perception of travellers to a range of locations. As Cian Duffy has noted, travellers in the Romantic period visited the Alps 'equipped with a plethora of cultural references through which those stupendous mountains could be mediated

and interpreted'.[1] Those cultural references included the bank of what we might anachronistically refer to as scientific writings. Such writings further shaped – albeit an unstable – factual and theoretical idea of the mountain's physical nature in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The relationship between such writings and the creative responses to Mont Blanc and the Alps has seen a degree of attention. Duffy has considered the potential influence of Ramond Louis de Carbonnières on Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc', John Wyatt has looked at how Wordsworth was influenced by developments in geology in *Wordsworth and the Geologists* (1999) and this has a degree of bearing upon Wordsworth's responses to the Alps, while Noah Heringman in *Romantic Rocks, Aesthetic Geology* (2004) has offered a detailed examination of the relationship between geology and late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century poetic and literary writings that include Coleridge's 'Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouny' (1802), Percy Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' (1817) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Yet, while such analyses bring the material mountain more fully into the frame, it is important to remember that scientific writings in the first instance tended to mirror poetic and literary responses by likewise being suspended between the three competing poles. In essence, a series of filters existed between the material mountain and the scientific discourse. As a result, responses to scientific writings by poets and novelists were not necessarily responses to objective science or even accurate accounts. Percy Bysshe Shelley's engagements with the writings of Ramond de Carbonnières and Georges-Louis Comte de Buffon, for example, are tilted towards imagined ideas of what the mountain might become and the extreme potentials of their writings and theories which were themselves subject to leaps of the imagination. Although examining those imagined potentials is important, it is my intention here to more fully consider the influence exerted by the material mountain and the significance of actual physical geography and environment on poets and writers.

On the surface it is easy to assume that because a critic is discussing the representation of Mont Blanc in their analysis then they will automatically take account of the physical geography of the mountain. And yet, the material mountain has tended to be overlooked or marginalised in the critical discourse in ways that are not, at first, obvious. If we consider Frances Fergusson's 'What the Mountain Said' (1973), undoubtedly an important intervention into the critical debate surrounding Percy Shelley's 'Mont Blanc', her evocative title nonetheless belies the fact that the actual mountain is somewhat overlooked. A number of critics have made the mistake of assuming Mont Blanc is the highest mountain

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[1] Cian Duffy, *The Landscapes of the Sublime, 1700-1930: Classic Ground* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) p.34.

in Europe.[2] Speaking to an expert on *Frankenstein* at the 1816 conference about the role of Mont Blanc in the novel, I was asked if I had looked at a Mont Blanc poem by Lady Cavendish. It transpired that what was meant was the *Passage over St Gotthard*.[3] It is not the intention here to detract from otherwise insightful and informative writings by experts in their fields. Rather, it is to suggest that critical analyses have at times focussed so much on the literary mountain as to forget that perhaps the actual mountain really might have had something to say. I am suggesting that some of the world's foremost experts on certain writings that include Mont Blanc appear to have given little attention to the geographical specificities in those writings, leaving a field that is less crowded than might be expected. Indeed, to stay with *Frankenstein,* the body of criticism pertaining to the novel is considerable, even over-whelming. However, very little of it has considered the geography in the novel in any real depth.

To adopt an approach that promotes an empirical method and to write of actual physical geography in relation to literature is problematic, if not also at times unfashionable. The critical plain is encumbered by its own theoretical potential. In essence we are *post* post-modern, *post* post-structuralist. It is all too easy to recognise the inherent instability in concepts or claims to an 'actual'. In their representations of Mont Blanc, the Romantic writers necessarily displaced place – abstracting the material or imagined material to the sphere of the representational. It is possible to argue that collectively they contributed to the creation of a virtual mountain – what Jean Baudrillard has termed hyper-space: physical locations re-represented and so removed from their material reality that they become simulacra. Certainly Mont Blanc in British literature was never static – it was constantly shifting, influenced by each successive visit and each new reference or representation. The sheer volume of depictions made the mountain an icon of Europe and world physical geography burgeoned with meaning. James Duncan and Derek Gregory have suggested that 'all geographies are imaginative geographies – fabrications in the literal sense of "something made" – and our access to the world is always made through particular technologies of representation'.[4] Yet such a position, like Baudrillard's hyper-space, though attractive is perhaps unnecessarily obtuse and overly theoretical. While conversely I am not advocating a blanket rejection of Duncan and Gregory's position, we should remember that it is not impossible to return to Mont Blanc and 'access' an actual mountain. It is reasonable to

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[2] The misconception that Mont Blanc is the highest mountain in Europe has been widely held. An episode of BBC television's *QI* allowed its 'foghorn of ignorance' to sound when panellists answered 'Mont Blanc' for the highest peak in Europe during a section of the programme called 'general ignorance'.

[3] The Gotthard Pass in Switzerland is over 120km ENE of Mont Blanc.

[4] *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing,* ed. James Duncan and Derek Gregory by (London: Routledge, 1999), p.5.

accept that a pure unfettered understanding of space and place is not possible in totality. We do not confront place as blank beings; it is perceived in relation to other things, whether physical, theoretical, or imagined: the outcome in this instance, our perception of Mont Blanc, is rarely stable. Up to a point, physical geography is understood through the filter of our imaginations, it is predisposed to our biases, our semantic leaps, our experiences and our preconceived understanding. These filters doctor and rework the *actual*. My aim here is not to disregard such filtering; it is simply to use geocriticism to redress the balance. To ask what the *actual* mountain might still tell us.

In the eighteenth century, Mont Blanc and the Alps acquired a distinctive lexicon. In large part this was a consequence of one of the three competing poles of Mont Blanc writings: representational precedent. Few who wrote about Mont Blanc did so without relying on the repository of associated clichés that seemed to circle in the air like the hanging spindrift from a settled avalanche. The effect of this was that a substantial proportion of the writings about Mont Blanc repeated what had gone before. The systematic reimagining of Montenvers as a mountain top in accounts from William Windham to Mary Shelley is representative of this process. In essence, in regards to this motif, one of the poles – material experience – seemingly exerted a less powerful influence than either the imagination pole or the pole of representational precedent. Anyone who has visited Montenvers will be aware that it is simply not a mountain top or a summit. Those writers, who visited Montenvers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries but nonetheless referred to a 'summit' or a 'top' must have understood this. For critics with at best a secondary interest in the relationship between physical geography and writings that include Mont Blanc, such a factual point will seem a topic of minutiae and not one worth dwelling upon. My argument is that *it is* worth dwelling upon. For example, in the case of Mary Shelley, such a point raises questions about how she was responding to material experiences. If her inclination was – in some instances at least – to marginalise or even ignore the realities of her experiences, was this in order to favour regurgitating other writers' representations? Did she rely so heavily upon her imagination and alternative accounts to render her material experiences unnecessary? In turn, we can fairly ask whether it mattered at all that she visited Montenvers and walked upon the Mer de Glace? Such questions are not easily answered. Nonetheless, this thesis will explore them. After all, in the case of Mary Shelley's visit to Montenvers, understanding the role of material geography may affect how we understand a key scene in one of the world's most well-known novels.

Whether writers attempted to ignore or embrace the realities of material place, on the page the mountain was constantly reiterated or reconfigured by both those who visited it and those who did not. In essence these writers could reimagine the material mountain

before, during and after it was being experienced. Alternatively, they might reimagine others' accounts of a mountain that had already been reimagined. Such outcomes are admittedly knotty. That does not mean, however, that a degree of untangling might not be possible. Bernard Westphal has written:

> In theory every space is situated at the crossroads of creative potential. We always return to literature and the mimetic arts in our explorations, because, somewhere between reality and fiction, the one and the others know how to bring out the hidden potentialities of space-time without reducing them to stasis.[5]

My chapters explore the relationship and gaps between the 'reality and fiction' of Mont Blanc in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They seek to untangle the knots. In doing so, a degree of insight into the 'hidden potentialities of space-time' that has been set out in poetic and literary works can be achieved. Collectively this thesis emphasises how Mont Blanc was romanticised, revered as something god-like or rejected as a disappointing tourist trap. It also shows Mont Blanc as a proliferated mountain, with each writer setting out on the page one more layer to the sedimentary layering of endless 'Mont Blancs' – and yet each layer we are able to visualise, as if the mountain exists in infinitely regressive images produced by two opposing mirrors. Yet the physical mountain remains throughout. It is an anchor; and it is important not to cut the cord.

Methodology

The primary distinctive research method underpinning this thesis is geocritical. By focussing on a sole location, Mont Blanc, at the outset, geography's relationship to literature is the driver and this is the fundamental underpinning of any critical work that might fairly claim to be 'geocritical'. However, as with most geocritical works, more conventional approaches to literary analysis are also deployed. This study therefore contributes to a body of geocritical readings of literature that have appeared since the 'spatial turn' that has taken place in literary criticism since the 1960s and was, to a great extent, a product of shifts in the critical landscape wrought by poststructuralism and postmodernism. For Robert Tally Jr, the spatial turn is an 'acknowledgement that matters of space, place, and mapping had been under-represented in the critical literature of the past'.[6] That is not, however, to suggest this thesis adopts poststructuralist or postmodernist approaches to physical geography. A key concern is the relationship between material place and imaginative representation of space on the page. Jean Baudrillard has claimed, 'there can be no silence up in the mountains since their very contours roar.'[7] From the outset I have recognised the power of Mont Blanc to

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[5] Bernard Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, trans. by Robert T. Tally Jr. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p.73.
[6] Robert Tally, *Spatiality* (London: Routledge, 2013), p.16.
[7] Jean Baudrillard, *America,* trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1989), p.6.

have 'a voice' that has spoken to those seeking to represent it on the page.[8] In grouping together complementary and contradictory perspectives on Mont Blanc during the course of a core forty year period, this thesis is topographical, forming a relief map of representations that appears to be the product of a literary cubist – distorted, overwritten numerous times, yet potentially illuminating in what it reveals about Mont Blanc in British literature. This study is therefore a realisation of the potentiality Bernard Westphal has recognised in post-spatial turn geocritical literary studies: 'Geocriticism will work to map possible worlds, to create plural and paradoxical maps, because it embraces space in its mobile heterogeneity'.[9]

In *Atlas of the European Novel*, Franco Moretti argues that his geocritical methodology recognises 'geography is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history "happens", but an active force, that pervades the literary field and shapes its depth.'[10] This thesis tests the extent of geography as an 'active force' in British writings about Mont Blanc. While a key area of focus in this thesis is the relationship between 'real' and 'imagined' geographies, this dichotomy is not as straightforward as might be hoped. Mont Blanc is a real place, but it is also – often simultaneously – an imagined place. Hence the signified Mont Blanc in writings and the material place itself are destabilised. We can accept that, at the point of writing or representing material place in the mimetic arts, the potential for distancing – or ignoring altogether – is considerable. Yet a first tier rewriting in the mind also takes place at the point of experience. For instance, Percy Bysshe Shelley might walk upon the material mountain, but consciously or subconsciously reject its reality in favour of reimagining the place at the very moment that place is being experienced – providing not merely a subjective empiricist response, but an imaginative response that complicates the value that can be placed upon material experience. To a certain degree the extent of that process is unknowable: all geographies are effectively destabilised in the mind to create subjective versions of place. Nonetheless, while accepting the difficulties inherent in such a project, there remains an opportunity to investigate the importance of material place in a way that has the potential to allow insight into texts. This thesis adheres to the notion that there is such a thing as an objective real material place. Addressing the way poetry and literature are influenced by, ignore or move away from notions of a 'real' place not only tells us new things about the significance of Mont Blanc in British literature between 1786-1826, but the importance – or lack of – material place in the writings of Romanticism.

The corpus of Mont Blanc writings formed by this study has necessitated a range of geocritical strategies. My purpose here is to discover if new insight into individual Mont Blanc writings can be gained; it is not to set out upon a controlled scientific experiment in

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[8] Shelley, *Six Weeks' Tour,* p.179.
[9] Westphal, p.73.
[10] Moretti, p.3

which each text is subjected to the same tests. Therefore strategies at times differ from chapter to chapter and text to text. Beyond the first broad strategy – to assess the geographical meaning of each text, methods include:

Mapping and Geosemantic Mapping[11]

Maps have long been an occasional feature of poetic and literary texts. Their role in literary criticism, however, has been relatively limited – although the fashion for maps and mapping texts has seen a notable increase in attention since the 1980s. They have, however, been a favourite of biographers looking to organise the travels of their subject on the page. They tend to be helpful in contextualising movements. But any such mapping is not without its problems. Maps are complex tools. The systems by which individuals use or interpret them are likewise complex.

Many of the Mont Blanc related writings discussed in this thesis constitute well-trodden ground. Franco Moretti's approach to literary geography in *Atlas of The European Novel* focussed on a number of canonical works that likewise might fairly be considered well-trodden ground. His primary approach was to use maps as 'analytical tools' in order to bring 'to light relations that would otherwise remain hidden'. The aim of this thesis is likewise to bring to light connections and insight into writings about Mont Blanc that 'would otherwise remain hidden'. I have adopted elements of Moretti's mapping strategies, particularly in chapter one and chapter three, to reveal original findings about the texts. However, I have added another mapping dimension that Moretti did not employ: geosemantic mapping. Rather than simply mapping the location of a narrator or character, I have sought to also map geographical allusions and references to places. As Denis Wood has suggested: 'Every map shows *this*… but not *that,* and every map shows what it shows this *way*… but not the *other*.'[12] Wood's playful ellipses emphasise the gaps and necessary selections inherent in maps. However, as Wood also suggests, any map's '*effectiveness* is a consequence of *selectivity'*.[13] The geosemantic mapping in this thesis is not an exact tool. Indeed, the portmanteau of 'geo' and 'semantic' necessarily acknowledges the inherent instability in places that are connected in the mind by the semantic leaps of writers or readers. Nonetheless, I have found value in undertaking the process while recognising such literary mapping is often troublesome and imprecise. After all, cartography predominantly involves a process of turning three-dimensional real space into two-dimensional representations adjusted to a scale or three-dimensional models that are likewise subject to scale. This process is then followed by a series of negotiations about extent and labels. For

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[11] I mean 'geosemantic' primarily in relation to the deployment of the term by Jason Karl, Jeffrey Herrick and Roger Unnasch et al, 'Discovering Ecologically Relevant Knowledge from Published Studies through Geosemantic Searching', *BioScience,* 63, 8 (August 2013), pp.674-682.

[12] Denis Wood, *The Power of Maps* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.1.

[13] Wood, p.1.

example, if Byron refers to 'Gaul' for France, questions arise as to where in 'Gaul' should a spot location be marked or even whether the reference ought to be ignored altogether because it cannot be conventionally mapped within a system that favours more specific locations. I have chosen to map references such as this. In doing so, I recognise that, as Wood suggests, another tier of subjective '*selectivity*' is being undertaken by the cartographer. As will be seen in Chapter One, I place the spot marker for Gaul on Paris – simply on the grounds that it is a representative capital city. Such a decision could fairly be viewed as unsatisfactory. Compromise is, however, inherent in map-making. While the marker cannot be precise, the marker needs to go somewhere because ignoring it altogether leads to a map that is even more misleading. In short, precision may not always – or ever – be possible, but this does not necessarily prevent the mapping from allowing us to assess texts in a new light and see hitherto disguised meanings. The aim is to discover trends, movements or patterns that might reveal something which otherwise was difficult to see. If making occasional arbitrary decisions about where a location marker should be placed is necessary to that aim, then so be it.

Field Research

Field research has been used as a geocritical tool throughout this thesis to support analysis of texts. While making comparisons between places as they are in the twenty-first century and as they were in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is problematic for a number of reasons, there is nonetheless still considerable benefit in doing so. As an outdoors pursuits specialist, I had a substantial bank of pre-existing experiences of Mont Blanc on which to draw before I began this thesis including having ascended Mont Blanc unguided and having overcome a storm in order to do so that saw almost all parties turn back. Recent visits undertaken specifically for research purposes include: a hike up to the Col de Balme to consider Wordsworth's vantage point for his 'soulless image' response to Mont Blanc in *The Prelude*; a visit to the Simplon Pass and Gondo Gorge to reappraise Wordsworth's imagination sequence there in *The Prelude*; repeating Coleridge's descent of Broad Stand on Scafell – a climb that inspired his engagement with Mont Blanc; a visit to the Pont Pelissieur and the Gorges of the Arve to assess Percy Bysshe Shelley's narrative position for 'Mont Blanc'; an evening hike up the Mer de Glace and a night time descent from Montenvers to gain perspective on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and other aspects of Percy Shelley's 'Mont Blanc'; an early evening visit to the Chateau de Chillon with a swim in Lake Geneva below the castle; and a visit to Geneva to gain a degree of perspective on Byron's and Shelleys' distances from the mountain in the summer of 1816 before their respective excursions to Chamonix. While admittedly there is a limit to how much a field trip can inform us about a literary text, in these instances the visits were illuminating.

Geographical Relationism

Where helpful, I have sought to use geographical relationism so that the geocritical perspective can be better understood. This is a straightforward tool for the geographer, but one that is less easily discerned by critics unfamiliar with – in this instance – mountain landscapes. The process can involve comparing the complexity of Mont Blanc as a massif to a standalone mountain such as Mount Teide, for instance, so as to better understand how the mountain is being interpreted. In Chapter One, for instance, I make a relative comparison between the Zailiyskiy Alatau range and Mont Blanc to critique Byron's distance from mountains while he is living in Geneva. Geographical relationism in this thesis will range from visual aids to mine and others' anecdotal experiences.

Representational Precedent

My research questions the extent to which experiences of Mont Blanc and/or its material reality affected the writings about it. Central to this and my broader methodology has been an acknowledgement of the power of representational precedent. A complexity in the perception and experiencing of any material place is that in almost all instances a writer already has knowledge of how it has been experienced or represented. It is this complexity that Percy Bysshe Shelley is engaging with when he attests that in the Savoyard Alps, 'he has read the raptures of other travellers; [and] will be warned by their example' only to settle on a negotiation by confessing 'all was as much our own, as if we had been the creators of such impressions in the minds of others as now occupied our own.'[14] Engaging with such difficulties take us to the heart of some of the central tenets held about Romantic writers insofar as their creative processes are so often deeply associated with apparently authentic experiences in the physical world, such as Wordsworth's fabled daffodils, the romance of Scott's border hikes or Byron's Continental adventures. Part of the complexity posed by the relationship between the material Mont Blanc and representations of it on the page is rooted in the profusion of accounts by British visitors of journeys to the mountain. This meant that an actual visit was not altogether necessary in order for writers to depict the mountain and further amplify its cultural significance. Conversely, those who did visit often showed an incredible reliance on or at least repetition of received descriptions of the mountain and its surroundings – even though they seemingly had no need to do so. An example of this is Wordsworth who admits in his notes for *Descriptive Sketches* to being reliant on Ramond de Carbonnières' descriptions of the Alps.

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[14] Shelley, Six Weeks' Tour, p.141 and p.152.

The Naming of Places

Today 'Mont Blanc' as the referent for the highest mountain in Western Europe is widely accepted. Only Italians, who share the summit of the mountain with the French, prefer an alternative – the translation 'Monte Bianco'. The first references to a mountain that might reasonably be identified as being Mont Blanc in the seventeenth century often used Mont Maudite (Cursed Mountain).[15] However, this term could also be used to refer to the Savoyard Alps more broadly and was occasionally pluralised as Le Monts Maudite or Montagne Maudite.[16] The name 'Mont Blanc' first appeared on a map of 1737.[17] William Windham was the first to describe the mountain's characteristics in detail, although he did not use a specific name and refers to Mont Blanc only as 'the mountain'.[18] Pierre Martel, who visited it the year after Windham and contributed the second portion of Windham's *An Account*, was more precise with his attention to toponyms. He refers to the mountain as 'Mont Blanc' and it is clear from this that the name was, locally at least, already settled. Mont Blanc is also labelled on a map by Martel included in Windham's *An Account* (see figure 1).

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[15] This name has over time become affixed to Mont Maudit (4456m), a significant subsidiary peak of Mont Blanc.

[16] Peter H. Hansen, *The Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering after the Enlightenment* (London: Harvard University Press, 2013), p.31.

[17] Laura and Giorgio Aliprandi, *La découverte du Mont-Blanc par les cartographes, 1515- 1925* (Milan: Priuli and Verlucca, 2000), pp.56-57.

[18] William Windham, *An Account of the Glacieres, or Ice Alps of Savoy in Two Letters, One from an English Gentlemen to his Friend at Geneva; The Other from Peter Martel, Engineer, to the said English Gentlemen* (London: 1744).
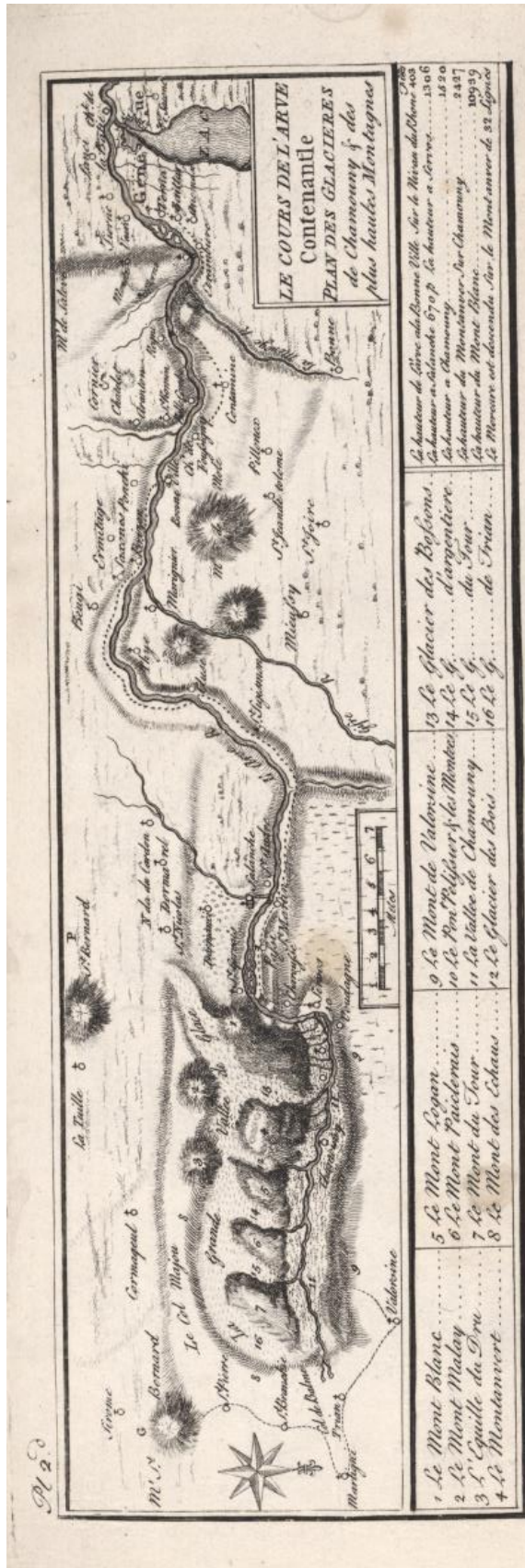
Figure 2

Figure 1 Map orientated to the south showing the course of the Arve by Pierre Martel (plate 2 of William Windham's *An Account of the Glacieres*, 1744). The scale is wrong and the map is full of inaccuracies. Nonetheless, 'Mont Blanc' is labelled and its summit position in relation to Chamonix is roughly correct. While this was not the first map to use the term 'Mont Blanc', it was perhaps the most influential. Windham, p.30.

The Physical Parameters of Mont Blanc

Unlike Mount Ararat in Turkey, Mount Teide on Tenerife, Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Mount Fuji in Japan, Mount Etna in Sicily or, to a lesser extent, Europe's high point – Mount Elbrus in Russia, Mont Blanc is not a stand-alone mountain easily separated from its surrounding landscape. This has problematised how its physical extent is interpreted and the referent 'Mont Blanc' is more complicated than might be expected. That Mont Blanc must include the high point of the Alps at 4808m in its definition is straightforward enough.[19] However, since it was first described in Windham's *An Account,* 'Mont Blanc' has proved an often vague term that has been and continues to be used interchangeably to describe: the summit dome; the summit dome and immediate mountain that supports it (usually, but not always, incorporating the first set of radiating satellite peaks); what today we refer to as the Mont Blanc Massif (often, but not always, including the immediate valleys that border it); and, less commonly, a wider swathe of the Savoyard Alps stretching into Italy and Switzerland. Mark Beaufoy, the first Briton to ascend Mont Blanc, acknowledged the mountain's indeterminate physical parameters in his 'Narrative' of 1787:

> We were now at the foot of Mount Blanc itself; for, though it is usual to apply that term to the whole assemblage of several successive mountains, yet the name properly belongs only to a small mountain of pyrimdal form that rises from a narrow plain which at all times is covered with snow.[20]

This thesis uses a straightforward delineation: it deals with writings that refer to Mont Blanc, irrespective of whether writers mean the Mont Blanc Massif as a whole, the summit dome in isolation or any division of that terrain as long as it includes, or appears to include, the summit.

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[19] The summit is composed entirely of ice. In recent years the exact height of the mountain has fluctuated between 4807m and 4810m.

[20] Mark Beaufoy, 'Narrative of a Journey from the Village of a Chamouni in Switzer-land, to the Summit of Mount Blanc, undertaken on Aug. 8, 1787', *Annals of Philosophy,* 9 (London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1817), pp.100-101.

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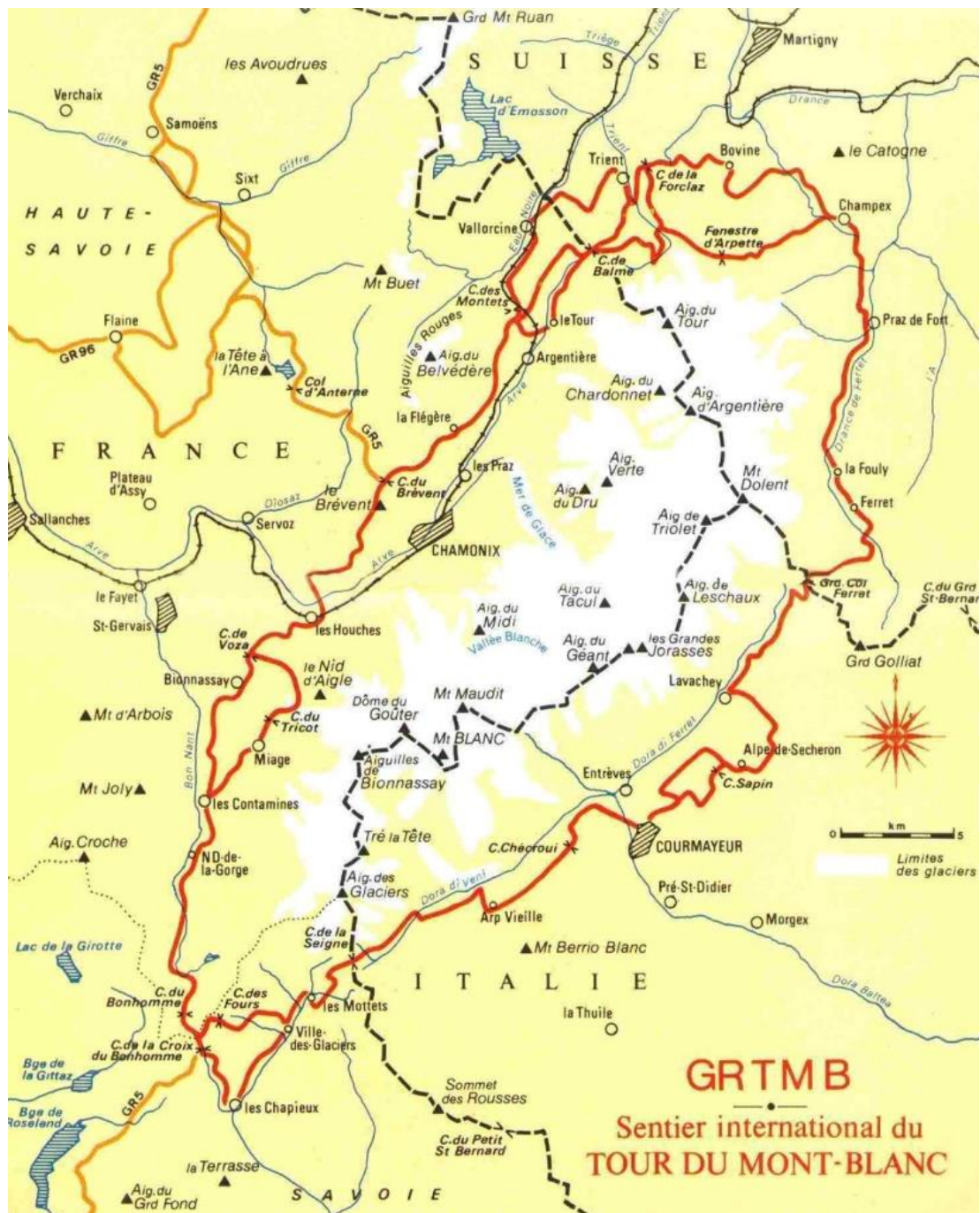
Figure 3 Map showing the Mont Blanc Massif within the loop of the Tour Du Mont Blanc hiking trail (marked red). The present day borders of France, Italy and Switzerland are represented by the black dotted line.
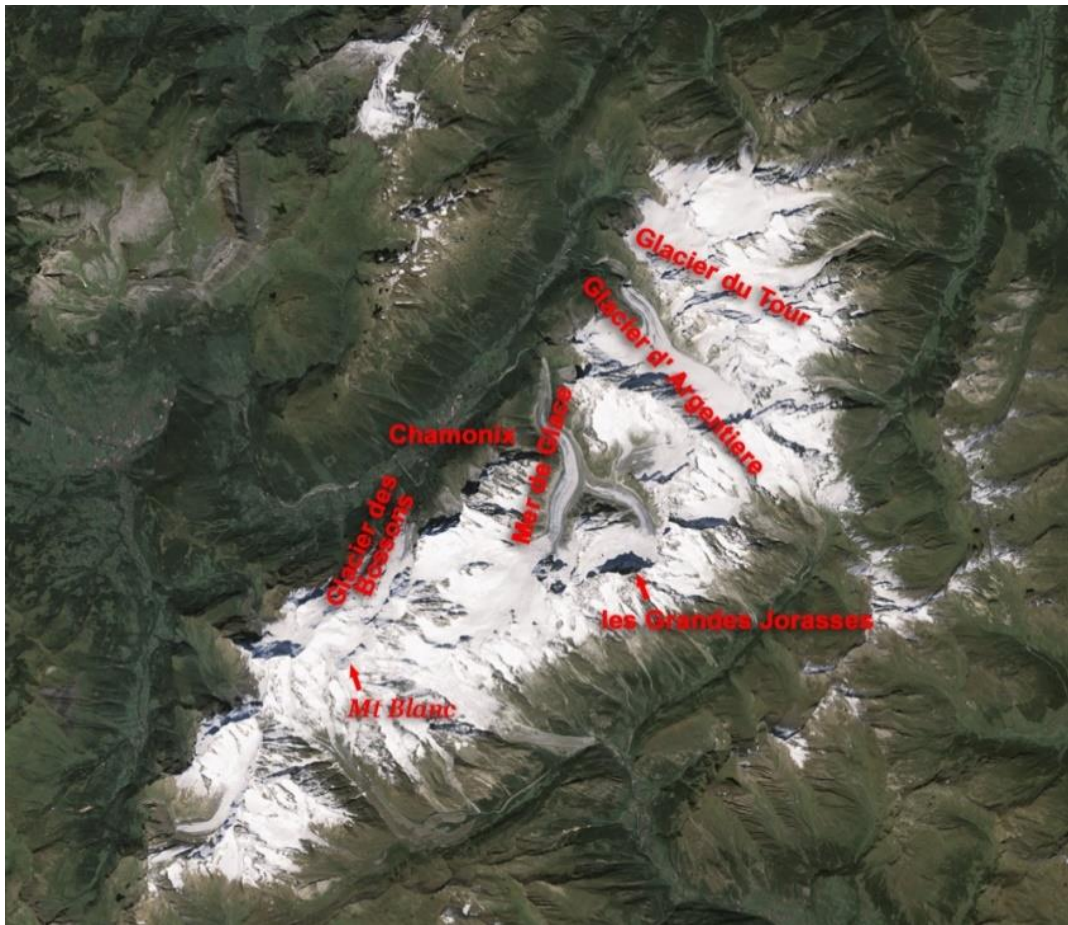
Figure 4 Satellite photo of the Mont Blanc Massif with the Mont Blanc summit labelled.

The Political Location of Mont Blanc

When William Windham and party left Geneva in 1741 to visit Mont Blanc, they understood that the mountain belonged to the Duchy of Savoy, which was part of the Kingdom of Sardinia and Savoy. On his visit in 1790, William Wordsworth also recognised that the mountain belonged to Savoy and wrote about its geopolitical position in *Descriptive Sketches* (1793). The Duchy of Savoy was annexed by the French in 1792. After the fall of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15, the Duchy was restored to the Kingdom of Sardinia and Savoy. In 1860, as part of the Treaty of Turin, Savoy was once more annexed by France and its border with Piedmont (by 1861 part of a unified Italy) was drawn over the summit of the mountain.[21] As figure 2 shows, a portion of the north eastern massif is today in Switzerland – as it was during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – while a large portion of the south eastern mountain, including the summit, is shared with Italy. The geopolitical location of Mont Blanc proved confusing for many visitors up to and beyond 1826. For example, Mark Beaufoy considered himself assured about what 'Mont Blanc' refers to in terms of summits and peaks, yet despite this he incorrectly claimed that the mountain and Chamonix were located in Switzerland.[22] This was not an uncommon mistake. In his analysis of *the Peasants of Chamouni* (1823), Simon Bainbridge has recognised the way in which Switzerland might be associated 'more vaguely with the Alps and particularly with Mont Blanc'.[23] 'Switzerland' was certainly an elastic term in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and was often used to refer vaguely to the geopolitical position of the Alps collectively, irrespective of the fact that the range was situated across a number of different states. Lord Byron occasionally used 'Switzerland' as a shorthand term for the Alps as a whole and nowhere in his writings does he make a distinction between Switzerland and Savoy. In this respect, he follows the travelogues of William Coxe, Helen Maria Williams and Johann Gottfried Ebel's popular guide book. All three of these writers were able to distinguish the political border, but found it convenient to group Mont Blanc together with the Swiss Alps.

Polemical depictions of autocratic despotism in Savoy, and to a lesser degree France, were used in numerous eighteenth-century British travelogues – including those by John Moore and William Coxe – to throw into relief the admirable qualities of the democratic Republic of Geneva and, more tacitly, Great Britain. The idea of moving from

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[21] The summit of Mont Blanc remains disputed between French IGN and Italian mapping. (See the Afterword of this thesis for a more detailed discussion and Carl McKeating and Rachel Crolla, 2009, pp.88-89)).

[22] Beaufoy, pp.97-103.

[23] 'A 'Melancholy Occurrence' in the Alps: Switzerland, Mont Blanc, and an Early Critique of Mountaineering' in *Romanticism, Rousseau, Switzerland,* ed. by Angela Esterhammer, Diane Piccitto and Patrick Vincent (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), p.153.

Geneva or any other Canton of Switzerland into Savoy tended to be framed in terms of a transition from the civilised to the uncivilised, the cultured to the uncultured, in such a way as to support the idea of Mont Blanc and its environs acting as an accessible exotic.[24] While not all visitors armed themselves for the transition as William Windham recommended, they nonetheless came prepared to view a country of political and cultural difference.

Critical Context

This thesis primarily focuses on literature produced during a forty year period alongside allusions to British representations outside of that time frame; its scope and critical context is therefore broad. Naturally, for a thesis that includes a wide range of texts, many of them well-known canonical works, critical material is extensive and this will be addressed primarily within each chapter. However, a number of works are pertinent to this thesis as a whole. In two key critical books, Duffy has engaged with the interactions between texts and physical geography in *The Landscapes of the Sublime 1700-1830: Classic Ground* (2013) and *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (2009).[25] In *Landscapes,* Duffy recognises the importance of Mont Blanc and the wider Alps in British attitudes to the sublime, and argues:

> Chamonix-Mont Blanc is essentially invented as what we might call "classic ground" on the cultural map of Europe during the eighteenth century and Romantic period, that is, that the area is transformed from a relatively unknown space into a familiar landscape inscribed with a range of highly specific, culturally determined connotations, many of which it continues to possess to this day.[26]

He acknowledges and engages with the philosophical influence of writers such Rousseau, Kant and Burke on British engagements with the Alps. However, Duffy moves beyond this to argue that an equal or even greater influence was exerted by contemporary responses and historical events. For Duffy, there was a 'discourse of ascent' fostered by historical events such as the first ascents of Mont Blanc or Napoleon's crossing of the Alps and by the plethora of concomitant travel accounts, including those by writers such as Horace Benedict de Saussure, Ramond de Carbonnières and Marc-Theodore Bourrit and a wider swathe of cultural influences, such as literature, tourism and mountain guides. Duffy argues that in response to this discourse, British writers interpreted and represented the Alps in a way that suggests a discernible 'poetics of ascent'. Integral to this approach is Duffy's recognition of the complex political status of Mont Blanc for different writers at different times: the mountain could symbolise the order of a conservative monarchical system; act in concert

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[24] Coxe, 1779, considers this dichotomy, see p.260. See also, Helen Maria Williams, 1798, pp.187-190.

[25] Cian Duffy, 2013, and *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[26] Duffy, 2013, p.18.

with the wider Alps to form a bastion for republicanism; or symbolise lands of liberty and moments of liberation. Duffy recognises a trope in which ascent connoted depth of feeling and knowledge: in essence, the higher a writer climbs the better his or her knowledge and the deeper his or her feelings. Significantly, however, an inaccessibility motif is also apparent in which 'Romantic-period religious responses to the Alpine sublime seek to conserve the idea that the highest summits, and especially the summit of Mont Blanc, are *inaccessible'*.[27] Duffy's *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (2009) gives attention to Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' within a broadly cultural historicist framework in which 'Mont Blanc' is read in relation to a broader understanding of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century sublime. He argues that '*Mont Blanc* is a 'challenge to the dominant, pious and conservative "records" of the Alpine sublime' and sees it as 'an attempt to revise, to *re-imagine* the cultural significance of Europe's most famous mountain'.[28] Bainbridge has written extensively about the relationship between mountains and eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British writers, including work on Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron. Bainbridge, like Duffy, argues for a broader range of events and writings influencing British responses to mountains. When Bainbridge has turned his attention away from British mountains and towards the Alps, he has in particular emphasised the influence exerted by Napoleon and Rousseau. Notably, in *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (1995) Bainbridge has countered Alan Liu's argument that Wordsworth's response to the Alps in *The Prelude* was a partial denial of history.[29] Bainbridge has also produced a range of papers that consider the development of domestic rock climbing and mountaineering during the Romantic period, and the relationship between that development and writings about mountains.[30]

From a geocritical perspective, this thesis can be seen as both an application and development of the literary mapping approaches proposed by Franco Moretti in *Atlas of the European Novel*. Likewise, the relationship between literature, topography – as in the naming of places – and the experiences of place in this thesis enters into a field of geocritical studies that includes J. Hillis Miller's *Topographies,* Bernard Westphal's *Geocriticism,* Jean Baudrillard's postmodern reading of geographical influence on texts and culture, in

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[27] Duffy, 2013, p.49.
[28] Duffy, 2005, p.90.
[29] See *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); '"And freedom's fame find wings on every wind": Byron and the Politics of Freedom and Terror' in *Byron and the Politics of Freedom and Terror*, ed. by Matthew Green and Piya Pal-Lapinski (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), pp.136-151; '"The Columbus of the Alps": Rousseau and the Writing of Mountain Experience in British and Romantic Literature' in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and British Romanticism* ed. by Russell Goulbourne and David Higgins (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp.51-74; and Bainbridge in Esterhammer, 2015, pp.150-167.
[30] Bainbridge, 'Romantic Writers and Mountaineering', *Romanticism*, 18, 1 (2012), 1-15 and 'Writing from "the perilous ridge": Romanticism and the Invention of Rock Climbing', *Romanticism,* 19.3 (2013), pp.246-260.

particular his *America,* and works by James Duncan and Derek Gregory with their geocritical collection of essays *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* proving particularly pertinent. A geocritical analysis of mountain texts moves us closer to material place and the real psychological experience of mountains. Like the archaeologist or historian who pieces together understanding of the past by actually registering how place is/was and its implications for writings about that place, I have at times deployed my own mountaineering and climbing place-experiences as evaluative tools to reappraise aspects of how writers were responding to landscapes. In essence, this approach is one in which small personal case studies are valuable devices in grounding exploration of the gaps between what writers *probably* experienced and what they wrote. As such, this thesis is also drawn towards a critical context that includes a broad swathe of analytical and philosophical mountain literatures written by climbers and mountaineers. While a complete list would be excessive, examples of texts include Ken Wilson's edited collections *Classic Rock* (1979-2007) and *Hard Rock* (1974), Heinrich Harrer's *The White Spider* (1959), Joe Simpson's *Touching the Void* (1988) and *The Beckoning Silence* (2002), Chris Bonnington's *The Quest for Adventure* (1981), Jim Perrin's *The Villain* (2005), Clint Willis's *The Boys of Everest* (2008) and Julie Tullis' *Clouds from both Sides* (1987).

By examining the travel experiences of British writers to Mont Blanc, this thesis enters into a range of criticism that has considered eighteenth and nineteenth-century travel to the Alps, including books by Jim Ring, James Buzard, Katherine Turner, Nigel Leask and Carl Thompson.[31] These critical works have at times overlapped with more conventional cultural histories of British engagement in the Alps both by writers, tourist and tourist-mountaineers. In particular, Peter Hansen's *The Summits of Modern Man* (2013) is a valuable text against which many of the cultural findings and arguments in this thesis might be read or compared. Hansen's book incorporates findings that can be seen in earlier studies in which Mont Blanc is a central area of focus, including those by Charles Matthews, Gavin de Beer and Fergus Fleming, but adds considerable new research to the historical record.[32] Robert Macfarlane's popular *Mountains of the Mind* borrows heavily from a number of cultural histories of mountains and mountaineering.[33] Its references to Mont Blanc are

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[31] See Katherine Turner, *British Travel Writers in Europe 1750-1800* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); Nigel Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1700-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Carl Thompson, *The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and James Buzard, 'The Uses of Romanticism: Byron and the Victorian Continental Tour' in *Victorian Studies*, 35, 1 (1991), pp.29-49.

[32] See Sir Gavin de Beer, *Alps and Men* (London: Arnold, 1932), *Early Travellers in the Alps* (New York: October House, 1967), and *Escape to Switzerland* (London: Penguin, 1945); Charles Edward Mathews, *The Annals of Mont Blanc* (Boston: Page and Company, 1900); and Fergus Fleming, *Killing Dragons: The Conquest of the Alps* (London: Granta, 2000) and *Tales of Endurance* (London: Orion, 2005).

[33] Macfarlane, Robert, *Mountains of the Mind: History of a Fascination* (London: Granta, 2004).

sporadic, however, and despite its commercial success and its deployment of personal experiences to reveal the psychologization of mountain experiences, it presents little that is new. Marjorie Hope Nicholson's well-known work *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (1959) charts the developing interest in the mountain sublime in British culture during the long eighteenth century.[34] The pre-Romantic bias of Nicholson's study is useful in recognising the developing interest in wild spaces as shown by poets such as Milton, Thompson and Gray and this development is read alongside shifting British attitudes to mountains in the wake of Thomas Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1681). However, the work gives little attention to actual experiences of mountains and, as Duffy has noted, overlooks the influence of Rousseau. Likewise, Nicholson's analysis rarely distinguishes between the specific physical geography of the mountains being written about and seems to approach texts as if all physical mountains are effectively the same and only the differences in the writings about them are important.

A significant proportion of this thesis looks at the works of the Diodati circle originating in the mythologised summer of 1816. A profusion of documentaries, films, dramatizations and even novels on the lives of the circle that summer have added colour and reckless speculation to the historical record.[35] However, a number of less-speculative critical studies have examined the experiences of the Diodati circle in 1816. In addition to the sober critical attention given by the aforementioned Duffy, Bainbridge and Hansen, Benjamin Colbert has taken a cultural historicist approach to the relationship between Percy Shelley's journey to Mont Blanc and his Mont Blanc writings. Colbert, however, offers only limited analysis of Mary Shelley and Lord Byron.[36] Charles Robinson analyses the influence Percy Shelley and Lord Byron had on each other that summer, although does little to consider the role of Mary Shelley.[37] Richard Holmes has built on work by John Buxton and has added much that is helpful to the biographical record.[38] Ernest Lovell has highlighted how Lord Byron and Mary Shelley related to each other.[39] However, Lovell emphasises how little we really know about Mary's attitudes to Byron in the summer of 1816 and the level of their

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[34] See Marjorie Hope Nicholson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (London: University of Washington Press, 1997).

[35] The countless examples include a glut of films about the group in the 1980s: Gonzalo Suarez's *Rowing with the Wind* (1986), Ken Russell's sexually charged horror *Gothic* (1986), Ivan Passer's *Haunted Summer* (1988), and later Haifaa al-Mansour's *Mary Shelley* (2017). A BBC-produced dramatised documentary, *Frankenstein and the Vampyre: A Dark Stormy Night* (2014), that has talking head contributions from a number of contemporary Diodati Circle scholars, including Richard Holmes and Angela Wright, is also sensationalist and speculative.

[36] See 'The Temple of Nature' in Hansen, pp.118-148.

[37] Charles Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and the Eagle Wreathed in Fight* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

[38] Richard Holmes, *Shelley: the Pursuit* (London: Harper, 2005) and John Buxton's *Byron and Shelley: The History of a Friendship* (New York: Harcourt, 1968).

[39] Ernest Lovell, *Byron and Mary Shelley* (Hampden: Archon, 1958).

interaction – a situation that the historical record has not significantly altered during the sixty years since his influential study. Jerrold Hogle is interested in the ways in which the gothic and political dimensions of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft's writings shaped the gothic approaches of the group in a period characterised by the failure of the French Revolution.[40] His work is helpful in highlighting the degree to which the writings of the Circle were in dialogue with each other respecting their gothic elements.

In recent years eco-critical and geo-critical studies have illuminated how Mont Blanc and the Alps might be understood in relation to the Diodati's Mont Blanc corpus. Eric Wilson looks at the Diodati circle's engagement with the glaciers of Mont Blanc – although Shelley's relationship to the ice is afforded the most attention.[41] Gillen D'Arcy Wood and Higgins have recently considered the Circle's time in the Alps in relation to the effects of the Tambora eruption of 1816.[42] Higgins also discusses 'the idea of human precarity that haunts the Circle's texts' and suggests that this was to a great extent derived from a response to geological findings and landscape processes – particularly those espoused by Comte de Buffon, Georges Cuvier, James Hutton and Horace Benedict de Saussure.[43] While Higgins applies this influence to Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, he nonetheless gives most attention to 'Mont Blanc'. Heringman (2004), Wilson (2003), Leask (2002) and Wyatt (1995) have sought to focus more fully on how poetry and literature in the Romantic era has engaged with geological and glaciological findings. By addressing the interactions between material place and writings, this thesis has necessarily also contributed in small ways to critical work relating to the history of geology and glaciology.

Summary of the Thesis

The core time period for this study ranges from 1786-1826. However, the parameters of the study have been expanded to incorporate George Keate's *The Alps* (1763). Some earlier writings such as William Windham's *An account of the Glacieres* are somewhat inevitably incorporated through references and contextualised analysis. Likewise, this thesis has recognised that the mountain, although it has changed and been developed over the past 200 years, has not disappeared and that its contemporary state, and the role of mountains in today's cultures, can form part of an insightful analytical framework with which to address the texts selected for the thesis. The year 1786 saw Mont Blanc's first successful ascent. It

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[40] Jerrold Hogle, 'Gothic and Second-Generation Romanticism: Lord Byron, P.B. Shelley, John Polidori and Mary Shelley' in *Romantic Gothic,* ed. by Angela Wright (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp.112-128.

[41] See, Eric G. Wilson, *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science and the Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[42] See the critical summary in the Chapter Four below.

[43] David Higgins, *British Romanticism, Climate Change and the Anthropocene: Writing Tambora* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), p.83.

also appears also to have been the year the mountain was first referred to by name in British poetry.[44] The closeness of 1786 to the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789 and the, albeit much-debated, early parameters of literary Romanticism have likewise made that year a good starting point. The year 1826 has been selected because it was the end of an era: that year saw the publication of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* – the final Mont Blanc work by a member of the Diodati circle. These dates allow this thesis to be read more easily in terms of Romanticism studies. I collated published and unpublished Mont Blanc writings produced during the intervening 40 year period. The resulting corpus includes material across several genres by writers whose experience of the mountain ranged from multiple visits, hikes and climbs on its slopes and glaciers, to writers whose works were inspired by secondhand accounts or were largely products of the imagination.

Chapter One uses original geocritical strategies including semantic mapping to consider the presentation of Mont Blanc in British travel poetry by George Keate, Helen Maria Williams, William Parsons, Thomas Whalley, Richard Cooksey and Lord Byron between 1763 and 1816. These six poets were responding to a new age of travel coeval with the birth of modern mountaineering and in which advances in geology and geographical understanding were significant. Yet while the relationship between these changes have not necessarily been looked at in respect of these writers' Mont Blanc-related works, these areas of change have seen a varying degree of critical attention in relation to British writings about Mont Blanc and the Alps. In respect of this, the chapter takes an original approach by focussing on two primary areas that have been given less critical attention. The first is the importance of Lake Geneva to presentations of Mont Blanc. The second is the significance of imagined and vicarious travel to Mont Blanc in the context of other real and imagined journeys within these texts.

Coleridge and Wordsworth's representations of Mont Blanc are the subjects of Chapters Two and Three. Bainbridge has argued that Wordsworth's presentation of Mont Blanc in *The Prelude* was an engagement with the agency of Napoleon in the Alps. Applying a similar cultural historicist methodology, I suggest that Coleridge's Mont Blanc of 'Chamouni the Hour Before Sunrise. A Hymn' (1802) should likewise be read as a political response to the sphere of Napoleonic influence. Integral to Coleridge's political response appears to be the notion of finding liberty through activity in landscapes. As such, I examine Coleridge's descent of Broad Stand and question what this significant moment of mountain activity tells us about Coleridge's representation of Mont Blanc and, by degrees, his philosophical and physical approach to mountain landscapes. Chapter Three covers ground that has previously been overlooked or marginalised. It is unique in analysing

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[44] The mountain is alluded to but not named explicitly in George Keate's *The Alps: A Peom* (London: Dodsley, 1763).

Wordsworth's three representations of Mont Blanc and the Chamonix Valley over a thirty year period. The primary questions I address in the chapter are concerned with Wordsworth's contradictory and contrasting representations of Mont Blanc in *Descriptive Sketches (1793), The Prelude* (1805) and 'Processions, Suggested on a Sabbath Morning in the Vale of Chamouny' (1822). A key contention is that the Mont Blanc of *The Prelude* constitutes a reaction against the mountain's touristic popularity and is an instance of a canonical writer challenging overwhelming British cultural trends. Deploying field research and the specificities of Wordsworth's experience of Mont Blanc, I argue that not only are his Mont Blancs suggestive of his transition from an early radical poet to a later more conservative writer – but also one of several catalysts in that process.

Chapter Four offers an original geocritical reading of Percy Shelley's 'Mont Blanc'. In the chapter I deploy field research to examine the subject of Shelley's poem as it is found today and question whether by examining the mountain's physical characteristics we can gain fresh insights into a poem that has seen considerable critical attention. Key to this chapter is the association made by Shelley between Mont Blanc and death – it is an association that is often made today. By examining the role of death in mountains more broadly and the potential anxieties inherent in both Shelley's and other people's interactions with mountains, I argue that it is possible to see 'Mont Blanc' in a new light as a poem of death, anxiety and crisis.

In Chapter Five I consider the role of Mont Blanc in gothic writings by Ann Radcliffe, Mary Robinson, Lord Byron and Mary Shelley. I argue that the mountain's location, physical geography and associated folklore and myths shaped these writings – but not always in ways that might be expected. I argue that conventional depictions about the physical beauty and sublimity of Mont Blanc are used by gothic writers to evoke scenes of psychological trauma and individual, familial and social crisis. In particular, I argue that Mont Blanc exerted a considerable influence on the narrative of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man,* for in these novels the mountain is both sublime and anti-sublime: its topography is celebrated, its scenes are presented with awe and spiritual revelation appears possible; yet what is revealed is not spiritual glory, but rather spiritual despondency through the absence of God and nature as benevolent forces.

Chapter One

The Lake, the Mountain and Imagined Travel: Mont Blanc in the Travel Poetry of George Keate, Helen Maria Williams, William Parsons, Thomas Whalley, Richard Cooksey and Lord Byron

Introduction

The proximity of Lake Geneva to Mont Blanc was essential to representations of Western Europe's highest mountain in British literature during the Romantic-era. This chapter focusses on five British poets and argues that the geographical relationship between the mountain and the lake helped shape the way in which Mont Blanc was understood and represented. The proximity of Lake Geneva for many writers enabled a means of geographical relationism in which the ice-clad verticality of the mountain was contrasted by the horizontality of the lake. This physical contrast facilitated devices of aesthetic juxtaposition: the lake might be calm or knowable, while the mountain could be volatile, unknowable. Ideas of a feminine lake and masculine mountain or civilised lakeshore and uncivilised alpine interior, were also manifested. In some instances these oppositions were analogous with the political divide: before 1792 Mont Blanc fell within the borders of the autocratic Kingdom of Savoy and Sardinia, while Lake Geneva, with its namesake city and Swiss shoreline was, for many British and Continental writers, an emblem of Continental liberty. Lake Geneva had a capacity to function as a prompt for writers to reflect on the state of politics and the nature of being in a way that coloured the manner in which Mont Blanc was framed.

The proximity of Mont Blanc to Lake Geneva fostered the notion that the mountain was an accessible exotic in the heart of Europe. This division was in part ethnographic. Visitors could travel from the apparent civilisation of Geneva and its lake to an interior that was othered through its inhabitants and its geographical distinctiveness. This notion is also traceable in wider peripheral areas of the Alps where populations inhabiting the shores of

lakes and banks of major rivers are defined as inside a familiar European culture in contrast to populations surviving in alpine valleys. Lake Como, for example, tended to function in a similar way to Lake Geneva for visitors approaching the Alps from the south or for those having crossed them from the north. Like Lake Geneva, Lake Como constituted a place belonging to a broader civilised European culture. The interior populations of the Alps, however, tended to be viewed as distinct by travelogue writers, including Coxe, Moore, Bourrit and Saussure. Even within one travelogue, local inhabitants in one valley might be framed in the mode of the noble savage and being pure in their primitiveness and wildness, while contrastingly in the next valley they might be seen as belonging to impure societies suffering the consequences of interbreeding, goitres and economic deprivation. As Duffy has suggested, there was a 'tension between evidently impoverished locals and the perception, or *wish* to perceive their society as idyllic'.[1]

The ethnographic division between the interior and periphery of the Alps in British literary responses were inevitably strongly influenced by Rousseau.[2] In his influential *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761), Jean-Jacques Rousseau emphasised the political divide that hinged on Lake Geneva. From a neutral mid-lake position, Rousseau explores the opposition of the two banks of the lake. The political freedom of the Swiss side contrasts the Chablais area of the Savoyard side:

> Then showing her the Chablais on the opposite shore, a land not less favoured by nature, and that nonetheless offers only a spectacle of misery, I had her distinguish clearly the different effects of the two governments, upon the wealth, the number and the happiness of men.[3]

The assumption of Savoyard unhappiness is subsequently complicated by the idyllic scenes the pair experience once on the Savoyard side. Rousseau undermines St Preux's notion of a 'spectacle of misery' to suggest that those who live more attuned to the wildness of their surroundings are able to experience freedom in spite of autocratic governance and economic conditions.[4] Mont Blanc is not depicted explicitly in the novel, yet Rousseau does refer to the vague geographical appellation for the Mont Blanc Massif and its surrounding peaks 'les

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[1] Duffy, 2013, p.32.

[2] *The influence of Rousseau and in particular Julie on writings about the Alps was far-reaching. As Bainbridge has suggested, Winthrop Young emphasised the influence as early as 1879. The role of Rousseeau on British perceptions of the Alps is an area that has seen considerable critical attention. As such, I limited digressions onto what is already well-trodden ground, although references to Rousseau's influence are inevitable.* See Edward Duffy, 1979; Cian Duffy, 2005 and 2013; Goulbourne and Higgins, eds. 2017; and Esterhammer, Piccotto and Vincent, eds. 2015.

[3] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*, trans. Phillip Stewart and Jean Vache (London: Dartmouth College Press, 1997), p.422.

[4] Rousseau, *Julie,* pp.422-28.

glacieres' briefly as part of a dramatic passage in which a storm has forced Julie and St Preux from the Swiss side of Lake Geneva to its Savoy shore.[5] The scenes in Savoy recall earlier perceptions of the Savoyard Alps in the novel and act as a metaphor for the naturalness of love set outside of political or social constructs. Ultimately, it is the lake that witnesses the novel's great tragedy. This disrupts the notion that the lake is a safe space while the mountains beyond it are the dangerous sphere. Yet despite Rousseau's disruption, the predominant starting position for many writers, including Moore, Bourrit, Coxe and Saussure, over the course of the next sixty years was to continue – as Windham had in 1741 – to promote the lake as a safe, calm and knowable space, and frame Mont Blanc and the Savoyard Alps as a place of potential danger. Indeed, Mary Shelley understood that there was generally a received idea that the lake was safe and Mont Blanc was dangerous. It is for this reason that she was able to disrupt the assumed binary opposition between safe lake – dangerous mountains, fifty-seven years after Rousseau had done so in *Julie*. It was an opposition that, because of Percy Shelley and Byron's near-death experiences in a storm on Lake Geneva in 1816, she undoubtedly understood to be largely misconceived.[6]

George Keate

The Alps (1763) by George Keate is a travel poem that frames the Alps within a broad sense of European geography. The course of rivers such as the Po, Danube, Rhone, Rhine and Aar are followed to outflows such as the Adriatic, Black Sea, Mediterranean and northwards to 'Belgic Sands'. Such an approach offers a sense of the Alps as a hub at the centre of northern, eastern, western and southern Europe. In the poem, the Alps are synonymous with Switzerland – that bastion of liberty in the centre of Europe celebrated by Keate in the preface and the wider poem. Although the association of the Alps with Swiss liberty would continue to be seen in British writing, many subsequent British poets would pay less attention to framing Mont Blanc and the Alps as the centre of Europe – no doubt partly because that position was expected to be understood. In the opening Keate refers to the '[p]aren't sweet of ev'ry Muse' of the 'Aonian Hill' (p.1). This is Parnassus, a mountain in central Greece mythologised for being the source of poetic inspiration. Keate presents the Alps as an alternative or equivalent European space that in essence was close enough to Britain to be visited and writes, 'we have trodden paths | New to the Muse' (p.26). This idea of '[n]ew' ground equivalent to Parnassus would be invoked in this way so that the Alps could be seen as an alternative space in Mont Blanc-related poems by Helen Maria Williams, William Parson's and Thomas Whalley. Such comparisons and equivalence were fundamental to the process by which, as Duffy suggests, the Alps themselves became

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[5] Rousseau, *Julie,* p.424.
[6] See Chapter Five.

'classic ground'.[7] The relationship of Lake Geneva to Mont Blanc, were important to how that process worked.

In *The Alps*, the speaker recalls the view of Lake Geneva from Mount Salève and considers the Lake as a mirror in which not only Mont Blanc, but the broader Alps are observed on its surface:

> Geneva's Turrets rise, and yon blue Lake
>
> A far stretched Mirrour spreads: its Bosom shews
>
> Th' inverted prospect circled with Hills
>
> And Cliffs, a Theatre immense! – But this
>
> No Peril wears to him who dares attempt
>
> The Glaciers slipp'ry Tract, or climbs the Steeps
>
> Of Tourne, or St Gothard, or hath join'd
>
> The toiling passages o'er Cenis Mount,
>
> Or Great St Berhard.[8]

For Keate, the Alps are a space of natural spectacle. Reflected in the lake, the greater mountains that include Mont Blanc create a 'Theatre' for the perilous nature of the Alps to be performed. It is a spectacle experienced at a safe distance: mountains and passes can be ascended with '[n]o peril'. It hardly appears to matter to Keate that this reflection was geographically impossible. What mattered was the lake's key function: to be a counterpoint to the mountains. Keate was not alone in promoting the notion of *danger there* and *safety here*. Danger is intrinsic to a story purportedly told to Keate by local shepherds that is retold in the poem. The tale proves a digressive moment in which Keate elucidates the threat posed by the abstract dangerous power of alpine landscapes to a relatable and vulnerable social sphere. In the tale, an avalanche from the 'House of Death' of Mont Blanc – described in the poem as the Arve's 'tallest Mountain' – kills a bride to be, Matilda, on the eve of her wedding to a suitor, Rodolpho. Overcome with grief on finding Matilda's body, Rodolpho 'sinks in Death, pale as the ambient snow'. If the fascination that the Alps might harbour sinister forces and see such melodramatic tales of misery were likely enough to put off some visitors, for many others the dangerous nature of 'Les Glacieres' was part of the appeal and intrinsic to the Burkean sublime.

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[7] Duffy, 2013, p.18.
[8] Keate, p.9.

As Keate's '[t]heatre immense' suggests, there remained a powerful tendency for imagined travel to Mont Blanc and experiences of it, despite the mountain's relative proximity to the lake. For those who did venture into the shadow of the mountain, a strong emphasis was placed upon managing risk, usually through the hiring of guides and the following of well-trodden paths to recommended sites. Nonetheless, British writings continued to reveal fascination with and anxiety about the mountain's dangers rooted in flights of fancy about imagined ascents and dangerous experiences. Such '[n]o peril' experiences were a feature of many Mont Blanc writings throughout the Romantic period and after. Indeed, Mark Twain satirised the tradition to great comic effect in his, 'The Ascent of Mont Blanc by Telescope' chapter of *A Tramp Abroad* (1880). Today this same desire for risk-free travel into apparently dangerous locations can be traced in the countless tourists taking advantage of the Aiguile du Midi cable car at a cost of 65 Euros to the highest cable car station in Europe. Among the various dramatic vantage points from which to gaze at the sublimity of the Mont Blanc massif on the Aiguille de Midi cable car station, visitors can now stand in a glass-floored cubicle above thousands of metres of void, their minds momentarily tricked into vertigo.
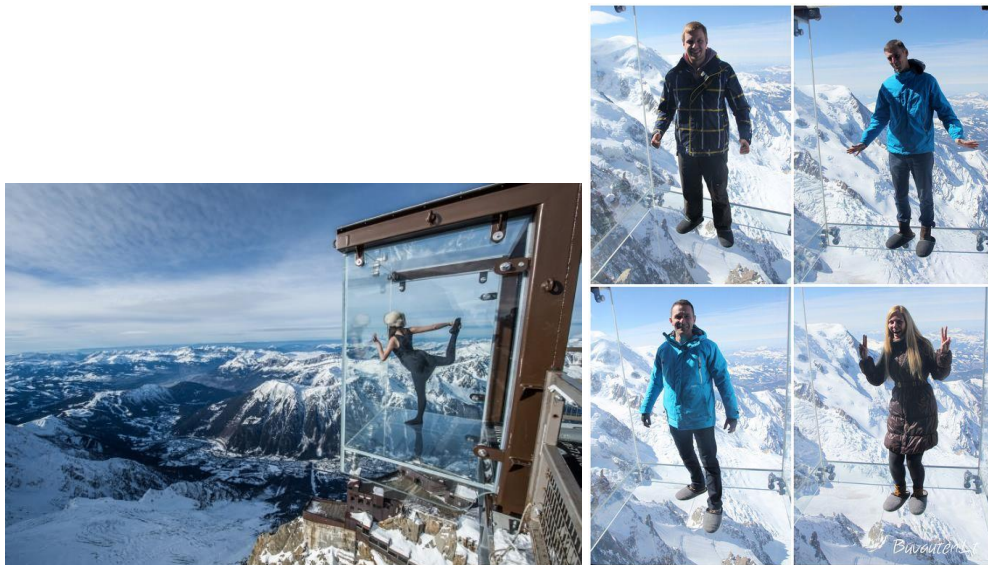
Figure 5 The 'Step into the Void' glass box on the Aiguille du Midi.[9]

If today the primary preoccupation tends to be less a search for the sublime experience and more the quality of selfies that frame Mont Blanc beyond smiling faces, the underpinning notion remains the same as it was for many eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British visitors: whether embracing a sublime experience, individuals predominantly wish to be insulated from genuine exposure to the danger being fetishized.

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[9] Photo by Sol Crisan <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/435512226444638548/?lp=true> accessed January 2020

Visionary descriptions of Mont Blanc relied on poetic or artistic projections, but there was a tendency to claim an external catalyst. The 'Mirrour' that Keate observes on the surface of the lake gives Mont Blanc and its adjacent Savoyard peaks a dream-like quality. Keate was impressed by the shifting nature of the reflection where 'Rocks beyond Rocks' that 'arise in ever-varying Shapes' can be momentarily interrupted or altered by mists on Mount Salève or the movement of the lake's surface: 'here a thick Mist | Steals on us while we gaze, and all below | Like one wide Ocean shows! – It breaks, – it fleets – | A new Creation bursts upon our sight'.[10] However, Keate was inventing a reflection on the surface of the lake that cannot actually happen. Inherent in this type of projection was the idea that somehow what was taking place was merely a reflection of the true nature of nature. Staring at the mountains, Keate questions: '[t]he active Mind, | What can control? free as the vagrant Air, | It scorns all bounds' (p.26). Such unwitting natural creativity was claimed by many British poets responding to the Alps. Arguments were set out that the power of imagination to animate the material mountain was a product of power innate in the external world that could overwhelm the mind. Wordsworth's expression of imaginative power in the Gondo Gorge passage of Book VI of *The Prelude* is part of this tradition. Likewise, Shelley tested the relationship in 'Mont Blanc'. For Keate, the power of the material world to overwhelm reaches its climax at the conclusion of the poem. Staring once more into the Alps he finds himself staring into a deep future. He envisions an apocalypse and expresses its destructive qualities in terms of geological processes. This apocalyptic passage anticipates similar responses by Thomas Whalley in *Mont Blanc* and Shelley in 'Mont Blanc'. What Keate raises in the poem is the idea that to deeply consider the processes of Mont Blanc and the Alps might be a dangerous thing – perhaps tantamount to considering death, whether personal, social or global. This potential darkness or upheaval at the heart of the white Alps was often registered in British Romantic-era responses in contrast to the brilliance and calmness evoked by scenes at Lake Geneva.

Helen Maria Williams

The following is a geo-semantic map that charts the locations of Helen Maria William's *An Epistle to Dr. John Moore* (1786), a poem that contemplates the power of vicarious travel born from fancy as a means of poetic inspiration:

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[10] Keate, p.9.

Figure 6 A geo-semantic mapping of *An Epistle to Dr John Moore*

1. Castaly* (adjectival allusion: 'Castilian'), p.4
2. Panassus* (adjectival allusion: 'Parnassian'), p.4
3. Pindus, p.7
4. Epping Forest ('*Epping* spreads a woody waste'), p.7
5. River Seine (allusion to Moore's journey along the Seine), p.7
6. 'Albion's plain' (used to compare differing response to misfortune between English and French), p.9
7. Geneva (feminine), p.10
8. Lake Geneva (implied feminine, being 'her Lake' belonging to Geneva and having a 'broad bosom), p.10
9. Rhone (masculine, both disrupts and is subdued by the feminine Lake Geneva), p.10
10. Savoyard Alps ('yon Alpine steeps' appear to refer to the near Alps that are the source of the waters of the Lake Geneva), p.10
11. Mont Blanc ('the mountain's awful brow' clarified at the end of the descriptive passage as 'Mont Blanc'), p.10
12. Parnassus ('Parnassian hill'), p.11
13. Switzerland, p.11
14. Prussia ('Prussia's martial clime I stray')
15. Venice and River Po
16. Rome
17. Campania
18. Virgil's tomb (Naples)
19. Florence and River Arno
20. Europe
21. Grange Hill, Essex

Unsurprisingly for a poem inspired by a Grand Tour travelogue, the map shows a series of movements across Europe. However, those movements are not as straightforward as might be expected. The sole allusion to Prussia in the poem disrupts the otherwise linear northwest-southeast movements. The singularity of the Prussia allusion reveals Williams' minimal interest in Moore's wider engagement with Continental Europe beyond his journey to and from the Alps and Italy. The first three locations are Greek and are not part of John Moore's travels nor were they on the itineraries of most British Grand Tours, yet they are important in the semantic mapping space. As the map reveals, when Williams refers to Mont Blanc in the poem we are taken from the Alps to Mount Parnassus in Greece. It is a journey not just from the centre of Europe to its southeast corner, but from the contemporary to the ancient world. This journey is then immediately reversed and we move back from Parnassus to Switzerland. Semantic deviations of this type in alpine descriptions were not uncommon. However, almost no Britons visited Parnassus and Pindus in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[11] The deviations are suggestive of a process by which British writers either aligned or interpreted Mont Blanc in relation to mountains that had long been either a source of poetic skill or spiritual significance; the inference being in this instance that such poetic inspiration could now be found in the heart of Western Europe. While Williams is basing her poem on someone else's journey, the exchange of mountain subject anticipates a modern attitude to mountains in which first-hand experiences confer on writers a valued sense of special knowledge and authenticity.

Williams' writing location in Epping is referred to twice in the poem, reminding readers that her descriptions are of an imaginary journey based on the reading of an account of an actual journey to the Alps by Dr John Moore. *An Epistle* extols the healing quality of Moore's writing and draws an analogy between Moore's ability to heal as both a physician and a writer. It is worth remembering that in Britain women were wholly excluded from becoming doctors until 1865 and that the veneration of male status contrasted by an apologetic female ambition in the poem navigates a complex sphere of social inequalities. In *A View,* Moore was fascinated by the idea that the Alps could act as a place of healing, both physically through fresh air and the consumption of glacial water, and mentally by means of a communion with nature.[12] These ideas are implicit in the healing Williams derives from her vicarious travel and effective in the restoration of her 'weaken'd frame', 'drooping mind' and 'mental malady' (p.5). Indeed, she goes as far as to suggest that Moore's 'gayer scenes' (p.5) have 'lengthened' her life (p.6). Williams asserts that the power of reading pleasing literature about the Alps could be similar to actually visiting them; both are

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[11] The philhellenist Byron is a notable exception.

[12] Williams would consider the debate about whether the Alps were an inherently healthy or unhealthy place to live in *A Tour in Switzerland* (1798), see pp.187-190.

physiologically beneficial. However, in doing so she also plays into the stereotype of the weak female prone to malady that needs a heroic male figure to restore her vigour.

The poem blends subtle allusions to gender identities within its exploration of imagined travel that appear to reaffirm the elevated status of men. This may in part be a consequence of responding to Moore's travelogue, which in one chapter chronicles a male-only party going to Mont Blanc. Indeed, Moore describes a moment of far-fetched competitive masculinity as two of his party on the Mer de Glace embark on an attempt to climb the Aiguille du Dru.[13] The Dru was not scaled until 1878 and even then by a route considerably easier than the imposing vertiginous face Moore's party saw from the Mer de Glace.

Figure 7 The west face of the Aiguille du Dru from the Mer de Glace in 2019: the whiter rock on the face reveals the post-millennium collapse of the Bonatti Pillar.

Whether Williams aligns mountain activity at this point with masculinity is hard to ascertain. However, this seems unlikely. Indeed, it would, comparatively not take long for a woman to complete an ascent of Mont Blanc – being climbed Marie Paradis in 1808.[14] Williams never visited Mont Blanc; although this was not by design. Escaping from the Reign of Terror in 1793, she fled to Switzerland and recounted her delight in its mountain scenery, but was prohibited from visiting Mont Blanc because of France's annexation of Savoy in 1792.

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[13] See John Moore, *A View of Manners and Society in France, Swisserland and Germany* (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1779), p.224.

[14] As Hansen suggests, our understanding of Paradis' climb, in which she was purportedly at times dragged and carried by her guides, is derived from unreliable sources that were likely biased against her achievement. See Hansen (pp.139-42 and pp.172-173).

When Williams asks 'Why is no poet call'd to birth | In such a favour'd spot of earth?' she envisages a male poet: '[h]ow high *his* 'venturous Muse might rise' (my emphasis). This modest apologism for her writing follows Moore, who truncated his description of the Mer de Glace: 'The hoary majesty of Mount Blanc ******* I was in danger of rising into poetry, when recollecting the story of Icarus, I thought it best not to trust to my own Waxen wings'. Moore instead relies on ten lines from Pope's *Temple of Fame* (1715) as a substitute.[15] In respect of physical activity, Williams may be establishing female/male stereotypes in order to subvert them. Indeed, while Williams professes the need for a more worthy local-born and indeed male bard for the mountain, in writing the poem she nonetheless simultaneously becomes the poet inserting her vision into the cultural sphere. In doing so, she compares her status and skill to a male poet of Virgil's stature.

> I mean no giddy heights to climb,
>
> And vainly toil to be sublime;
>
> While every line with labour wrought,
>
> Is swell'd with tropes for want of thought:
>
> Nor shall I call the Muse to shed,
>
> Castalian drops upon my head;
>
> Or send me from Parnassian bowers
>
> A chaplet wove of fancy's flowers.
>
> At present all such aid I slight –
>
> My heart instructs me how to write. (p.4)

Williams professes her unworthiness for the poetic skill derived from Parnassus that might be seen in Virgil, and the passage has a somewhat pseudo-apologetic nature that could be read as a female excusing her intervention in a predominantly male sphere. However, the apologetic tone veils a subtle boldness. Williams' confession that her 'heart instructs' her how to write has an element of proto-Romantic treatise. The emotional response apostrophises a Rousseauian naturalness, even if her direction is somewhat weakened by the '[a]t present' that suggests her attitude might change.

Williams' remote treatment of Mont Blanc and Lake Geneva in the poem exploits the proximity of Lake Geneva and Mont Blanc to juxtapose their physical contrasts and explore perceptions of geography divided along masculine and feminine characteristics:

> There, dress'd in each sublimer grace
>
> Geneva's happy scene I trace;
>
> Her lake, from whose broad bosom thrown
>
> Rushes the loud impetuous Rhone,

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[15] Moore, p.225.

And bears his waves with mazy sweep

In rapid torrents to the deep—

Oh for a Muse less weak of wing,

High on yon Alpine steeps to spring,

And tell in verse what they disclose

As well as you have told in prose;

How wrapt in snows and icy showers,

Eternal winter, horrid lowers

Upon the mountain's awful brow,

While purple summer blooms below;

How icy structures rear their forms

Pale products of ten thousand storms;

Where the full sun-beam powerless falls

On crystal arches, columns, walls,

Yet paints the proud fantastic height

With all the various hues of light.

Why is no poet call'd to birth

In such a favour'd spot of earth?

How high his vent'rous Muse might rise,

And proudly scorn to ask supplies

From the Parnassian hill, the fire

Of verse, Mont Blanc might well inspire. (p.10-11)

The importance of Geneva, '[h]er lake' and the nearby Rhone as framing devices for Mont Blanc are clear. By manipulating the landscape and folding the sixty miles separating the lake and the mountain, Williams, like Keate with his 'mirrour', creates a topography that advances the notion of Mont Blanc as an *accessible exotic* – a space that is wild and has a feeling of remoteness, yet is easily reached by tourists prepared to venture there from the confines of civilised society. Williams furthers the contrast between the two places by establishing an opposition. Geneva and '[h]er lake' with its 'broad bosom' are feminized, while the 'impetuous Rhone' is masculine. She appears to be making a sexual analogy: the '[r]ushes', 'impetuous' and 'roar' of the Rhone suggest a direct, impatient, even violent phallocentric masculine sexuality which her female lake has an ability not only to bear but to diffuse with a multi-erogenous 'mazy sweep' that nonetheless pulsates in 'rapid torrents to the deep–'. The 'Oh' that follows 'deep' and its long dash moves the subject onto the need for a 'Muse less weak of wing'. Nevertheless, it reads as a sexual exclamation worthy of Molly Bloom during the masturbatory sequence at the end of Joyce's *Ulysses*. As such, a degree of female empowerment played out through geography is asserted.

Williams establishes in the Lake Geneva – Mont Blanc passage the lake as a 'happy' place 'dress'd in each sublime grace' and vibrant with a relaxed 'mazy' movement. Once Williams turns her attention to Mont Blanc, she presents us with an altogether different location that is 'wrapt in snows and icy showers', where '[e]ternal winter, horrid lowers | Upon the mountain's awful brow'. The contrast with the lake accentuates the 'awful' features of the mountain. The hard rigidity of the icy structures are resistant to the 'powerless' 'sun-beam' and in a sense their impenetrability contrasts the deep penetration of the lake. Yet despite this apparent austere strength, the mountain is also a place of beauty where the sun 'paints its proud fantastic height | With all the various hues of light'. The theatre of colour somewhat softens and vivifies the uninhabitable upper mountain and creates an image of a showy spectacle. In this respect the '[e]ternal winter' is projected onto the mountain so that it is not a place of stasis, but of production – whether of one of icy structures or beautiful surfaces.

Williams' suggestion of an imagined local-born poet who will 'scorn to ask supplies | From the 'Parnassian hill' (p.9) recalls her personal rejection of Parnassus in regard to her poesis at the beginning of the poem. The reappearance of Parnassus in the Mont Blanc passage builds upon notions within the poem of a break with the past insofar as Parnassus can be viewed, at least in a literary sense, as an ancient mountain and Mont Blanc as a new subject for artistic and poetic attention. To an extent this is a straightforward means of comprehending the new with familiar literary tropes. Yet the process is also indicative of changing British attitudes to Continental sites. As the poem details, Italy might still function as the main objective of a tour and a place to be venerated, but that crossing the Alps en route was no longer something that required a blindfold to be worn in order to hide one's eyes from the grotesque hideousness of its forms. Mont Blanc could be a vessel for new ideas. Williams transposes a city space onto the mountain. The 'icy structures' offer a city of ice with 'crystal arches, columns, walls'. This type of architectural analogy is evident in various writings, including in Shelley's 'Mont Blanc'. For Williams, despite the ever changing nature of the ice, these structures offer a fascinating permanence belonging to the mountain's '[e]ternal winter' that the crumbling ruins of Rome, that great *eternal city* referred to later in the poem as being 'no more in glory bright' (p.15), do not. There is recognition here of a mountain that is paradoxically changeable but nonetheless still symbolic of the everlasting. This contrasts the fragility of human structures – both physical and political.

Writers often followed Rousseau in first establishing an opposition between civilised and uncivilised space, before contradicting it. Following the Mont Blanc passage, Williams ponders the correlation between freedom in landscape and political freedom among the Swiss mountains that appears to incorporate Mont Blanc: 'How fancy loves thy

steeps to climb, | So wild, so solemn, so sublime | And o'er thy happy vales to roam, | Where freedom rears her humble home' (p.11). William's use of the word 'humble' for the alpine dwellings offers a sense of Rousseauian ideas about primitivism in which alpine living contrasts the complex social structures of modern city life and gives a sense of freedom outside of political systems – Wordsworth would deploy 'humble' in a similar way in *The Prelude*.[16] As with Rousseau's *Julie*, beyond Lake Geneva, Mont Blanc and its environs may at first offer an inhospitable mode of living, yet on closer inspection these assumptions could be challenged. Williams is making an analogy here between the freedom of roaming on mountains and a mode of social freedom beyond political structures. It is clear that in her vicarious journey, the power she imbues Lake Geneva with and the gendering of 'Freedom' as female she did not envisage such freedom to be a solely male domain.

William Parsons

William Parsons' 'Ode to the Lake of Geneva' and 'Vallombrosa' were written in the wake of a visit to Mont Blanc in 1784 and published in *A Poetical Tour in the Years 1784, 1785, and 1786* (1787).[17] Parsons' *Poetical Tour* is a somewhat misleading collection. Many of the poems were written years before his Continental tour and the collection hardly forms a cohesive or complementary assortment. Nonetheless, Parsons is keen to direct readers to the authenticity of his responses to place through footnotes and, in the case of the 'Ode', an epigraph that assures the reader: 'Written at the Chateau de Chillon, near Vevay, after a tour of the Glaciers of Chamouni and through the Lower Valais'.[18] As with Helen Maria Williams reminding readers in *An Espistle* of her writing location in Epping, there was a tendency with the loco-descriptive poetry of this period for writers to emphasise their geographical experiences and in particular their location at the point of writing. The trend continued into the nineteenth century. It is worth remembering that the title of Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' in manuscript form emphasised not so much the mountain or river that are predominantly the subjects of the poem, but the location of the poet.

The 'Ode' follows the journey set out in the epigraph and reads as a poetic travelogue, moving from an opening sestet that describes the 'Alpine heights' of Mont Blanc. In the third stanza the 'enchanting' and 'pure' (pp.23-27) Lake Geneva is reached while the thirteenth century gothic Chateau de Chillon at its eastern end proves a key site for attention.

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[16] See Chapter Three.

[17] Parsons was a member of the Della Cruscans, an Anglo-Florentine literary coterie ostensibly led by Robert Merry. The Della Cruscans flourished between 1785 and 1795, and for a period included Mary Robinson.

[18] William Parsons, *A Poetical Tour in the Years 1784, 1785 and 1786* (London: J. Robson and W. Clarke, 1787), p.23. [Further references in the text.]

Figure 8 Looking south past Château de Chillon on Lake Geneva to the Dents du Midi in the Savoyard Alps.[19]

There are a number of similarities between Parsons' and Williams' presentation of Mont Blanc. Both poets exploit the proximity of Mont Blanc and Lake Geneva. Parsons, like Williams, establishes an opposition between perceived masculine and feminine geographical spaces in the 'Ode', yet simultaneously marries the two spaces through regal metaphors. Mont Blanc is kingly ('Mont Blanc uprears his monarch brow'), while Lake Geneva is queenly ('Fair Queen of Lakes!'). In contrast to Williams, Parsons primarily uses the masculine mountain to accentuate the qualities of the lake, rather than the feminine lake to emphasise the masculine mountain. Parsons follows Williams in deploying the trope of a geographical space that is absent from the poetry of the classical era. His Lake Geneva is '[u]nhonor'd in Ausonian song' in a way that draws close to Williams' movement from Parnassus to Mont Blanc.

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[19] Photo by Weerakarn Satitniramai, (2012) <https://www.flickr.com/photos/weerakarn/7308636798>

Figure 9 Overview map of William Parsons' 'Ode to the Lake of Geneva'
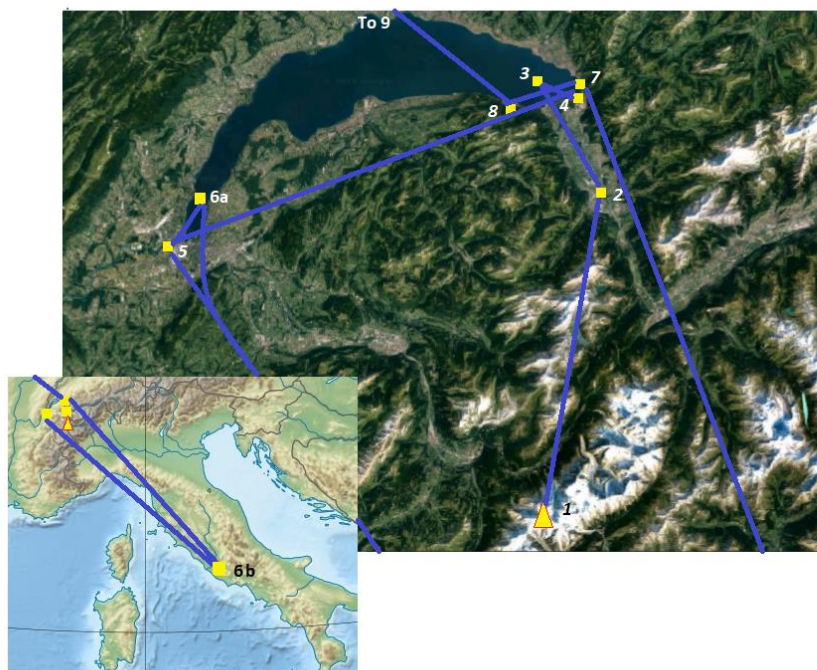
Figure 10 Detailed map of Parsons' 'Ode to the Lake of Geneva' with deviation to Lake Nemi inset

1. Mont Blanc
2. Valais ('sluggish Vallusians')
3. Lake Geneva
4. Rhone
5. Arve

6. (6a) Lake Geneva
6. (6b) Lake Nemi outside of Rome
6. (6c*)The location of 'Blandusia' (the Fountain of Bandusia) is referred to in the 'Ode' but it is not mapped above: despite being in Horace's *Odes*, its exact whereabouts has never been confirmed
7. Chateaux de Chillon on the shore of Lake Geneva
8. Chablais ('Chablais' cliffs')
9. Britain ('Albion')

The locations on the map show that while Parsons' poem is centred on a tight western corner of the Alps. There are, however, two deviations that, like in Williams' *An Epistle,* create a predominant northwest-southeast vector across the map. The vector mirrors the line of the predominant Grand Tour journeys of the eighteenth century. The effect of this is that while Mont Blanc was hitherto a marginal subject for poetry, its appearance could be framed within the familiar rather than the unfamiliar sites of Continental Grand Tours. If there were readers who knew little of Mont Blanc, the mid-point placement of the mountain on a vector between Britain and Rome nonetheless conveyed its centrality within western European space.

The nine yellow location markers reveal that not a single urban space is depicted. This contrasts Williams' *An Epistle,* which is dotted with urban – or implied urban – locations. Even Parsons' digression that takes us south-south-eastwards to the region of Rome settles not on the city, but on Lake Nemi. In the eighteenth century Lake Nemi had a significant separation from Rome's urban expanse. As a note from Parsons informs us, Lake Nemi's inclusion at all is primarily for its place in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* rather than necessarily as a visited site on Grand Tours. Nonetheless, Lake Nemi attracted British Grand Tourists, including Joseph Addison. The digression to Lake Nemi and Bandusia allows the distinctiveness of the Alps to be realised through contrast. As with Williams' *An Epistle,* the predominant effect of the deviation to Italy in the poem is a movement from the present to the past: a movement from a rustic contemporary culture to the ruins of an ancient civilised one.

Mont Blanc is defined both by its physical terrain and through the contemporary social character of its environs. The opening sestet of the 'Ode' describes Mont Blanc and provides a lofty starting place for the poem's journey, but it also presents us with a chamois hunter.

From Alpine heights where clad in snow

Mont Blanc uprears his monarch brow,

Where chamois on the ridgy rock,

The hunter's daring efforts mock,

*To grasp each bare dry crag who strains,

And opes in fell despair his veins. (p.23)

The asterisk of line five directs readers to the following footnote:

> It is a fact mentioned by many travellers, and verified by the Author's own enquiries, that the Chamois hunters in the hot season when sliding dust makes the points of the rocks unsafe to hold by, are sometimes obliged, after all other moisture fails, to wound themselves and moisten them with blood.

The 'Author's own enquiries' set out in the footnote emphasises authenticity and epistemological accuracy. Yet it seems highly unlikely that any chamois hunter ever did this. I have climbed all over the world and am yet to find a rock-type, dusty or otherwise, where sweaty or wet hands, let alone hands (or veins!) that are lacerated and bleeding, would be deemed by any climber as advantageous. It is likely Parsons has been told of such acts by locals who were keen to accentuate the danger of the pursuit. The desired effect of such an association is that the mountain environment appears more treacherous. Such tales of danger by locals prepared the ground for the economic exploitation of tourists. If the terrain was understood to be extremely dangerous then the services of experienced guides were worth paying extra for.

The chamois hunter was a figure that fascinated many British and continental writers throughout the eighteenth century, including Coleridge who pondered that he might have been one in a former life and Byron who would later immortalise the figure in *Manfred*.[20] The chamois hunter in the passage is framed as belonging to an alien subculture. Accentuated by the extreme nature of his vein-opening procedure, he is 'othered'. Whether Parsons fully trusted the vein opening or merely deployed it to add colour and gothic intrigue to his poem is impossible to say. Certainly, other British visitors were distrustful of such local information. William Windham wrote in 1744 of how his party mocked his guides' belief that witches frequented the glaciers of Mont Blanc. Windham likewise had little respect for 'these people' – as he disparagingly described the locals.[21]

Parsons transitions from the chamois hunter to the Valais in the second verse:

From where in indolence supine

The sluggish Valaisians recline,

Where, as I trod the marshy plain,

I pitying saw the listless swain,

Bent by the Goitre's tumid load,

Scare lift his hand to point the road.

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[20] See Chapters Two and Five.
[21] Windham, p.5.

The contrast between the chamois hunter and the swain could hardly be more pronounced. While the former is 'daring', the latter is 'listless'. If the chamois hunter connotes the vigour and vitality of those who work at a higher altitude and venture into the upper mountains, then the 'indolence' of the 'sluggish Valaisians' represented by the swain paints a very different picture of life in the Alpine valleys. William Coxe had described the inhabitants of the Valais in this way in *Sketches*.[22] For the speaker, the swain cuts a somewhat monstrous figure of revulsion. He is not only weak and 'listless', but '[b]ent by the Goitre's tumid load'. It is implied that the environment is the cause of this goitre.[23]

The recognition of physical defects reflects how British writers were not altogether rose-tinted about Switzerland. The Alps might on one page be presented as a place of health and vitality, only on the next to be a place of degeneracy, disease and disfigurement. These shifts often arose as writers moved their attention from one valley or location to another. It would be difficult to argue that these divides were drawn along political borders. The Valais was, and is, part of Switzerland. Switzerland was generally regarded favourably by British writers keen to view its democratic governance as analogous with a heralded British model. Parsons contrasts the seemingly unhealthy 'marshy plain' of the Valais, with the 'pure' waters of Lake Geneva. The effect is that despite the contrast between the chamois hunter and the swain, both figures contribute to a divide between the interior Alps that are an unfamiliar even savage place, and the more familiar civilised cultures to be found outside of it or on the periphery. In this respect, Lake Geneva functions as a frontier; a final hub of civilisation on the edge of more primitive lands; to leave the environs of Lake Geneva for an excursion into the mountains was still to replicate Windham and Pococke and take on the role of an explorer.

The juxtaposition of Lake Geneva and Mont Blanc is accentuated by the aforementioned gendering of the mountain as male and lake as female. Parsons appears to frame the lake as an idealised female. In contrast to the violence of the 'tumbling Glaciers roar' of the apparently masculine mountains, the lake is virginal with its 'pure wave', 'chaster bed', 'mild expanse of sapphire hue' and 'gentle tide' (p.25). Parsons follows Williams here in making a gendered and seemingly sexual analogy in relation to the lake, the rivers and the mountain. The Rhone originates in the mountains and attempts to sully the lake's virginal waters with 'his turbid stream' and 'polluting stains' (p.24). However, such is the power of the feminine lake that she can purify the masculine Rhone. For Parsons 'corrupt' men are often corrupted once more by exposure to their vices. The Rhone's purity

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[22] See Coxe, 1779, pp.242-245.
[23] A lack of iodine in the diet of inhabitants was eventually discovered to be the most common cause of goitre in the Alps.

is short lived as soon after discharging from the lake it meets the heavily silted brown-grey Arve emanating from the Mont Blanc massif.

The topography of 'Ode' is ordered within a neat circuit from Lake to mountain and back. This connectivity between Mont Blanc and other topographical features such as Lake Geneva, the Jura and the Valais did not detract from the otherness of Mont Blanc. Rather, in the case of the juxtaposition of vertiginous mountain and horizontal lake in the 'Ode', not only is the sense of Mont Blanc's environment as an extreme one heightened, at Lake Geneva, Parsons reimagines with 'fancy' that 'fondly thinks it true' (p.26) the fatal leap of the eponymous heroine in *Julie* and directs readers to the novel with a footnote. For Parsons, Lake Geneva is a place of solace, its 'soothing melody' contrasting the 'scenes of dread' (p.25) offered by Mont Blanc. Yet the lake's ability to restore spiritual order to the poet allows it to become a space of political contemplation as it is in *Julie*. Parsons registers the opposition of Lake Geneva's Savoyard and Swiss shores: 'Of *Slavery* there, and *Freedom* here' (p.26). The organisation of space and the relationship with *Julie* emphasised Mont Blanc's central position within European geography and culture.

Parsons presents Mont Blanc in the poem as part of Savoy and therefore belonging to a region afflicted with political subjugation, yet, following Rousseau, as simultaneously separate, rising above its surroundings to represent the promise of political and individual liberty in nature. It is to this sense of individual liberty that Parsons' chamois hunter points, despite the political delineation of alpine borders. This mode of reading mountains as both within state and political borders, yet paradoxically as spaces that could be represented as something beyond man's political delineation of the earth was a significant principle adopted by many British Mont Blanc poets. As we shall see in the following chapter, Coleridge looked upon mountains in this way, closely identifying with the idea of the chamois hunter as a figure somehow able to live freely because of his surrounding landscape, regardless of its political and social structures. In essence then, the reading of such landscapes could form part of a reflexive process that demanded reader to appraise their relative freedom. Indeed, Parsons' 'Ode' ends with an address to Freedom in which he looks at Continental Europe and considers how the liberty enjoyed by the 'sons' of 'Albion' and the Swiss should be a 'common right'.

In 'Vallombrosa' (1787) Parsons presents Mont Blanc and the Alps as part of an opposition between nature and the civilised social sphere that made up the Italian part of traditional Grand Tours. The poem's conclusion rejects the 'chains', 'Ambition' and 'Avarice' associated with contemporary society and places a solitary figure perched on a mountain top who finds personal enlightenment through mountains: 'The Muse on my lone path shall shine, | And Contemplation's wealth be mine!' (p.101).

Figure 11 'Vallombrosa', William Parsons

1. 'Wild Helvetia's Steeps' – the footnote makes it apparent this means Mont Blanc
2. Staubbach Falls
3. Lake Geneva – the footnote makes it clear that Lake Geneva is the 'azure lake'
4. Mont Blanc
5. 'Tuscan summer's heat' - Tuscany
6. Apennine
7. Florence
8. a, Vallombrosa
   8. b, [Secchietia fn]
   8. c, [Florence fn]
   9. Vicano Falls
   10. Ferrara
   11. Secchietia
   11. a,[England fn]
   11. b, [Paris fn]
   11. c, [Genoa fn]
   11. d, [Brussels fn]
   12. Britain
   13. Secchietia
   14. 'Helicon's sweet source' (River Helicon has its source on Mount Olympus)
   15. Arno
   16. Apennines
   16. a, [Alps fn – used in a comparison with the Apennines]
   17. Tyrrhenian Sea
   18. Etruria (in this instance Tuscany – clarified in footnote)
   19. Lake Trasimeno
   20. Gaul

21. Rome
22. Pisa
23. Florence
24. Secchietia

The even division of urban and non-urban locations on the map complements the poem's central discussion about the lack of fulfilment in city life compared to that which can be found in nature. The map again emphasises a northwest – southeast axis running between Britain and Italy. The locations reveal the central position of its title subject. Vallombrosa is referred to in *Paradise Lost* and consequently proved a popular literary pilgrimage for British tourists, including Wordsworth, Byron and Mary Shelley. It is a Benedictine monastery situated in an elevated position on a mountain in the Apennines. On the map above it has been grouped together with the nearby Mount Seicchetia, represented by a mountain symbol. Vallombrosa functions as a hub for movements within the poem, many of which prove to be spokes running outwards from it that do not connect to other locations before returning. As with Williams' *An Epistle,* there is a significant deviation to Greece by an allusion to a location known solely through classical literature: the source of the Helicon River. Pausanias referred to Helicon as on Mount Olympus and flowing through the city of Dium.[24] The movement to Olympus is prompted by the speaker drinking from a spring on top of Mount Seicchietia. Significantly, the water revitalises the poet, and prompts him to contrast the beauty of the mountain top with the 'circling scenes of human woe'. It is not altogether clear what 'scenes' in particular Parsons' is referring to here, but an idea is communicated that mountains and their water sources, whether in ancient Greece or contemporary Central and Southern Europe, are fundamentally places where a poet can elevate their mood and gain a heightened perception on the world.

In 'Vallombrosa' Lake Geneva is once more closely linked to Mont Blanc. The lake forms part of a passage in which the different colours of the wild landscapes of the Alps are emphasised. Yet in many ways the Alps passage, as the neat triangle on the above map displays, functions as a separate prologue to the rest of the poem – it is only later through a footnote comparing the geological formation of the Apennines and the Alps that we return to the Alps. The three alpine locations in the poem are non-urban. In travelogues, writers such as Coxe and Moore felt it necessary to give extensive attention to urban locations such as Geneva and Bern that are within or in the shadow of the Alps. When Parsons turns his attention to human habitation, it is only to the Chateau de Chillon and Vallombrosa. These buildings hardly interrupt the wildness of the mountains and reveal an inclination towards the picturesque that fosters a sense of mountainous areas as celebrated isolations where the 'busy hum' of city life can be escaped. This was a highly selective way in which to present

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[24] See Pausânias, *Pausanias Description of Greece*, IV, Trans. by W. H. S. Jones and Henry Ormerod (London: Heinemann, 1918), p.303.

the Alps, which has historically had relatively high population levels despite its climate and the difficulty of living there. Parsons presents a non-urban Alps as an escape from more familiar European culture and social structures, often in the face of contradictory realities. Ignoring how populated or busy the Alps could be was almost certainly a result of the power of labelling theory. Writers came to the Alps not only anticipating the sublime, but eager to satisfy a socially conditioned set of behaviours that necessitated they respond accordingly to pre-labelled celebrated wildernesses. Even today, labelling theory exerts an influence and it is common to see a rose-tinted inclination for visitors to present mountains as zones of escape from modern urban living in a way that can wholly overlook reality. Anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves in Chamonix on a summer weekend or at the height of the ski season will not find a sleepy idyllic village nestled between grandiose peaks, but rather discover an urban expanse overrun with noise, pollution and a stampede of tourists. Indeed, there is still a degree of collective social shock when perceptions of mountain idylls are irrefutably exploded:

Figure 12 A 2019 photo of queues at the Hillary step on Everest taken by a Nepalese Sherpa. The photo caused widespread surprise around the globe, disrupting socially conditioned idealisations of wild mountainscapes.[25]

In 'Vallombrosa' Mont Blanc is framed as a superior topographical feature capable of superseding its surroundings. Its height enables it to resist 'Night's shadowy veil', whether by reflecting the sunset long after everywhere else is dark or through the ethereal brilliance of its snow-covered summit:

> While afar MONT BLANC displays
> On his top the lingering rays
> And awhile th' eternal snows

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[25] Photo by Nirmal Purja, 2019.

> Counterfeit the blushing rose
>
> Soon the lovely tints decay
>
> By degrees that fade away,
>
> Till the fainter gleams are past,
>
> And palest white remains at last. (p.86)

This image of the dark red sunset lingering on the summits was a cliché that recurs countless times across various writings about the Savoyard Alps. It can be found in Rousseau's *Julie* and Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches.* A footnote on this phenomenon draws Parsons into a mistake:

> The rosy hue on the summit of Mont-Blanc, seen on a fine evening from the neighbourhood of Geneva, must draw the attention of the most careless observer. It is on this account sometimes call'd Monte Rosa by the Italians. (pp.84-85n)

Here the force exerted by representational precedent is easily discerned. The didactic qualities of poems about the Alps were part of the jigsaw of material that shaped the cultural understanding of Mont Blanc in Britain. Italians did not know Mont Blanc (or Monte Bianco) by Monte Rosa. Monte Rosa is the highest mountain in Switzerland and the second highest massif in the Alps. It is on the present day Swiss-Italian border that in 1787 was the Swiss-Piedmont border. Ironically, the toponym 'Monte Rosa' appears itself to have arisen from confusion with its original name, Mont Rouése: 'rouése' is an archaic local patois word meaning 'glacier'.[26] Fundamentally, the cliché meant that those viewing Mont Blanc from a distance could appreciate something of its distinctiveness and beauty, without necessarily travelling into its immediate shadow.

As Helen Maria Williams had done in *An Epistle,* Parsons transposes cityscapes onto natural phenomena in the poem:

> [W]hen the morning light
>
> Gilds the Glacier's lofty height,
>
> Where the broken fragments lie,
>
> Fancy bade my wandering eye
>
> In the icy mass admire
>
> Many an arc, and many a spire,
>
> Like the labor'd works of stone,
>
> By the hand of Time o'erthrown. (p.85)

In case the analogy between the icy fragments and the ruined city be missed, Parsons reiterates the comparison in a footnote: 'These objects have often charm'd the author in Switzerland – The broken parts of the Glaciers exhibit a number of surprizing and irregular

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[26] See <http://www.lovevda.it/it/scoprire/grandi-montagne/monte-rosa> [Accessed April 2018].

forms, which are in many places no imperfect representations of ruin'd Architecture' (p.85n). Parsons, like many of his contemporaries, becomes poet-detective, piecing together clues to the mysteries of the landscape. Formed partly from geological findings, his solutions construct a version of the Alps that allows readers movements between contrasting spatial and temporal plains. The poem's geological city of rock and ice formed from 'points of granite', 'horizontal strata' and 'petrifactions' (p.95n) is – like the ruined ancient city in the wilderness – exotic and distanced from the social sphere. If the poem points towards the picturesque with the use of 'irregular', it more keenly realises a convergence between rational Christianity and geology: the 'aquatic' post-deluge Apennines are compared to the 'aboriginal' Alps that had remained above the deluge. This melding of the biblical and the geological produces evocative imagery about otherwise hidden processes.

After 36 lines of 'Vallombrosa' dedicated to the Alps – Mont Blanc is the only named mountain – the poet relocates to Tuscany. Here he reflects experiences typical of Grand Tours, but then rejects Italian art and sculpture in favour of a return to mountains and nature:

> Sated now with works of Art,
>
> All their wonted joys depart;
>
> Nature's wide exhaustive store
>
> Now shall charm her votary more. (p.86)

When the poet leaves Vallombrosa he heads deeper into the wilderness by choosing to climb Secchieta, '[t]he glory of the Apennines' (p.91). From a god-like vantage point offered by the summit he concludes that art ought to serve nature (as Parsons believes it does in Britain) and not the other way around. Quite what Parsons means by this is hard to say, but the sense that nature should be at the forefront of thinking does suggest a degree of early environmentalism. As with the 'Ode', Parsons' escape into wilderness enables a contemplation of his and man's relation to the world. The narrative journey of 'Vallombrosa' from Alpine wilderness to Grand Tour Florence and back to wilderness emphasises that a perspective on modern life is best achieved by moving between urban and wild locations. In many ways, for British tourists it is easy to see the Alps not only as mid-way on the NW-SE vector between London and Rome, but also as a forming a well-timed wild escape or interlude from Grand Tours that added variety to a tour. By concluding his poem on the summit of Secchietia, Parsons promotes the notion that it is the mountains themselves that should be viewed as the prime destinations, rather than the well-trodden and somewhat prosaic cities.

Thomas Whalley

In the summer of 1784 Thomas Whalley spent two months in the vicinity of Geneva and Mont Blanc, touring Lake Geneva and visiting Lausanne, the Chateau de Prangeans, and Pays de Vaud. He described Lake Geneva as 'majestic', being particularly impressed by the 'little hills above [Lausanne] covered with wood and vineyards; the green lake stretched out in a noble mirror before it; the picturesque villages on either hand […and] the sublime pile of the Alps to close the scene'.[27] From his vantage on the lake, Whalley was attracted to the glaciers of the inner Alps. In Geneva, he befriended two Danes who would accompany him to Mont Blanc on '[o]ne of the most charming excursions [he] ever took'.[28] The excursion had a lasting impression. On his return home from the Continent in 1787, he commenced the construction of a new estate, Mendip Lodge. The lodge seems to have been inspired by Mont Blanc. Whalley imagined it to be on a 'mountain's summit', while Anna Seward referred to it as an 'alpine habitation' and Hannah More nicknamed it 'Mont Blanc' on account of its whitewashed frontage and elevated position on a Mendip Hill.[29] Whalley's poem *Mont Blanc* was published the following year. Its 810 lines provide a sustained mix of variegated religiosity as the mountain's power is celebrated.

Mont Blanc echoes Williams' idea of emotions rather than poetic convention guiding the pen, and the speaker responds melodramatically: 'Reach then, reach my sounding lyre; | My panting soul is all on fire […] | O! for a strain so potent to impart | The great sensations struggling in my heart! (p.7). The poem likewise follows Williams and Parsons' inclination to view Mont Blanc through an architectural framework. For Whalley this has been formed by God. The mountain is a 'mighty bulwark' with 'tow'rs', 'unnumber'd spires' and 'heav'nly masonry' that can 'far surpass what human skill can dare' (pp.27-28). Despite similarities, where Parsons and Williams' poems are regular, *Mont Blanc* is irregular. There is a genuine sense of disjointedness to its structure that results in a distinct flitting between scenes. It was probably more for this reason that the poem drew, as Chris Stephens has noted, 'savage criticism' in the *Gentlemen's Magazine*, more than the criticism was, as Anna Seward considered it, a consequence of personal enmity on behalf of Samuel Pratt.[30]

While Lake Geneva does not form the framing device in *Mont Blanc*, Whalley nonetheless asserts the sense of division between Switzerland and Savoy that the Lake

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[27] Thomas Sedgwick Whalley, *Journals and Correspondence of Thomas Sedgwick Whalley DD,* 1 (London: Bentley, 1863), p.409.
[28] Whalley, 1863, 1, p.410.
[29] Chris Stephens, *The Reverend Dr Thomas Sedgwick Whalley and the Queen of Bath: A True Story of Georgian England at the Time of Jane Austen* (Cardiff: Candy Jar, 2014), p.119. See also Anna Seward, *Letters of Anna Seward Written Between the Years 1784-1807,* 3 (Edinburgh: George Ramsay, 1811), pp.107 and 202.
[30] Stephens, pp.362-363

tended to prompt. Mont Blanc and its 'Viceregent' the Shreckhorn, form political frontiers between the 'liberal' lands of Switzerland '[w]here Liberty with Science reigns' (pp.50-51) and elsewhere. This is reflective of the Rousseauian idea of the Savoyard Alps as a space where nature was free, but the society of the country in which they belonged was not. Although the Shreckhorn prompts Whalley to contemplate the physical barrier of the Alps as a political one that can protect Switzerland's liberty, he does not appear to consider the reverse: that those mountains may themselves prohibit the spread of democracy southwards or westwards to Savoy.

Figure 13 Geo-semantic map of Thomas Whalley's *Mont Blanc*

1. Mont Blanc fn
2. Peruvian Mountains (Andes) fn
3. Mont Blanc
4. Mount Olympus*
5. Mount Ida*
6. Mount Etna
7. Mont Blanc
8. Alps
9. Mount Sinai*
10. Alps
11. Mont Blanc
12. Israel
13. Egypt
14. Alps

15. Mont Blanc including:
Dru, Mont Blanc
Aiguille de Chamoz, Mont Blanc
Neede of the South (Aiguille de Midi) Mont Blanc
Grand Jorasse, Mont Blanc
Giant's Tow'r (Dent du Geant), Mont Blanc
16. Chamouny
17. Glaciers of Montenvert (Mer de Glace) and Bossons, Mont Blanc
18. Mont Blanc
19. Chamony
20. Alps of Savoy
21. Rome
22. Glaciers [Mont Blanc]
23. Mont Blanc
24. Italy
25. Afric[a]
26. Great Britain
27. Shreckhorn
28. Alps as source of four rivers: Tessin; Rhone; Rhine and Po
29. Shreckhorn
30. Mont Blanc

* Exact location subject of debate. Consensus location used.

As the map suggests, despite his prolonged tour of the lake, Whalley does not refer to it in the poem or use it as a framing device, choosing instead to focus more closely on the inner Alps. With the exception of one allusion to Great Britain, the map reveals that Whalley makes no reference to northern or eastern Europe. Instead, the vectors emanating from Mont Blanc on the map primarily emphasise two separate allusion-processes in the poem that position Mont Blanc in relation to biblical and classical traditions. The first set is to the immediate south and west with the connection of Olympus, Ida and Etna. This reflects the poem's opening in which Whalley, like Williams and Parsons had done before him, invokes the idea that the topography of the Alps had been overlooked by earlier poetry (Homer and Pindar are referred to later in the poem):

> Yet should Olympus' praise be sung
>
> In potent verse? Shall Ida's name
>
> Dazzle with immortal fame?
>
> […]
>
> And greatest thou [Mont Blanc] the works of God among
>
> Shall not thy wonders wake one lyre[?] (pp.5-6)

The movements on the map between the Alps, Israel and Egypt, are a means of moving to sites or ideas important to biblical narratives, such as the Exodus and Moses' communion with God. Engagement with biblical ideas reaches a climax towards the end of the poem (pp.52-56) when Whalley merges apocalyptic imagery with geological theories in order to envisage Mont Blanc as a mountain that witnessed, in the following order, the creation of Earth and Man; the fall of Adam; the death of Jesus ('When God incarnate died to free | Mankind from endless misery', p.54); and the Deluge. Indeed, Whalley concludes *Mont*

Blanc with two notes. The first relates to the scientific findings of 'Dr Saussure, and others of the best Naturalists' that allow the biblical deluge story to be reinterpreted. The second note refers to:

> [T]he 'admirable Philosopher and exemplary Christian, Mons. Bonnet […] who supposes this globe has undergone various changes, before its actual state of existence' and that 'the term Creation, as applied in the book of GENESIS, should be understood in a partial and confined sense […] issuing from the destruction and chaos of […the globe's] pre-existing state, [rather] than from its being then first called into existence.[31]

As such notes suggest, in the poem Whalley creates a confusing maelstrom of ideas that build upon the variegated nature of the poem as a whole. He conflates contradictory neptunist and vulcanist theories with biblical narratives in order to emphasise the affinity between the power of Mont Blanc and the power of God and says of the mountain: 'How deep thy awful thunders roll | From land to land, pole to pole,' (p.54). This reconfiguring of geographical space to offer a religious sublime is often achieved through direct addresses in the form of rhetorical questions to the mountain, to the reader and/or to imagined shared observers of the scenes witnessed.

> At times these addresses have a distinctly Old Testament and/or Miltonic tone:
>
> Ah! Whence the change; great ruler! why
>
> That gloomy front, that threat'ning eye?
>
> What our offence? --- Be still, be still,
>
> Nor question his sovereign will.
>
> […]
>
> Stand, stand aloof! Do ye not dread
>
> The Storms that gather round his head? (p.11)

Here the 'great ruler' Mont Blanc is analogous to God, while Whalley adopts the Noachic position asking his fellow man to heed warnings – an apocalypse motif is prevalent throughout the poem. The violent changes in weather and scene that Whalley witnesses are reflected by his own dramatic emotional shifts from fear to delight, gloom to glory. Mount Sinai, the only other mountain similarly valorised in the poem, appears in Part VIII and enables a parallel to be drawn between a storm the speaker is witnessing and the events surrounding the communion between Moses and God in Exodus. Here the actual witnessed phenomenon of Mont Blanc gives depth to the imagined mountain space represented in the Bible: this is Mont Blanc colouring biblical mountains and not the other way around.

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[31] Whalley, p.57n.

There is a sense in *Mont Blanc* of global interconnectedness that is geological as well as spiritual. It appears rooted in both a deistic view of God as inherent in all nature and a conceptualisation of Mont Blanc as a world source of geological creation.[32] Whalley presents the natural processes that have created 'sparkling gems, and precious ores' and envisages 'mazy ducts, unknown to human art' that have spread forth from Mont Blanc by means of hydrological processes a cornucopia of natural riches in the form of gems and the glacial meltwater which is 'Destin'd to fertilize the earth!' (p.43). However, the apocalyptic conclusion to *Mont Blanc* and its visionary imagining of deep time is distinctive for its rejection of anthropocentrism:

> And when, once more, earth's changing sphere
>
> In conflagration shall appear,
>
> And Nature and her works expire
>
> In one tremendous flood of fire,
>
> Thou [Mont Blanc], haply, shalt survive the general doom,
>
> Rise like the Phoenix from thy flaming tomb,
>
> And be the wonder of a world to come! (p.56)

If to read the poem is to embrace a tour of the mountain in the first instance, it is also to comprehend a much broader spatial, temporal and philosophical plain. In this respect, like Shelley in his later 'Mont Blanc', Whalley invokes the mountain's darker forces to pose questions that are not easily resolved or indeed expected. Whalley questions the very notion of human dominance over nature as espoused in Genesis 1.26.[33] The idea that Mont Blanc is God's 'delegate on Earth' (p.38) and is somehow greater than man and will outlast him displays a distinctly modern attitude to the planet, if not a partially nihilistic attitude to man. In the context of *Mont Blanc,* such apocalyptic ideas are geological as well as biblical. Indeed, the poem's summation is not too far removed from 'the anti-humanism and deep ecology' considered by Eric Wilson: 'the removal from the planet of the most destructive species ever to exist […] is the truest, and most tragic ecology, an end of wasteful death in the name of new life'.[34]

Richard Cooksey

Richard Cooksey's little-known *Miscellaneous Poems* was published in 1796. The collection contains two poems that refer to Mont Blanc: 'On the Prospect seen from the Acacia Grove' and 'Lines Written in the Valley of Chamouni, August 1790'. *Miscellaneous Poems* offers a window into Cooksey's evolving attitude to mountains. The second poem in his collection of

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[32] Whalley writes that with '[m]ountains being considered as the source of the most precious mines, [… he] thought it a fair poetical licence to suppose Mont Blanc their common centre' (p.38).
[33] *King James Bible*, Genesis 1:26 (London: Edwin Dalton, c.1916).
[34] Wilson, pp.XI and 220.

poetry is 'Ode II' written in 1779 and addressed to his friend Mr. Dunster. In 'Ode II', Cooksey offers the cliché of wishing to derive poetic inspiration from Mount Parnassus. Such ideas of poetic skill are reiterated in a reply that is included in the collection: Dunster refers to Cooksey as someone who can roam free | On Pindus and Parnassus | And frolic with the Nine [classical Muses]'.[35] By 1782, however, Cooksey appears to have adapted his approach. In 'A Song on Malvern Wells' he makes it clear he has been inspired by William Cowper's landscape poetry and instead of celebrating the mountains familiar from classical poetry, they were now a means by which he could reflect the power of localised geography: 'THO' old poets would so often sing | Of Parnassus' Mount and fair Helicon's spring | In praise of such objects they shall not surpass us; | Be this Well *Aganippe* and this Malvern *Parnassus.*'[36] Such turning inland to reflect upon the properties of lesser-known domestic hills and mountains was increasingly common in British poetry as the eighteenth century advanced.

When read together, Cooksey's two Mont Blanc poems suggest a significant shift in the poet's attitude to the mountain. Mont Blanc is viewed favourably when it is seen from an acacia grove at the relative distance of Lausanne on Lake Geneva. Yet after a visit to the mountain, there is a condemnation not of its beauty or power, but rather of British visitors who celebrate the mountain and its environs instead of turning their attentions towards England.[37] This shift in attitude anticipates shifts in the responses of Wordsworth, Shelley and particularly Lord Byron to Mont Blanc. It is not so much that there is a transition from celebration to condemnation of the mountain, rather than unease with how the mountain was regarded, represented and visited.

Like Parsons and Williams, Lake Geneva is a frontier framing the mountain before an excursion. In 'On the Prospect seen from the Acacia Grove' the speaker, situated in an acacia grove in Lausanne, scans across the 'azure lake' of Geneva and views the rocks above Meillerie, the brow of the hill above Clarens with its Chateau, the woods at Evian, the Ripaille Convent and also a distant Mont Blanc:

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[35] Mr Dunster in Cooksey, p.7.
[36] 'A Song on Malvern Wells', Cooksey, p.13.
[37] Both poems are dated August 1790. However, I see no reason to consider the order in which they appear anything other than being chronological, as is the case with the rest of the collection.
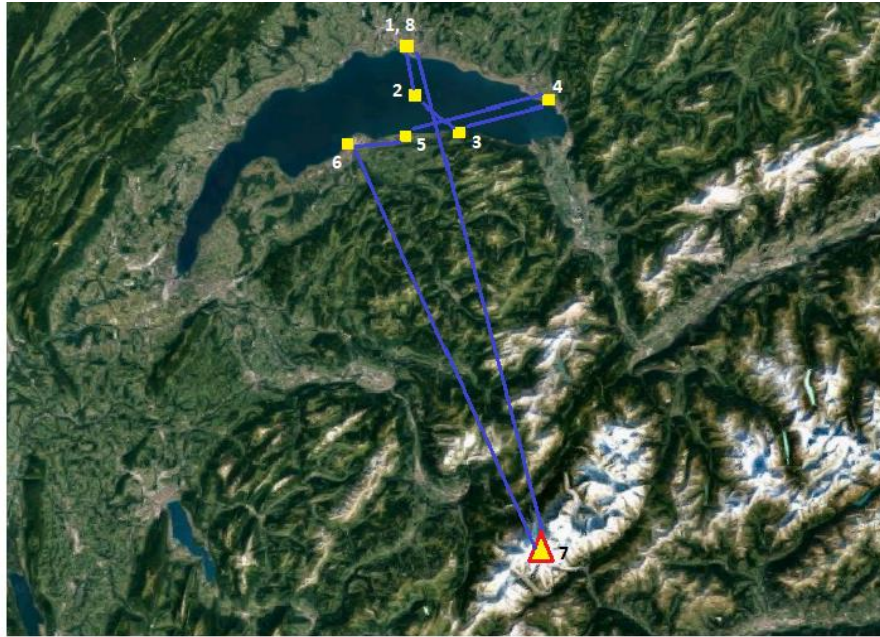
1. Acacia Grove, Lausanne
2. Lake Geneva
3. Rocks above Meilliere
4. Chatelard Castle near Clarens
5. Blaunay Wood near Evian
6. Ripaille Convent
7. Mont Blanc
8. Acacia Grove, Lausanne

The map emphasises the importance of the lake and its surrounding locations to the framing of Mont Blanc. Six locations are non-urban environments. Although the first and last location is in or around Lausanne, the vantage point of the acacia grove makes it also feel non-urban. The movements on the map complement a picturesque view of the lake insofar as, joined together, the locations prove suitable ingredients for a picturesque oil painting; woods, rocks, a lake in the foreground, isolated castles and, in the far distance above all, the snow-capped high mountain of Mont Blanc. The movement to Mont Blanc and back to the lake gives a sense that this was a landscape in communication with a series of elevations; with neither the Chamonix Valley nor its mountain readily isolated.

In the prospect before him, the speaker imagines the spirits – or shades – of Julie and St Preux from Rousseau's *Julie* moving through the landscape and haunting the environs of the lake. It prompts him to consider love and youth as something tragically short-lived. As with George Keate's *The Alps* with its tale of Matilda and Rodolpho, the Alps function as a backdrop of geographical permanence against which the transience of youthful love can be cast:

To Beauty, e'en the Alps will prove

The fatal truth, "It lasts not long."

View hence the lights at eve which move

And cast their blushes on Mont Blanc.

No Tyrian dyes, not e'en the rose†

With tints so rich, have ever shone

As these which, on eternal snows,

Bloom for a moment, and are gone.'[38]

The 'lights at eve' that 'cast their blushes' bring to mind the courting youths and maids at Evian that have been depicted two stanzas earlier. Mont Blanc with its 'eternal snows' functions as a mirror analogous with the face of youth that might reflect the blushes of maids as they 'dance' in the 'lute-resounding grove' on the opposite shore. Wordsworth describes a similar pastoral courtship scene to this at Lake Como before he turns attention to the Alps in *Descriptive Sketches*.[39] The contrast between the pleasant environment of the lake where youths might procreate and the harsh beauty of the icy mountain fosters a sense of a civilised social sphere juxtaposed with a forbidding interior Alps. The image of Mont Blanc catching the sun's lingering rays had become a cliché by the late 1780s. Cooksey nonetheless expands on the image with a footnote. In doing so, he makes the same mistake that Parsons had done in 'Ode to the Lake of Geneva': 'From rose-like tints, Mont Blanc is called by the Italians Monte Rosa'.[40] Despite having toured the region in 1790, Cooksey has probably used William Parsons' 'Ode' as his source. Certainly Cooksey's 'azure lake' is a phrase also used by Parsons to describe Lake Geneva, while the use of 'blushes' follows Parsons who deploys 'blushing rose'. Likewise, the specific reference to the colour of the sunset reflected on the summit of Mont Blanc being beyond the palate of 'Tyrian dyes' also points to Parsons who uses the idea in 'Vallombrosa'.[41] If Cooksey is borrowing from Parsons, it emphasises a distinct narrowness in the representation of Mont Blanc in British poetry and the power of representational precedent to govern writers' perceptions of geography. Certainly, many writers across various genres who visited Mont Blanc or could see it from Lake Geneva appear to have been inclined to reiterate other people's accounts to such an extent that the importance of the material geography and their actual experiences of it were greatly diminished.

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[38] Cooksey, p.45.

[39] See Chapter Three.

[40] Full title 'Inscribed to Miss de Cerjat, of Lausanne, On the Prospect seen from the Acacia Grove, in the Garden of Mr. de Cerjat' in Richard Cooksey, *Miscellaneous Poems* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1796), p.45n.

[41] See Parsons, p.96.

The cultural conservative didacticism of Cooksey's 'Lines Written in the Valley of Chamouni' provides a very different attitude to the Alps from the Rousseau-tinted view offered by the scenes at the lake in 'On the Prospect':

> YE British youths who cull, like bees,
>
> The sweets of hill and dale,
>
> And here your wand'ring fancy please,
>
> In Chamouni's fam'd vale,
>
>
> Let not its charms too long detain,
>
> Your steps, nor farther roam;
>
> The search of happiness is vain,
>
> So distant from your home.
>
>
> Be England's worth, which each pole knows,
>
> The subject of your song:
>
> In justice pure as Alpine snows,
>
> And hardy as Mont Blanc.[42]

Cooksey visited Mont Blanc in August 1790. Wordsworth and Jones reached the Chamonix Valley on the 6 September. Youthful tourists of Wordsworth and Jones' ilk swarming 'like bees' in the Vale of Chamonix are clearly who Cooksey has in mind and it is not impossible that their paths crossed. It is clear from the word 'cull' that the visits to Chamonix made by such youths are not in Cooksey's view an altogether good thing. Although a Whig, Cooksey was in a no way a radical and this poem appears to have been rooted in a reaction against celebratory attitudes – like those of Wordsworth at that time – to the French Revolution and the threat posed by the spread of its ideals to Britain. According to Ed Pope, while Cooksey was in Lucerne during his 1790 excursion he applied to join a Worcestershire militia.[43] This suggests that during his time on the Continent something had made him alert to the threat posed by the French Revolution and this in turn may have changed his attitude to the landscapes he was witnessing. The advice to the youths in the poem that 'Chamouni's fam'd vale' should not 'too long detain' can be read as a response to the changing political climate on the Continent and the imminence of the Revolution spreading. Cooksey's poem anticipates the unease about the British fascination with Continental geographies that, in

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[42] Cooksey, pp.49-50.

[43] Ed Pope, 'Richard Cooksey', *History* <http://edpopehistory.co.uk/entries/cooksey-richard/1000-01-01-000000> [Accessed April 2018]

terms of Mont Blanc, may have been difficult to trace before the French Revolution but would be made starker in its wake. The 'charms' of the Chamonix Valley have a double meaning. They can be read in the negative sense of leading the youths astray. Despite this, the physical greatness Cooksey recognises in Mont Blanc prompts him to reflect on the state of Britain and Britishness, and his message – bound up as it is with a sense of national duty to celebrate the fame and expanse of a great nation known from 'pole to pole' that has 'justice pure as Alpine snows' – emphasises Mont Blanc had become a symbol of power and permanence against which national qualities could be judged and its identity remained open to appropriation.

Lord Byron

Ernest Lovell has argued that 'a great change came over Byron immediately after he left Switzerland' and points out that 'the emotional tone of his nature passages is at once a quieter one'. Lovell reasons that for Byron, 'with the country of Rousseau left behind and Shelley departed for England, there is no longer present any stimulus to urge him toward poetic pantheism.'[44] Bainbridge has similarly wrestled with Byron's attitude to Switzerland. He has argued that for Byron the Alps represented a space of political freedom and psychological hope after the fall of Napoleon, the reinstatement of several European monarchies and the failure of the ideals of the French Revolution.[45] For Bainbridge, in the summer of 1816 Byron was 'reviving the myth of Switzerland as the land of Freedom' and that 'in Switzerland Byron did encounter an environment and a population that came to represent for him a possibility of freedom.'[46] He concludes that for Byron, Switzerland fell short: 'For neither Manfred nor Byron is the vision of free-born pastoral existence embodied by the Chamois Hunter enough to lighten the weight upon their hearts or lose their own wretched identity.'[47] While I agree with Lovell and Bainbridge about the sense of a transition taking place from Byron's full Wordsworthian embrace of nature to dissatisfaction with that approach, this evolved during his time in the Alps rather than when he left the area as Lovell and Bainbridge intimate. Indeed, Byron's disillusion with Switzerland was probably festering early in the summer and certainly while Percy Bysshe Shelley was still present.

The investment in Switzerland as a land of freedom was bound up in Byron's personal circumstances. The scandal of a collapsed marriage and supposed affair with his half-sister Augusta were important catalysts that governed his move to the Alps. Indeed,

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[44] Lovell, p.175.
[45] Bainbridge in Green, pp.136-151.
[46] Bainbridge in Green, pp.148-149, and p.141.
[47] Bainbridge in Green, p.151.

escape became a particularly recurrent feature of his 1816 writings. The eponymous characters of *Childe Harold*, 'Prometheus', *The Prisoner of Chillon* and *Manfred* – each born from or returned to during the summer of 1816, are means by which Byron explores ideas of confinement, social isolation and the need or difficulty in moving away from those conditions.[48] Like the eponymous Prisoner of Chillon who in the poem imagines the Alps as a space of liberation beyond his prison walls, Byron envisaged the Alps as a location where freedom and rejuvenation might be experienced. His embrace of the sublime as he sojourned at Geneva was predicated on the notion of the Alps being a place where the worst of humanity ('vain man') could be left behind – or rather 'below'.[49] However, from the moment he arrived in Switzerland, he was wrestling with two Switzerlands: the one he had imagined and desired, and the one he actually encountered. Byron's letters, Alpine Journal and poetry suggest a pattern where hopes he had for the Alps when leaving Britain in April 1816 were routinely disappointed. James Buzard has recognised Byron's difficulty with tourists, and writes that 'the British tourists' deluge, invasion, or infestation of the Continent' after the Napoleonic Wars affected Byron's attitudes to Continental locations. Buzard concludes that the 'British tourists' apparent omnipresence ruined many places Byron had longed to visit'.[50] While to claim Mont Blanc or the Alps were entirely 'ruined' would be to go too far, negative tourist experiences – of which the experience of Mont Blanc may have been the most profound – were important catalysts affecting the direction of Byron's poetry.

At Lake Geneva, Byron had remained relatively insulated from other – particularly British – visitors to the extent that some of those visitors had resorted to viewing him through their telescopes because he cast such an inaccessible yet nonetheless intriguing figure. Lady Shelley describes:

> There are above 1,100 English in and near this place. In every hotel there is a perpetual coming and going of travellers. Lord Byron is living near here with Percy Shelley, or rather, with his wife's sister, as the *chronique scandaleuse* says.[51]

As with the other poets considered in this chapter, the relationship between Lake Geneva and Mont Blanc proves important in shaping Byron's response to Mont Blanc. His movements from lake to mountain to lake to mountains and, eventually, to leave the Alps for

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[48] In the dungeons of the Chateaux de Chillon on the shores of Lake Geneva the name 'BYRON' is carved into a stone pillar. If Byron was responsible for carving this during his visit to the dungeons with Percy on the 25 June 1816, it seems symbolic of his sense of psychological imprisonment that summer.

[49] *LBP1*, *CHIII*, p.123, 62, l.598.

[50] James Buzard, 'The Uses of Romanticism: Byron and the Victorian Continental Tour' in *Victorian Studies,* Vol 35, 1 (Bloomington: Indiana, 1991), 29-49, p.31.

[51] The 'chronique scandaleuse' is Lord Brougham. Lady Frances Shelley, *The Diary of Frances Lady Shelley,* vol 1 (New York: Scribners, 1912), p.231.

good are important in understanding why Canto III of *Childe Harold* sits where it does within the Byron canon. Staying for a long time at Lake Geneva in view of but not close to Mont Blanc before venturing to its slopes, allowed Byron to travel in his mind and imagine Mont Blanc and the inner Alps as 'palaces of nature'.

Byron's excursion to Mont Blanc in August was the first major interruption to his insulation from fellow tourists. Certainly, a clear disjunction can be recognised between his attitudes to the Alps when he viewed the mountains at the relative distance and seclusion of Lake Geneva and his feelings about them after he had made excursions to Mont Blanc and the Bernese Oberland where he had necessarily to acknowledge and interact with fellow tourists. Byron's disappointment was not with the physical appearance of the mountains – he would continue to describe them in positive terms – but rather with the societies, both local and international, associated with them. In a letter to Thomas Moore in 1821, he reflected:

> Switzerland is a curst selfish, swinish country of brutes, placed in the most romantic region of the world. I never could bear the inhabitants, and still less their English visitors.[52]

Despite this misanthropic appraisal, the distinction between the inhabited political space ('Switzerland') and the physical space ('region') is clear. At the heart of his disillusion with the Alps is a realisation that the physical space could not be exempted from the social sphere. The compartmentalisation of those two spheres was a difficulty many British visitors wrestled with, including the Shelleys.

It is tempting to regard Byron's visit to Mont Blanc – coupled with his tour of the wider Alps that followed – as marking the climax of his Wordsworthian embrace of wild nature. However, these moments more properly illuminate when that embrace faltered. In his 'Alpine Journal' Byron tells us:

> I remember at Chamouni – in the very eyes of Mont Blanc – hearing another woman – English also – exclaim to her party – "did you ever see any thing more rural" – as if it was Highgate or Hampstead – or Brompton – or Hayes. – "Rural" quotha! – Rocks – pines – torrent – Glaciers – Clouds – and Summits of eternal snow far above them – and "Rural!" I did not know the thus exclaiming fair one – but she was a – very good kind of a woman.[53]

Despite Byron's claim that he did not know the 'exclaiming fair one', the woman *was* known to him: it was Thomas Hope's wife.[54] The naming of four suburban London areas as the sort of places from which such a tourist might come gives a sense of his class disdain for

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[52] *LBLJ* under 'Ravenna 1821', 21 September 1821, p.151.
[53] *LBLJ*, p.44.
[54] In a letter to Scrope Davies of November 7 1816, Hobhouse compares the scenes of the Bernese Alps to Mont Blanc and writes: 'I am not sure however that we saw any thing more <Rho/>romantic or as Mrs Hope would call it, more rural, than the glacier of the Aveiron.'

the nouveau riche and their attitudes to landscapes beyond the city. Byron's indignation is directed not just at what Louisa Hope has said, but at what she represents. The 'woman' is emblematic of a type of person who, as he implies, is unlike him. Such a person is not attuned to the true qualities of nature. Able only to perceive wildness in the way you might perceive suburban parkland, the "rural" summation is not merely for Byron a limitation in expression, but somehow revealing of a limitation in character and feeling. Other tourists are *lesser* tourists and, for the profoundly egotistical Byron, that would almost certainly mean most tourists. Throughout history poets have defined themselves – and society has defined them likewise – as somehow special writers whose feelings or observations hold the key to an innate truth about humanity. Byron, his ego endowed by the success of Cantos I and II of *Childe Harold,* considers himself empowered to act here as an arbiter in the cult of the sublime. In essence, he claims there is a very definite *right* and *wrong* way to feel about the Alps; a cultured and uncultured way of seeing the mountains. His judgement was undoubtedly codified through the Wordsworth lens. Yet, unlike Wordsworth, I am doubtful that Byron discovered a great deal in nature during that summer beyond a realisation he was not altogether attuned to it, especially given the poetry that followed his Alps summer.

 Childe Harold is a long poem; yet Canto III is very much a self-contained instalment. To help evaluate the significance of Mont Blanc in Canto III I have deployed three maps of the Canto (below):

Figure 15 Harold/Byron's narrative positions *Childe Harold* Canto III

Figure 16 *Childe Harold* Canto III – geo-semantic mapping of verse without Byron's footnotes

Figure 17 *Childe Harold* Canto III – geo-semantic mapping of verse with Byron's footnotes.
This map is consistent with my mapping of Williams, Parsons, Whalley and Cooksey.

1. Albion (England, Byron set sail from Dover)
2. Waterloo
3. Athens
4. Brussels
5. Watreloo
6. Lochiel, Albyn (Loch Eil)
7. Waterloo
8. Mont St Jean, Waterloo
9. Waterloo
9. [9a, Platea (Plataea)]
9. [9b, Troy]
9. [9c, Mantinea]
9. [9d, Leutra]
9. [9e, Chaeroneca (Chaeron)]
9. [9f, Marathon]
9. [9g, Mont St Jean, Waterloo]
9. [9h, Hougoumont, Waterloo]
10. Dead Sea's shore
11. Waterloo
11. [11a, Ardennes]
11. [11b, Paris]
11. [11c, Moscow]
12. Rhine
13. Drachenfels
13. [13a, Bonn]
14. Koblenz ('Coblentz')
14. [14a, France]
14. [14b, Andernach]
15. Ehrenbretstein, Koblenz
15. [15a, Leoben]
15. [15b, Gibraltar]
15. [15c, Malta]
16. Rhine
17. Alps
18. Morat (Murten)
19. Waterloo
20. Cannae, Agilia
20. [20a, Marathon]
20. [20b, Ghent]
21. Morat
22. Marathon
23. Aventicum (Avenches), Morat
24. Mont Blanc
25. Lake Geneva
26. Rhone, Lake Geneva
27. Lake Geneva
28. Pythian Cave, Delphi
29. France
30. Lake Geneva
31. Jura
32. Persia
32. [32a, Sermon on the Mount, Mount of Beatitudes]
32. [32b, Forum, Rome]
32. [32c, Sigaeum, Dardenelles]
32. [32d, Mount Ida, Troad]

32. [32e, Patras]
32. [32f, Chimari, Acroceraunian Mountains, Albania]
33. Jura
34. Rhone
35. Lake Geneva
36. Clarens
36. [36a, Meillerie]
36. [36b, Vevay]
36. [36c, Lake Genenva]
36. [36d, Clarens]
36. [36e, Vevay]
36. [36f, Chateau de Chillon]
36. [36g, Bouveret]
36. [36h, St Gingo (St Gingolph)]
36. [36i, Meillerie]
36. [36j, Evian]
36. [36k, Rhone]
36. [36l, Clarens]
36. [36m, Meillerie]
36. [36n, St Gingo (St Gingolph)]
36. [36o, Meillerie]
36. [36p, St Gingo (St Gingolph)]
36. [36q, Clarens]
36. [36r, Great St Bernard Priory]
36. [36s, Meillerie]
36. [36t, Simplon]
37. Lausanne
38. Ferney
39. 'White Alps'
40. Rome
41. Mountains/Lake Geneva
42. England

The four primary narrative locations in Canto III shown on the first map are: England; Waterloo and its environs; the Rhine Valley in and around Koblenz; and the western Swiss Alps. Through geo-semantic mapping those references intensify and the locations appear as clusters on the second and third maps. The second and third maps reveal digressions to Greece. Greece constitutes a further distinct location cluster. Given this cluster, it is not unreasonable to claim that Canto III is perhaps as much about Greece as it is about the Rhine. Whether we view the reasons for the digressions to Greece as a product of Byron's philhellenism, his following of a tradition in British poetry of referencing classical history and literature that had its roots in a manifestly philhellenic British public school education, as something that points towards Byron's ambition to ultimately return to Greece in the future or as a mixture of all three of these, the important thing to recognise here is the power that Greece had over Byron's interpretation of European Continental geography.

The maps reveal movements between Waterloo and Greece. This is unsurprising. In visiting Waterloo, the site of one of the most significant battles in European history, we

might fairly expect Byron to draw comparisons with some of the epic battle sites in ancient Greece, given his education and previous travels to such sites. However, for Byron, Waterloo represents a needless waste of European lives and the failure of Western European civilisation. In his grappling for an analogy to define the battle, we are moved not to Greece but to the Roman Empire: 'Waterloo with Cannae's carnage vies'. In contrast, at the battle site at Morat in Switzerland he can discern not bloodshed but nobility and heroism: 'Morat and Marathon twin names shall stand | They were true Glory's stainless victories | Won by the unambitious heart and hand'. This twinning and glorifying of Switzerland with Greece is part of the lens through which he first observes the mountain glory of Mont Blanc. Indeed, we move locations from the 'stainless' Morat to Marathon to Morat and then to the stainless or as Byron puts it 'imperishably pure' Mont Blanc in the space of three stanzas. In Canto III Mont Blanc is therefore a feature of the central European plane, but also framed in relation to the glory of ancient Greece just as it had been by Helen Maria Williams in *An Epistle* and Thomas Whalley's *Mont Blanc*. There are no movements between the Rhine and Greece. This is probably because the Rhine area did not as deeply affect Byron. Certainly, the movements between Greece and the Alps give Mont Blanc a heroic depth through association that, without mapping, might not otherwise be obviously recognised.

Byron sets out a relatively straightforward narrative curve in Canto III of *Childe Harold* to reflect his personal circumstances. In the poem's opening he establishes his emotional turmoil. A journey then ensues that fundamentally represents the search for a resolution to that turmoil. At the end of the Canto we look forward to that resolution and the poem finishes on an optimistic note. Within the Canto, the Savoyard Alps allow Byron to represent an imagined optimistic movement in which he addresses a troubled past and anticipates a better future:

> I look upon the peopled desert past,
>
> As on a place of agony and strife,
>
> Where, for some sin, to sorrow I was cast,
>
> To act and suffer (*III,* 73 ll.690-93)

Byron writes disparagingly of the 'hum', 'herd' and 'crushing crowd' of society throughout Canto III.[55] It is a key theme of his summer. In 'Epistle to Augusta' (1816), most likely written in the month following the completion of Canto III, he writes:

> Here are the Alpine landscapes – which create
>
> A fund for contemplation – to admire
>
> Is a brief feeling of a trivial date –
>
> But something worthier do such scenes inspire:

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[55] *LBP,* II, *III*, 68-71. [Further references are given in the text.]

> Here to be lonely is not desolate –
>
> For much I view which I could most desire –
>
> And, above all, a lake I can behold
>
> Lovelier, not dearer, than our own.[56]

In the context of 'Epistle to Augusta' and the address to his half-sister, Byron's desires move freely from people to place, but also place to people, or to put this another way: to contemplate place is to contemplate his social and human relationships. Yet in his consideration of place and those white Alps beyond the lake, Byron recognises the key flaw in his nature: that despite all his problems with the 'busy hum' and 'crushing crowd' he cannot help being attracted to company and to fear loneliness at all times. Byron's compulsive need to be close to other people is also the thing that fundamentally separates him from the character of Childe Harold, who can at least give us the impression of travelling alone throughout much of the poem. In the above passage, the Alps and Lake Geneva are a 'fund for contemplation', yet such a backdrop only impels Byron to assert his desire to address his relationship with Augusta and not be alone.

As the foot of the high Alps are reached for the first time in stanza 62 of *Childe Harold Canto III*, Byron/Harold describes the scene:

> Above me are the Alps,
>
> The palaces of Nature, whose vast walls,
>
> Have pinnacled in clouds their snowy scalps,
>
> And throned Eternity in icy halls
>
> Of cold sublimity, where forms and falls
>
> The avalanche – the thunderbolt of snow!
>
> All which expands the spirit, yet appals,
>
> Gather around these summits, as to show
>
> How Earth may pierce to Heaven, yet leave vain man below. (*III,* 62, ll. 590-98)

Byron's Alps are contrived. Only at the foot of a mountain that has a gradient above thirty degrees or near a wall of mountains of prodigious height could the idea that they are 'above' an individual really work, and the idea that the Alps are 'above' Harold or Byron stretches poetic license.

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[56] *LBP,* IV, p.38, ll.57-64. According to McGann, 'Epistle to Augusta' was probably written in late July or August 1816.

Figure 18 Villa Diodati in relation to Mont Blanc and the old town of Geneva.

When considering Byron's location at Villa Diodati and its environs, it is easy to lose sight of quite how removed he was from the mountains. Returning to Geneva in 2019 to assess Byron's narrative locations, I was reminded just how flat and extensive the Genevan plain around the southern end of the lake is and how far away the mountains feel. Today, photos taken with telescopic lenses draw in the distance from Geneva to the mountains, but with the naked eye those same mountains feel a long way away. The mountains are closer and the vantages for them are better at the northern end of the lake in locations that include the Chateau de Chillon. Nonetheless, the high mountains remain fairly distant prospects. The impression Byron gives of the snowy Alps rising above him is misleading. Such a perspective on mountain ranges overshadowing place is possible. For example, the Zailiyskiy Alatau range towers over the former capital of Kazakhstan, Almaty. Although a northern off-shoot of the Tien Shan that rises to over 7000m, the Zailiyskiy Alatau is a range of comparable height to the Alps:

Figure 19 Two photos of the Zailiyskiy Alatau range from Almaty, Kazakhstan

Byron gives an impression of place that is more closely akin to the photos above. It is not, however, something he could have experienced in and around Lake Geneva, but especially not at the Villa Diodati. The photo below offers a sense of the distance between the lake and the high mountains. Villa Diodati is near the edge of the lake fractionally outside the left of the frame.

Figure 20 Geneva looking ESE towards Mont Blanc.[57]

What Byron is setting out in Canto III is a constructed a version of the Alps that has little to do with the mountains that are before him.

In stanza 67 Byron adds a note to his description of the high Alps:

This is written in the eye of Mont Blanc (June 3[r]d, 1816) which even at this distance dazzles mine. (July 20th.) I this day observed for some time the distinct reflection of Mont Blanc and Mont Argentiere in the calm of the lake, which I was crossing in my boat; the distance of these mountains from their mirror is 60 miles.[58]

The 'distance' of Mont Blanc from the lake is not altogether ignored by Byron, nonetheless it is its proximity he seeks to emphasise: he is a poet 'in the eye' of the great mountain. Yet the mountain's ability to dazzle seems little more than a mirage. In the second part of the note on the 20th July, Byron asserts that his knowledge of the massif is such that he can distinguish the Aiguille de Argentière from the summit of Mont Blanc and while the distance is admittedly substantial – sixty miles – this is contracted by the beauty of its reflection on the surface of the lake. The problem with this is that the Mont Blanc massif cannot realistically be reflected on the surface of Lake Geneva, the distance is simply too great. The note asserts Byron's biographical experiences in a way that gives this part of the poem the appearance of both authenticity and emotional depth by asserting foundations to the poetic expression that are built from genuine experiences and feelings. This is at best a reshaping of landscape, events and feelings. More likely it is simply a deceit intended to

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[57] Photo by Stéphane Pecorini.
[58] *LBP,* II, p.308.

foster a given outcome – in this instance, to heighten his persona as a mountain poet in the fashion of Wordsworth.

At Lake Geneva, Byron is forming his idea of the Alps before really knowing what they are like. He imagines a productive nature in the mountains that has created 'palaces' with 'vast walls' where 'Eternity' is found in 'icy halls'. The analogy with a temple or Parthenon of ice on a snowy acropolis draws attention to both human capability by recalling the construction of cityscapes and its absence because these are not works in which man has played a part. The mountain temple is a Wordsworthian framing of nature as a place of worship. Byron is in essence using a similar analogy to those deployed by Williams and Parsons, whose descriptions of a natural alpine architecture of ice and rock seem to recall descriptions of ancient temples and ruins or at least cityscapes.

In stanza 67, after consideration in the preceding four stanzas of the significance of a victory for Swiss soldiers at the battle of Morat and the death of Julia Alpinula, Byron/Harold reflects:

> But these are deeds which should not pass away,
>
> And names that must not wither, though the earth
>
> Forgets her empires with a just decay,
>
> The enslavers and the enslaved, their death and birth;
>
> The high, the mountain-majesty of worth
>
> Should be, and shall, survivor of its woe,
>
> And from its immortality look forth
>
> In the sun's face, like yonder Alpine snow,*
>
> Imperishably pure beyond all things below. (*III,* 67, ll.635-643)

The sense of mountains outlasting 'empires' – in this instance a nod to the recent collapse of Napoleon's Empire – feels Wordsworthian. Probably encouraged by Shelley, the insertion into *Canto III* of this stanza and its accompanying note reveal Byron's growing valorisation of Mont Blanc and the Alps.[59] As shown above, the note attached to l.642 makes it clear that Byron has in mind Mont Blanc when he writes of 'yonder Alpine snow'. Mont Blanc functions here as a scale against which human greatness can be measured, just as it had for Richard Cooksey. Byron finds in Mont Blanc then an emblem, a sunlit upland analogous to greatness of human actions he finds in Morat and within the pages of Rousseau's *Julie*. Yet Byron is not so much reading the landscape of Mont Blanc as much as he is writing his preconceived ideas upon it.

Longing for escape and contemplating the power of solitude in nature as a means to personal restoration, Childe Harold/Byron confesses that 'in me shall Loneliness renew

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[59] In Byron's first draft, held by the Murray archive at the NLS, this stanza is not present.

thoughts hid' that '[e]re mingling with the herd had penn'd me in their fold' and explains '[t]o fly from, need not be to hate, mankind'(*III,* 68-69, ll. 650-51 and 653). Byron seeks to elevate himself above the ranks of the crowd and, inspired by the distant view of Mont Blanc, it is into nature that Harold/Byron must 'fly':

> 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 (*III,* 72, ll.680-83)

Bainbridge has read this passage as a temporary adoption of St Preux's feelings about landscape as expressed in Rousseau's *Julie*.[60] Higgins has recognised this passage as 'elemental-spiritual' and has contrasted it with the 'creaturely-physical' lines that follow in which Byron can find '[n]othing to loathe in nature, save to be | A link in a fleshy chain'. For Higgins, '[t]here is a kind of litotes at work here: by seeking to escape from the physical body, and therefore from all connection with other humans and animals, he actually seems to loathe a great deal.'[61] Byron does not, however, loathe the material landscape, but it does suggest the difficulty he had with wider societies. This was a difficulty necessarily exacerbated by his inevitable interaction with 'other humans' during his excursion to Mont Blanc. At the very least, there is something hollow in the meaningless idea that 'mountains are a feeling' and Harold/Byron is not altogether convincing in his Wordsworthian clothing. According to McGann, through Shelley's influence 'Wordsworth's natural religion, or religious naturalism' led Byron to discover 'the secret ministries of Nature'.[62] McGann is somewhat investing in the notion that Byron really did discover a genuine belonging in nature. Yet the greater musing of Harold/Byron that continues from this stanza to stanza 75, clarifies that Byron is himself not altogether convinced by his new clothes. Indeed, while in stanza 72 he can 'become | Portion of that around [him]', in stanza 75 he questions that belonging by asking, '[a]re not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part | Of me and of my soul, as I of them?' This question is a simultaneously rhetorical and introspective moment in which Byron doubts his argument at the point of delivery.

As we are drawn to the close of Canto III, we are presented with Byron/Harold's ambition to truly experience the mountains beyond the lake:

> The clouds above me to the white Alps tend,
>
> And I must pierce them, and survey whate'er
>
> May be permitted, as my steps I bend
>
> To their most great and growing region, where

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[60] Bainbridge in Gouldbourne and Higgins, 2017, pp.65-67.
[61] Higgins, 2018, p.82.
[62] McGann and also M. K. Joseph in *LBP,* II, p.300.

The earth to her embrace compels the powers of air. (*III*, 109, ll.1017-21)

The passage emphasises the distance of the mountains from the lake – they are visible, but also ethereal. The idea that the Alps is a 'growing region' hints at the influence of Shelley and his interest in Buffon's earth cooling theory. There is an air of mystery in being able to 'survey whatever | May be permitted' – as if elevation will not only reveal views of the earth below but allow glimpses of something secret amid the eternal snows. It is, like the power that 'compels' the air, a hint of Shelley that anticipates 'Mont Blanc'. This power over the air remained of interest and Byron returned to the theme with the Spirit of Mont Blanc in *Manfred*.[63]

The brevity of Byron's excursion to the Chamonix Valley belies his professed Wordsworthian ambitions for the Alps. Byron adhered to the zeitgeist of the sublime, however, the excursion emphasises that Byron was a man who had probably not wholly invested in a love of nature.[64] He left Geneva early in the morning on Thursday 29 August and was back in Geneva by Monday 2 September. The party included John Polidori, John Hobhouse and Scrope Davies. The latter, according to Burnett, was 'a gambler, a drunkard and a spendthrift who ended his days in ruin' and appears to have taken the lead at key moments of the trip. [65] The flamboyant group spared no expense (even their guides had guides at one point), but they could only truly be said to be experiencing Mont Blanc and what Polidori referred to as its 'classic ground' in relatively close proximity for less than two days.[66] Indeed, at 12pm on the 30 September Hobhouse notes:

> The whole scenery in front closed by the snows of the roots and needles of Mont Blanc – here commences the wonder of this journey.[67]

Yet less than 24 hours later the party were passing that same spot on their return to Geneva. Such a limited visit and the boisterous company chosen for the trip are suggestive of Byron's true feelings about the Alps.

Byron was first and foremost an egotistical poet whose primary commodity was the promotion of a marketable self-identity. It is difficult to know whether he ever really

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[63] The phrase was prevalent among the Diodati Circle. Percy and Mary Shelley use it a number of times in their descriptions of Mont Blanc in *Six Weeks' Tour.* In 'Mont Blanc' the mountain is introduced as 'piercing the infinite sky' (p.178). Hobhouse also describes Mont Blanc 'piercing' the sky in his diary account.

[64] It is worth noting that when Shelley lamented the absence of Byron during his excursion to Mont Blanc, he sent a letter from Chamonix entreating him Byron to join him: 'I wish the wonders and graces of these "palaces of Nature" would induce you to visit them' adding that he hoped 'soon to see in poetry the feelings with which they will inspire you'.[64] Yet despite this expectancy, Shelley's primary method of persuasion was turned to allaying the logistical difficulties of the excursion. In short, his consciousness of Byron's needs being those of a reluctant tourist with a decadent taste and physical disability suggest he was not altogether convinced by Byron's embrace of nature.

[65] Burnett, p.17.

[66] John William Polidori, *The Diary of Dr. John William Polidori,* ed. William Michael Rosetti (London: Elkin Mathews, 1911), p.97.

[67] *JCHD*, p.161.

believed the Alps would offer the type of freedom he craved or whether appearing as an experienced nature poet in 1816 momentarily seemed prescient to a commercial end. However, the transition in Byron's hopes for the Alps of the early summer is unequivocal in a letter to Augusta on the 14 September:

> To Scrope I leave the details of Chamouni & the Glaciers & the sources of the Aveiron.[68] This country is altogether the Paradise of Wilderness—I wish you were in it with me—& every one else out of it—Love me, A., ever thine –B.[69]

Byron still imagined Mont Blanc and the Alps through the lens of the St Preux and Julie romance. Yet the 'Paradise of Wilderness' could now only be a paradise with 'every one else out of it'. While he would continue to separate the physical glory of the Alps from the inhabitants or visitors he met among them, it is clear here that Byron has come to realise his 'palaces of nature' were not the space he imagined them to be and that they would not offer the escape and transformation for which he had hoped. Two weeks later in a letter to Murray dated 29 September 1816, Byron made a comparison that would reappear in Canto IV of *Childe Harold*:

> Chamouni, and that which it inherits, we saw a month ago; but, though Mont Blanc is higher, it is not equal in wildness to the Jungfrau, the Eighers, the Shreckhorn, and the Rose Glaciers.[70]

The following day in another letter to Murray, Byron clarified that his enjoyment of these latter 'scenes' had a lot to do with the fact that they 'were not those usually frequented by the English'.[71] Byron related to Moore in November how the sense of being hemmed in by tourists and exiles during his exercises in the Alps shaped his outlook on arriving in Italy:

> I have seen the finest parts of Switzerland, the Rhine, the Rhone, and the Swiss and Italian lakes; for the beauties of which I refer you to the Guide-book. The north of Italy is tolerably free from the English; but the south swarms with them, I am told. [72]

On leaving the Alps it is clear the English across the Continent had become for Byron a pestilent swarm. They had affected his preconceived romance of Mont Blanc and the Alps. The effect on Byron's attitude to landscape may have been felt immediately. Indeed, mountains function as something negative or as mere scenery in *Manfred* – the mountain glory had gone. By the time of *Childe Harold* Canto IV, written in Italy in the summer of

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[68] Scrope visited Augusta on 28 September. As Byron records in a letter to Murray on the 15 October, Scrope only seems to have delivered half the letters he was meant to deliver (see also T. J. Burnett, p.132).

[69] *LBLJ,* p.41. The original manuscript has been lost. Cochran has used a transcript: Ralph Earl of Lovelace, *Astarte* (London: Christopher's, 1921), pp.268-70.

[70] *LBLJ,* p.54.

[71] *LBLJ,* P.56.

[72] *LBLJ*, p.16.

1817 after he had completed *Manfred*, Mont Blanc and the Alps were consigned merely to experiences that bestowed on Byron/Harold a sense of worldliness:

> I have seen the soaring Jungfrau rear
>
> Her never-trodden snow, and seen the hoar
>
> Glaciers of bleak Mont Blanc both far and near (*IV,* 73, ll.654-56).

The 'bleak Mont Blanc' seems to be consciously working against the initial perception of the mountain from Lake Geneva that 'dazzle[d]' Byron's eyes with its glittering 'palaces of nature'. And while the Jungfrau is preferred to Mont Blanc – 'soaring' is a marked contrast to 'bleak' – both mountains are now just two among a list of many famous peaks from the stock of European poetry and literature that punctuate the travels of Harold. If Byron had ever really believed mountains could be 'a feeling', that idea had certainly passed.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Lake Geneva was an important influence in British literary representations of Mont Blanc. Indeed, it is possible to see the Lake on many Grand Tours as being a midway anchor for a journey on the vector between London and Rome. The chapter has revealed that writers used geographical relationism involving the lake not only to understand the mountain, but also to express auxiliary ideas ranging from exploring feminine and male qualities and identities through landscape to exploring notions of political liberty within state boundaries compared to personal liberty through landscape. By comparing attitudes to the mountains from the vantage of the lake to those after a visit to Mont Blanc has taken place, insight has been gained into poems written at different times with different vantage points. Byron has been a key study in this respect. The process of contrasting experiences in viewing the mountain from the relative calm and civilisation of Lake Geneva to the near environs of Mont Blanc appears to have had important implications. These have tended to be rooted in experiences of human geography more than in physical geography – with the repercussions of mass tourism proving difficult for writers to navigate. Certainly the transition between Parsons' two poems that refer to Mont Blanc is suggestive of this process. Indeed, even when the lake has been absent in a literary product, as it is in Thomas Whalley's *Mont Blanc,* the relationship between the lake and mountain remained influential – as Whalley's letters suggest. The chapter thus asks us to consider the extent to which difficult transitions between the lake and the mountain may be important factors that have influenced a number of British writings – some of them, such as Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, canonical.

By deploying a series of geo-semantic maps, this chapter has argued that poems about the Alps and Mont Blanc can have surprising spatial movements. The maps reveal that there was a tendency during the Romantic period to position the Alps within a European

plane that communicated with points in Italy and Greece, more than it did with areas to the north or east. In the case of Italy, a primary destination of British Grand Tours, this is not altogether unexpected. In the case of Greece, the power exerted by locations usually only known from the annals of classical literature is perhaps surprising given that in the Alps, as Keate writes, poets had 'trodden paths | New to the Muse' (p.26). Yet this chapter has also shown that to an extent references to Greece often formed part of establishing Mont Blanc as something different, something new, indeed, something fashionable that could be heralded as a mountain belonging to a new age – an age that had seen Paccard and Balmat's ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786, the birth of mountaineering and an adjustment in how mountains might be experienced. As the maps reveal, perhaps surprisingly, Britain, which might fairly be expected to be a point of geographical reference for British writers, was largely ignored. That is not to say that British mountains did not influence how the Alps was perceived or represented. Rather, it is to suggest that their influence was more subtle or at least harder to discern than it might have been. Part of the reason for this was, of course, because the Alps were largely better known to many British readers than their own domestic mountains. The extent to which Britain is integral to or overlooked by a writer who embraced what Duffy has called an 'era of ascent' is at the heart of the next chapter.

Chapter Two
Coleridge and the Contested Space of Mont Blanc

Introduction

To write about Mont Blanc in 1802 was to write about a contested political space. The mountain had belonged to an autocratic Kingdom of Savoy, been used as a retreat by French Royalists during the Revolution, before being appropriated by the French Republic. In response, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's representation of Mont Blanc in the poem 'Chamouny; The Hour Before Sunrise. A Hymn' (1802) was bound up with ideas about liberty, patriotism and the fear of French invasion increasingly associated with the mountain's cultural meaning in Britain.[1] The 'Hymn' is the central poetic expression of Coleridge's philosophical exercises in which liberty might be realised through landscape. Yet the deployment of Mont Blanc complicated the poem's meaning because the mountain harboured a number of complex inherent political connotations. Yet it is exactly because of those connotations that Coleridge 'transferred' his ideas to the mountain. In essence, Coleridge was attempting a complex reclamation of Mont Blanc in order to suggest a purer form of liberty with the power of God and Nature at its centre as a potential alternative political landscape to that offered by Napoleonic rule or other systems. The 'Hymn' suggests an exultant form of liberty that an individual may experience if only the song of God in Nature can be realised.

The 'Hymn' maps the transition of the speaker who at the beginning is praying to God while observing the material landscape from the vantage of the Chamonix Valley but, as the grandeur of Mont Blanc is unfurled by the rising sun, is able to intuit the song of God in nature. Coleridge undertook a hike and climb on Scafell in August 1802 and this experience was – as Coleridge claimed – 'transferred' to Mont Blanc. However, the 'Hymn' is also an 85-line reworking of the 26-line 'Chamouny Beym Sonnenaufgange' (1795) by Friederike Brun, a Danish-born German poet. Considerable critical attention has been given to how Coleridge adapted Brun's poem which, in its 26 lines, conveys the same essential

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[1] The poem was later retitled and is more familiarly known as 'Hymn before Sun-Rise, in the Vale of Chamouny'. Line references for the 'Hymn' will primarily use the version Coleridge produced for the *Sibylline Leaves* (1817) collected in *CP,* pp.717-723. Specific references to lines that are different in the first version published in the *Morning Post* on the 11th September 1802 will be indicated. For this and other versions of the poem see *CP (Variorum Text)*, pp.922-933. Adrien Bonjour has noted the attention Coleridge paid to the Hymn, claiming that 'few of Coleridge's poems were so often revised in the course of the poet's life' (see Adrien Bonjour, *Coleridge's 'Hymn Before Sunrise': A Study of Facts and Problems Connected with the Poem* (Lausanne: Imprimerie la Concorde, 1942)). There are 11 versions of the Hymn to which Coleridge made corrections and adjustments.

narrative of Coleridge's 'Hymn' in that it presents a speaker at the foot of Mont Blanc who questions whose hand is behind the divine scene, only to be answered that the landscape is the work of God. Coleridge made no acknowledgement that Brun provided the source material beyond an allusion to 'a short note in some Swiss poems' recorded in the letter to William Sotheby written the night before the first publication of the 'Hymn'. Unlike Coleridge, who never saw Mont Blanc, Brun visited Chamonix in May 1791. 'Chamouny Beym Sonnenaufgange' was first published in her collection *Gedichte* (Zurich, 1795). A strong impression that Coleridge had experienced first-hand the Chamonix Valley and witnessed Mont Blanc is given by an introductory note to the 'Hymn'. This is most apparent in the *Morning Post* edition where the note is expanded. The long note relied heavily upon Brun's introductory notes to her poem with, as Adrien Bonjour points out, 'some passages being no less than an actual translation with a few clever interpolations'[2]

The transference from Scafell to Mont Blanc had political significance. In Britain the public reception of writing about Mont Blanc could not be isolated from the mountain's changed political identity since the invasion of Savoy by French Revolutionary armies in 1792 and the commencement of the war between Britain and France in January 1793. The annexation of Savoy and curtailment of excursions to the Chamonix Valley on Grand Tours initiated a new period of evolving British cultural attitudes to Mont Blanc throughout the 1790s. Savoy was renamed the Department of Mont Blanc in December 1792. This was widely reported in the British press. While the term 'Mont Blanc' was overwhelmingly still used to denote the mountain, the lexical association between mountain and political region inevitably meant there was a subtle adjustment in how the mountain might be perceived. The renaming of Savoy during a period of upheaval necessarily accentuated this. Certainly, the rise of Napoleon, whose image and shadow were cast over the snow-white slopes of the mountain, could not be ignored. Reading the 'Hymn' in the context of this political history and Coleridge's other published writings in September and October 1802, this chapter will argue that the poem responds to Napoleon's increasingly autocratic government and the failure of the French Revolution by exploring an alternative form of liberty beyond the limitations of political institutions.

In the France-focussed writings of autumn 1802 Coleridge was in many respects wrestling with ideas to which he had already given attention in earlier works. His difficulty in reconciling political philosophy and patriotic feeling at a time of war and in the face of the excesses of the Revolution are explored in 'France. An Ode' (1798), a poem inspired by the April 1798 French invasion of Switzerland. In the autumn of 1802 'France. An Ode'

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[2] Adrien Bonjour, 1942, p.218. See also Elinor Shaffer, 'Coleridge's Swiss Voice: Frederike Brun and the Vale of Chamouni' in *Essays in the Memory of Michael Parkinson* (Norwich:University of East Anglia, 1996), pp.67-76.

once more proved central to Coleridge's attitudes to France and nationhood; it was reworked and reprinted in the *Morning Post* on the 14 October 1802 almost exactly a month after the first publication of the 'Hymn'. According to J. C. C. Mays this version was 'the text on which he lavished most care'.[3] The October 1802 edition of 'France. An Ode' was accompanied by an editorial note that explained '[t]he present state of France and Switzerland gives […'France. An Ode'] so peculiar an interest at the present time that we wished to re-publish it and accordingly have procured from the Author a corrected copy.'[4] France had withdrawn its troops from Switzerland in July 1802, only for a civil war known as the Stecklikrieg to commence in August. This led to political collapse and a renewed Napoleon-led French military occupation in October. 'France. An Ode' at this time therefore functions as part of Coleridge's active engagement with the agency of Napoleon in the Alpine region.

In Coleridge's introductory notes to the October 1802 edition of 'France. An Ode', he explains its fifth stanza:

> An address to Liberty, in which the Poet expresses his conviction that those feelings and that grand *ideal* of Freedom which the mind attains by its contemplation of its individual nature, and of the sublime surrounding objects […] do not belong to men as a society, nor can possibly be either gratified or realised, under any form of human government; but belong to the individual man, so far as he is pure, and inflamed with the love and adoration of God in Nature.[5]

The primary conceptual subject matter of the 'Hymn' mirrors almost exactly the above statement and it appears the adjustment of 'France. An Ode' is responding to similar stimuli to those that generated the 'Hymn'. On the 4 August 1802, the day before Coleridge put his 'whole limbs in a tremble' as he 'dropped down' from ledge to ledge 'gambling'[6] with his life on Scafell, 'the Senate Consultum of August the 4' proclaimed Bonaparte First Consul for life and adopted ten laws that altered 'the Constitution in the direction of making the citizens spectators for life'.[7] This act destroyed the last vestiges of democracy in the Republic and made explicit what Coleridge would describe as the 'worst of all pure despotism, military despotism' taking hold in France.[8] The proclamation of Napoleon as First Consul for life would have been known to him by the time Coleridge composed the 'Hymn'.

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[3] *CP,* I.I, p.463.
[4] *CP,* II.I, p.586.
[5] *CP, I.I,* p.464.
[6] *CL*, pp.840-841.
[7] *CE*, p.322 and 322n.
[8] *CE*, p.318n.

Previous critics have overlooked the political implications of the 'Hymn'. After Coleridge's death in 1834, Thomas De Quincey revealed the indebtedness of the 'Hymn' to Brun's earlier poem. The adaptation and plagiarism of Brun has been read as a symbolic product of his 1801-1802 'Dejection Crisis' and as symptomatic of Coleridge's ailing poetic genius. As such, the poem has been somewhat dismissed or maligned for its lack of being based on an authentic experience. Coleridge reported in a letter that Wordsworth, who would almost certainly have recognised the Brun poem as providing the source material, had felt the 'Hymn' to be 'strained and unnatural, and condemned the Hymn in toto […] as a specimen of the mock sublime'. [9] Carl Woodring in 1961 was no less disparaging about Coleridge's use of Brun, viewing the 'Hymn' as something Coleridge 'translated, stole, tortured, stretched, and gradually reformed from a poem by Friederike Brun'. [10] Angela Leighton, who has examined the relationship between the 'Hymn' and Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc', also focuses on Brun. She writes that 'Coleridge's compulsive and lasting dishonesty about the composition of the poem betrays perhaps his own uncertainty concerning its merit' and suggests 'Wordsworth rightly detected in it a straining for effect which is false'. [11] She also argues that Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' 'implicitly condemns in it [the 'Hymn'] a religious orthodoxy which is glib'. [12] Geoffrey Hartman refers to the 'Hymn' as 'counterfeit', 'Coleridge's fake composition' and a poem offering a landscape that 'is so patently sublime imitation' in which 'there is nothing reminiscent of Wordsworth's ability to draw the logos-power of voice out of nature, as in his ascent of Snowdon in *Prelude* XIV'. [13] Duffy, who adopts a similar position to Leighton by looking at the poem's relationship to Brun and 'Mont Blanc', considers the 'Hymn' to be a 'quintessentially poetic statement of the conventional, religious records of natural grandeur […] that informed Chamonix's burgeoning tourist industry'. [14] Adrien Bonjour in 1942 examined a number of the poem's key adjustments. While he is more positive about the 'Hymn' than many critics, going as far as to regard it as Coleridge's last great landscape poem, his work is in the tradition of John Livingston Lowes' *Road to Xanadu,* tending to be more concerned with sources than with considering broader implications. Hansen also addresses the relationship between the 'Hymn' and Brun. However, he argues this is 'more interesting as a problem of translation than a question of plagiarism'. [15] Hansen questions 'who, and what, is being translated' and suggests that '[t]ranslation did not mean simply

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[9] *CL*, p.974. This criticism is examined in Chapter 4.
[10] Carl R. Woodring, *Politics in the Poetry of Coleridge* (Madison: University of Wisonsin Press, 1961), p.187.
[11] Leighton, p.59.
[12] Leighton, p.59.
[13] Hartman, 1987, pp. xxviii-xxix.
[14] Duffy, 2005, p.111.
[15] Hansen, p.133.

rendering Brun's German into Coleridge's English' but translating her interpretations of the landscape of Mont Blanc.[16] Hansen draws close to and yet stops short of recognising that the voices of guides and peasants are ones that are also translated and shape poetic responses to the mountain – whether those responses are derived from first-hand experiences or secondary accounts. In essence he regards the 'Hymn' as significant and argues that 'poets who knew Mont Blanc only secondhand' were nonetheless 'implicated in the cross-cultural poetics of this encounter'.[17] Recognising the cultural influence of poems based on secondary accounts is essential if the importance of Mont Blanc in British culture is to be fully understood.

In his biography of Coleridge, Richard Holmes also concentrates on the relationship between the 'Hymn' and Brun's poem. He views the summer and early autumn of 1802 as a post-Dejection Crisis period of rejuvenation for Coleridge that witnessed a renewed confidence in his creative faculties. Holmes points to the poet's physical recovery and notes that it coincided with a clearing of the air with his wife in regards to the Asra situation, almost certainly in May. The effect of the departure of the Wordsworths for France to settle the Annette Vallon affair on the 12th July is also seen as beneficial: 'Their absence seems to have had a curiously liberating effect on Coleridge.'[18] Holmes is struck by the failure of Coleridge to realise the brilliance of his prose accounts of the climb on Scafell in poetry. He views the 'Hymn' as an 'overtly religiose poem full of booming Teutonic piety' suggesting that despite the 'marvellous perceptions already gathered [...] Coleridge was unable to transfer these into poetry – indeed the whole conception of "transferring" what already existed so intensely in his prose was questionable.'[19] While I agree with Holmes that the prose is brilliant and the 'Hymn' is unsatisfactory, the poem should not be so readily dismissed. What Coleridge was attempting to do both with the climb and its transference to Mont Blanc for the poem was politically significant and this has not been fully recognised.

The methodology underpinning my reading of the 'Hymn' is similar to that employed by Paul Magnusson in his reading of the politics of 'Frost at Midnight' by unveiling the political significance of writings that may not be obviously political.[20] In *Landscapes of Liberty and Authority* (1996) Fulford adopts a similar approach when examining the complex relationship between Coleridge's landscape writings and the poet's

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[16] Hansen, p.133.
[17] Hansen, p.133.
[18] Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: Early Visions* (Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), p.325.
[19] Holmes, 1989, p.334.
[20] See Paul Magnusson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp.67-94.

shifting political positions during the 1790s and early 1800s.[21] Fulford's work has proved helpful to my reading of the 'Hymn' but it is also an important study with which mine can be contrasted. Coleridge's account to Sara Hutchinson of the descent of Broad Stand on Scafell is a key part of Fulford's chapter and quoted almost in its entirety. However, while Fulford recognises the Broad Stand descent as having political significance, this is limited to Coleridge's radicalism and domestic politics. Fulford gives no attention to the fact that the descent inspired the 'Hymn' and does not remark on the broader political significance of Coleridge having 'transferred' his Broad Stand experience to France at a time when France held such a problematic status for Britons regardless of their political allegiances.

Heidi Thomson sees Coleridge's publications in the *Morning Post* in September and October 1802 as evidence of a period of rejuvenation and as an assertion of independence from Wordsworth. For Thomson the 'Dejection Crisis' that culminated in the publication of 'Dejection. An Ode' in the *Morning Post* on the day of Wordsworth's wedding to Mary Hutchinson on the 4 October 1802 'may have contributed to a certain neglect of Coleridge's contemporary publications'. Thomson identifies an interest in France among these writings and examines the 'Comparison of France and Rome' essay that was presented in three parts and published in the *Morning Post* over the course of four separate days (21, 25, 29 September and 2 October 1802). For Thomson the essay reveals 'a shift in the *Morning Post,* largely carried by Coleridge's journalism, away from qualified support of Bonaparte to a jingoistic stance in which anti-French sentiment mingles with predictions of the fall of Bonaparte'.[22] She argues that Coleridge's portrayal of France 'oscillates between partisan support of the Royalist cause against Napoleon and vilification of anything French'. To which she adds:

> [S]ome of the writings display for the first time Coleridge's outspoken patriotism in which the critique of the autocratic Napoleon lapses into the xenophobic condemnation of the country to the extent that any cultural association could be construed as sedition: "We must be jealous of the progress of their truly slavish language among us; we must be detectors and detesters of their mock philosophy, of their false and boastful pretensions in science and literature, equally as in politics".[23]

Thomson may be overstating Coleridge's position here. Nonetheless, recognising a degree of antagonism towards France in his writings is important in realising the contemporary meaning of the 'Hymn'. Although Thomson gives only limited attention to the 'Hymn', she

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[21] See Tim Fulford, *Landscape, Liberty and Authority: Poetry, Criticism and Politics from Thomson to Wordsworth* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996), especially the chapter, 'Coleridge and the Fields of Liberty'.
[22] Thomson, p.77.
[23] Thomson, p.77. The Coleridge quotation is from the 25 September *Morning Post* article 'Comparison of the Present State of France with that of Rome under Julius and Augustus Caesar. II.' in *CE*, p.324.

does note that in the poem 'the mountain is also associated with a "kingly spirit" in the Savoy Alps, a royalist reference at a time when Napoleon's increasingly expansionist imperialism would soon become the subject of [the Comparison of France and Rome]'.[24] However, having made this connection, Thomson offers no more analysis of it.

The publication of the 'Hymn' in the *Morning Post* on 11 September coincided with Coleridge's renewed discourse on Napoleon – in particular the publication of the 'Comparison of France with Rome' essay. This essay reveals a sea-change in Coleridgean thinking from moderate tacit support for Napoleon and the ideals of the Revolution to a position in which patriotic principles superseded radical idealism. Napoleon had been declared First Consul on 4 August and although for Coleridge the idea of the comparison between ancient Rome and modern day France dated back at least as far as May 1802, the declaration was a key influence upon the essay. On 27 September, amidst the instalments of the essay, the *Morning Post* published an unacknowledged epigram by Coleridge: 'A Hint to Premiers and First Consuls' followed by the reissue of 'France. An Ode' on 14 October. Because these works, including the 'Hymn', each shone a spotlight across the Channel, and given the proximity of their publication dates, they create an important grouping within Coleridge's corpus. Given such strident attitudes towards France and Napoleon in his writings published the same month as the 'Hymn', Coleridge's transference from the sublime British high ground of Scafell to a prominent feature of newly appropriated French territory deserves critical scrutiny.

This chapter will begin by briefly establishing the changed political and cultural status of Mont Blanc between 1789 and 1802. I will suggest that works that traded on Mont Blanc as a symbol of the alpine sublime and envisioned it as a space exempt from contemporary state politics were nonetheless subject to the mountain's shifting political meaning in the sphere of their cultural reception. I will concentrate on the relationship between the poem and Coleridge's engagement with Napoleon. Finally, having established that the 'Hymn' should be read as a political poem, I will question what the climb on Scafell and the act of its transference to Mont Blanc says about both the politics of Coleridge's poetics and the power of Mont Blanc in British literature.

Mont Blanc 1789-1802

Mont Blanc became a contested space after the commencement of the French Revolution. Rumours of a planned counter-revolutionary attack to be launched from the strategic position of Savoy's mountains had abounded in the National Assembly throughout 1791 and 1792. These rumours increased after the deposition of Louis XVI in August 1792. In October the newly declared French Republic invaded and annexed Savoy, thereby making

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[24] Thomson, p.85.

what was already the iconic high point of Western Europe part of French territory. Ostensibly the newly formed National Convention was impelled to invade Savoy through a need to protect the Revolution rather than a desire to ascend the first rung on the ladder to empire building. Pressure for the annexation had primarily arisen from a need to combat Royalist forces and émigrés for whom Savoy had proved a military sanctuary that could facilitate safe passage into Piedmont. Theoretically the annexation would offer Republican forces increased security because moving the border to the mountain passes of Savoy made France easier to defend on its south eastern frontier. Nonetheless, the invasion was given ideological as well as strategic impetus and framed by the Convention as an act of liberation and a legitimate spread of Revolutionary ideals. Henri Grégoire, who held the presidency of the Convention for a fortnight in November 1792 and was instrumental in the annexation attested 'that of 655 communities [in Savoy], 580 had expressly charged their deputies to demand the union; seventy had given them unlimited powers; and only one had opposed the measure, demanding that Savoy should be a separate Republic'.[25] Grégoire assimilated the geographical identity of the Savoyards with the ideals of the Revolution: 'the man of the mountains is truly a man of liberty […]. Our union, our liberty and the sovereignty of peoples will be as durable as your mountains, as immutable as the heavens.'[26] This regional iconography of the mountain soon transmuted into national iconography.

Following the annexation, Savoy was promptly renamed the Department of Mont Blanc. Thereafter the mountain was used to symbolise the liberty and power of the Revolution. As Hansen notes: 'At Chambery, [a model of] Mont Blanc was festooned with flames, and torrents of water flushed away crowns, banners, and symbols of Italy from its slopes.'[27] Mont Blanc neatly fitted the Jacobin moniker of *Montagnards* and the use of a 'white mountain, or to give its proper name, *le Mont Blanc'* was a key motif in the Jacobin Festival of Reason on 10th November 1793 at Notre Dame in Paris.[28] After the Reign of Terror and the fall of Robespierre and the Montagnards in July 1794, the Convention briefly disassociated itself from its former mountain iconography and Mont Blanc was, for a short period, marginalised. However, the symbolic potential of Mont Blanc to represent the potency of the Revolution proved difficult to resist and for most of the mid-to-late 1790s it continued to represent a key battleground for the Revolution – a literal and psychological front line between the Revolution's central principles and the surrounding threat of despotism that would seek to undo them. The ongoing importance of the mountain to the

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[25] Gregoire's argument to the National Convention in 1792 is paraphrased in Calonne, *The Political State of Europe at the Beginning of 1796,* trans. by D. St Quentin (London, 1796), p.873.
[26] Henri Gregoire in Jean Nicolas, *La Revolution Francaise dans les Alpes: Dauphine et Savoie, 1789-1799* (Toulouse: Biblioteque historique Privat, 1989), pp.196-198. I have used Hansen's translation, p.122.
[27] Hansen, p.123.
[28] Hansen, p.127.

French state is emphasised by the retention of the name 'Department of Mont Blanc' throughout the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods.

As late as February 1792, William Pitt had reduced defence expenditure on the grounds that 'there never was a time in the history of this country, when, from the situation in Europe, we might more reasonably expect fifteen years of peace'. [29] Within a year, the annexation of Savoy and the execution of Louis XVI on 21 January 1793 provided evidence of the threat posed to British domestic stability by French expansionism and the export of Revolutionary and Republican principles. Britain's changed policy towards France was seismic. Mont Blanc's cultural identity divided in such a way as to allow a degree of parallelism whereby several Mont Blancs co-existed in the public consciousness. In Britain, the war with France ensured that new first-hand descriptions of the mountain ceased. Nonetheless, the legacy of Mont Blanc in the tradition of the alpine sublime and as a locus of scientific discovery continued to be promulgated by the reissuing of anachronistic pre-war accounts in the periodical press. Yet added to this was a sense of Mont Blanc and Savoy as transitional political spaces in which the spread of Revolutionary ideals beyond French territory was being tested.

After annexation the people of Savoy, freed from subjugation within the autocratic Kingdom of Sardinia, were theoretically able to enjoy the democracy, fraternity and liberty offered by the Revolution. Annexation meant a new system of regional government that enabled social restructuring. This, however, caused fissures that divided communities. The seething divisions that had arisen between Dr Gabriel Paccard and his partner Jacques Balmat on the first ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786 were compounded by the political situation. Those formerly excluded from power found new opportunities. Paccard was among them. He became Mayor of Chamonix and held a number of other important government positions. In contrast, Balmat, a committed Royalist and Catholic, took part in counter-Revolutionary agitation in Savoy, one instance of which saw Paccard's residence burnt down, while on a separate occasion Paccard was nearly beaten to death.[30] Despite instances of revolt, the newly-founded Department of Mont Blanc symbolised a successful region of liberation for the Revolution. Britain found herself at war with France in February 1793 and counterrevolutionary uprisings in Savoy forced the National Convention to secure and occupy the region with greater military presence in order to maintain rule and enforce liberty. The following contemporary analysis characterises prevailing loyalist sentiment in Britain:

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[29] William Pitt in Eric J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain 1783-1870*, 2 ed. (London: Longman, 1996), p.80.

[30] A history of the ascent of Mont Blanc is not complete without the story of the acrimonious divisions between Paccard and Balmat that followed the climb, a fissure made greater by their being on different sides of the Revolution (see Hansen, pp.90-117).

The Convention, intoxicated with their good fortune [at the Republic's success in crossing the Var and taking Nice], forgetful of their recent renunciation of foreign conquests, and yielding to the impulse of rapacity, or ambition, decreed that Savoy should be immediately annexed to France under the name "the department of Mont Blanc." Such were the first fruits of the boasted "Rights of Man," and such respect manifested for the principles, upon which the Republic itself was founded![31]

The charge that annexation undermined the principles of the Revolution could easily have come from British radicals. Indeed, the bloodiness of the Revolution, the annexation rather than liberation of Savoy, and the onset of war with France were also difficult for British radicals broadly sympathetic to the aims of the Revolution. Frenchification of Mont Blanc in 1792 proved problematic for how the British regarded the mountain: for the loyalist it was an emblem of France the bitter rival, while for the radical it may have been a beacon of liberty, but it was nonetheless a *French* beacon of liberty that denied Savoyard self-determination and was subject to the contradictions and disfigurement of revolutionary principles and therefore troublesome.

To write about Mont Blanc in Britain in the 1790s was to write, however distantly, of the Revolution. On 7 January 1793, two weeks after the renaming of Savoy and a fortnight before the execution of Louis XVI, the *Phyrrus,* a Temeraire class 84-gun ship of the French navy, was renamed *Mont-Blanc* (see below):
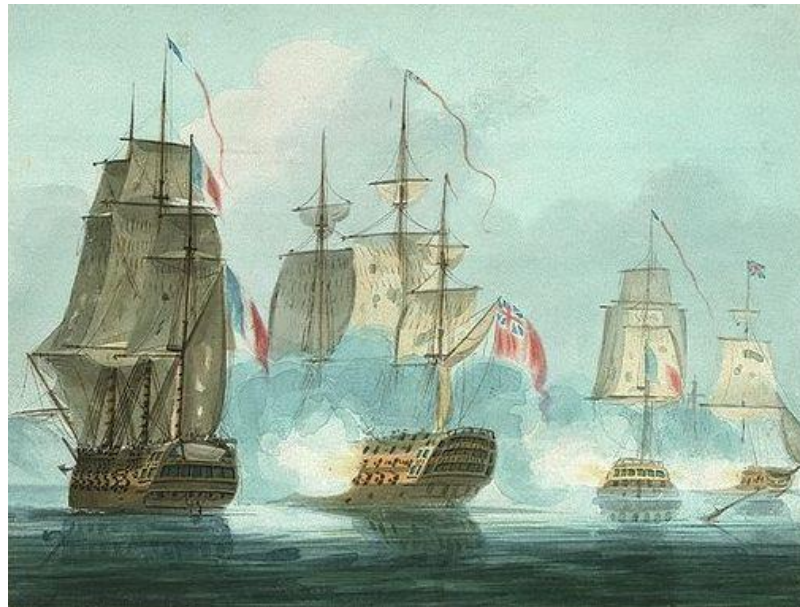

Figure 21 *HMS Caesar* engaging *Mont Blanc* at the Battle of Ortegal, 4 November 1805 depicted in *Les Contrebandiers* (c. 1805; watercolour; unknown artist; National Maritime Museum).

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[31] *A View of the Recent State of Great Britain and France at the Commencement of the Year 1796* (London: J. Derrett, 1796), p.20.

Mont-Blanc was referred to on a number of occasions in the British press and featured in comparative lists of France and Britain's respective naval capabilities. Just like the newly formed Department of Mont Blanc, the power of the ship's name to affect the identity of the mountain needs to be taken into account. *Mont-Blanc* took part in the Battle of Trafalgar on 21 October 1805 and two weeks later was captured by the Royal Navy on 4 November 1805 at the Battle of Cape Ortegal. It was promptly commissioned into the Royal Navy and became *HMS Mont Blanc*. The story of *Mont-Blanc* from 1793 through the Napoleonic period parallels the struggle for the cultural identity of the mountain as both the British state and British culture sought to free the mountain from its French identity. The relationship between the semantic complexity of 'Mont Blanc' in the period and national thinking undoubtedly affected how the mountain might be considered. Indeed, shifting attitudes are seen in Coleridge's description on 29 September 1802, shortly after the publication of the 'Hymn', of the British public's attitude to France and how it could be turned to reflect positively upon Britain:

> [T]he English utter the words – "THE FRENCH REPUBLIC," as a spell, as a love-philtre, that enamours them of their own constitution, of their own dear island; that is at once a majestic kingdom, and a free commonwealth. Formerly, when we spoke of Frenchmen, we used the words, slavery and wooden shoes; now we say, LIBERTY and EQUALITY – and we mean the same things, and mingle no whit less pity with our thoughts, and infinitely more contempt.[32]

If to write or read about France was to reflect upon the condition of one's own nation, then there is necessarily reflexivity in Coleridge's transference of the Scafell experience to poetry about Mont Blanc. Once it had been appropriated as a key symbol of the French Revolution, Mont Blanc could no longer exist simply as a geographical feature and emblem of the sublime free of nationalistic perceptions. In the note that introduced the 'Hymn' in the *Morning Post*, Coleridge explains the location of Chamonix without referring to France or the Department of Mont Blanc. Instead he refers to the then obsolete 'Barony of Faucigny in the Savoy Alps'.[33] Partly this is from Brun's notes. Nonetheless, Coleridge's denial in the 'Hymn' of the contemporary statehood and territorial claim over Mont Blanc can be read as his seeing the mountain through a nationalist lens – if it could not be British then it at least *must* not be French.

The imminent threat of French invasion and the rise of Napoleon further problematised the status of Mont Blanc in British culture in the years leading up to and following Coleridge's publication of the 'Hymn'. In the wake of Napoleon's crossing of the Great St Bernard Pass close to the Mont Blanc Massif during the Second Italian Campaign

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[32] *CE*, p.331.
[33] *CP*, Variorum, p.925.

of 1800, the mountain became part of the mythologised story of Napoleon's empire building. Jacques Louis David's painting *Napoleon at the Saint Bernard* (1801) or *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* as it is more commonly now called appears to depict Mont Blanc du Tacul, Mont Maudit and Mont Blanc's domed summit in the distance behind the rear of Napoleon's horse (see Figure below):

Figure 22: *Napoleon at the Saint Bernard* [Napoleon Crossing the Alps] by Jacques Louis David (1801, oil on canvas, Château de Malmaison).

Mont Blanc is only 10km from the Grand Saint Bernard pass and David seems to have exploited this by presenting Mont Blanc as part of Napoleon's dominion in four of his five versions of the painting to add greater symbolic depth to an already highly symbolic painting. According to the US National Gallery of Art, 'David was in fact, though not in

title, Robespierre's minister of the arts, to whom it fell to plan the huge national pageants that were the Revolution's chief means of mass indoctrination. He designed their settings of artificial mountains, symbolic sculptures, and monumental altars.'[34] It is significant therefore, as Hansen suggests, that during Roberspierre's time as leader, 'the French government incorporated Mont Blanc into the new regime of festivals and practices that constituted the revolution.'[35] For David, it appears the mountain remained something he could use to connote political power – only in this instance, transferring from the earlier power of the Revolution to the power of a future Emperor.[36] David's reference to Mont Blanc is admittedly subtle. Yet it offers a hint of how the mountain could be associated. To read or hear about Napoleon's crossing was to bring to mind the Alps and for many Britons, who had only a generalised sense of the Alps, the Alps were metonymically represented by their high point Mont Blanc. It is difficult therefore to separate Napoleon from the reception of the 'Hymn', the more so because French cultural artefacts that made their way across the channel increasingly appeared to associate him with the mountain. An example of this is provided by an 1804 medal called *L'École des Mines du Mont-Blanc*. During the course of Napoleon's ascendancy and rule of France, 141 medals were produced that commemorated key achievements of his career. The 34th medal to be produced is shown in two images below:

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[34] <https://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/artist-info.1212.html> accessed July 2017
[35] Hansen, p.126.
[36] See Hansen, pp.126-128

Figures 23 Napoleonic Medal *L'École des Mines du Mont-Blanc* (1804)

On the medal's obverse is the newly crowned Emperor Napoleon complete with laurel, while on the reverse Mont Blanc is personified as a mountain god. The bald head of the god

represents the dome of Mont Blanc and extends into clouds. An accurate depiction of the summit of Mont Blanc can be seen protruding above the clouds on top of the bald head. The importance of Mont Blanc to French industry is shown by the miners that are at work below the god's right leg, while the god's hair – complete with fish – flows from the mountain and symbolises Mont Blanc's role as a source of water. The idea of Mont Blanc as a God follows a tradition, as Laskey suggests, of anthropomorphised mountain god figures.[37] Yet it also shows the reverence in which the French state held the mountain that attests to the power of the state and the success of Napoleon: an Empire that can appropriate and harness the power of such a being must surely be a formidable one.

In the Shadow of Napoleon: 'Chamouny; The Hour Before Sunrise. A Hymn'

For Bainbridge, between 1798 and 1802 Coleridge viewed Napoleon optimistically as a figure with the potential to rescue the ideals of the Revolution: 'Coleridge […] looked hopefully towards [Napoleon] not only as a leader whose exercise of power would justify its underhand seizure but as a "genius", a "man of science", a "philosopher", a "poet" and a "peacemaker".'[38] Bainbridge argues that 'as late as May 1802 Coleridge may still have seen Napoleon as a figure of political promise and potentiality who could use his new position as Consul for Life to very real effect.'[39] While Napoleon did not actually become Consul for Life until the 4 August 1802, much of Coleridge's writing about Napoleon does, as Bainbridge suggests, give a 'sense of awe at the sublimity and possibilities of the enormous power possessed by Napoleon and its potential for good and ill'.[40] I agree with Bainbridge that the summer of 1802 proved the turning point and disillusion was in the air. As Bainbridge suggests, 'Coleridge and Southey, like Wordsworth, grieved for Buonaparte in 1802.'[41] For Bainbridge, Coleridge's disillusion was founded in the failure of the Treaty of Amiens: 'The "experiment" of the peace, as Coleridge termed it, revealed Napoleon's "undisguised and unqualified ambitious designs" as he ordered a second invasion of Switzerland, refused to remove his army from Holland and threatened Egypt, Syria, the Greek Islands and Malta.'[42] Undoubtedly French expansionism was a key factor in

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[37] Laskey suggests the figure of Mont Blanc on the coin was influenced by John de Bologna's Father Apenninus (now generally known as the Colossus of the Appenine) at Villa di Pratolino. While similar in posture, the Colossus is markedly different and has a full head of hair. A further medal 'Le Simplon' produced in 1807 uses the Mont Blanc god and commemorates Napoleon's construction of the Simplon Pass road between 1801 and 1805. The idea of the waters of Mont Blanc as life giving is a feature of Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' and numerous other texts (see Chapter Four).
[38] Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.24.
[39] Bainbridge, 1995, p.25.
[40] Bainbridge, 1995, p.25.
[41] Bainbridge, 1995, p.51.
[42] Bainbridge, 1995, p.51.

Coleridge's changed attitude to Napoleon. The 'Comparison of France and Rome' essay mocks the French leader's belief in fate and rallies the British public to maintain its wartime resolve and check his expansionism: 'Let the Chief Consul' Coleridge writes, 'learn to submit to "FATE", if he finds that it is still his fate to struggle with the spirit of English freedom, and the virtues which are the offspring of that spirit!' promising that Napoleon will be confronted by 'the GENIUS OF GREAT BRITAIN, which blew up his Aegyptian navy into the air, and blighted his Syrian laurels, still follows him with a calm and dreadful eye, and in peace, equally as in war, still watches for that liberty, in which alone the Genius of our Isle lives.'[43] Such stirring patriotism was paralleled by Coleridge's concern for the effect Napoleon was having over the liberty of the pen through expanded press censorship.

The 'Comparison' essay presents Napoleon as an opponent of a free press and conversely positions Coleridge as its defender:

> The very newspaper, which our reader has in his hand, and which, in a few hours hence, he may probably rumple up for "vile uses," is so powerful an agent, as to constitute the difference between the probable duration of a despot's reign in the present age, and that which it often was in the time of Imperial Rome. […] The press is the only "*infernal machine"* which is truly formidable to a modern despot.

This belief in the inherent influence of his writing might not have been altogether misplaced. According to Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 'it is a well-known fact that Napoleon read the leading articles in the *Morning Post*, and deeply resented their tone and spirit.'[44] Certainly the *Morning Post* liked to give the impression to its readers that Napoleon was counted among them. Indeed, the edition of the *Morning Post* that carried the 'Hymn' on page three contained an article on page two that noted: 'The *Morning Post* is read daily to the Chief Consul'.[45] All this may well be overstating Napoleon's interest in the British press. Nonetheless, Coleridge was aware that Napoleon *might* read his work and would later boast of his influence upon him. On the 2 October 1803 he wrote to his brother George: 'Heaven knows! What a sacrifice I made […] to embark on this stormy Sea of Politics – but felt it my Duty, the more especially as my former Essays during the Peace were those that had so extravagantly irritated the First Consul.'[46] In chapter ten of *Biographia Literaria* (1817) Coleridge suggests Napoleon demanded his arrest in Italy in 1805-1806 because of the 1802 'Comparison' essay and that it was this that encouraged the poet's departure from Rome.[47]

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[43] *CE*, p.320.

[44] *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: William Heinemann, 1895), p.498n.

[45] 'London: Saturday, September 11th', *Morning Post* (London, 1802), p.2. Daniel Stuart, editor and proprietor, is the likely author of this article.

[46] *CL*, p.1006.

[47] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Works: Biographia Literaria,* vol 1, ed. by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (London: Routledge, 1983), p.217. See also Coburn, *Essays*, pp.401n.-402n.

Certainly it seems plausible that Coleridge's French-focussed publications in 1802 were issued with an eye to Napoleon reading them. The same could be said of the 'Epigram' (more familiarly known as 'A Good Great Man') in the *Morning Post* on the 23 September. In the poem, greatness is considered an innate quality and contrasted with things that appear to adorn greatness but do not in themselves lead to it: 'What would'st thou have a good great man obtain? | Place? Titles? Salary? A gilded Chain? | Or Throne of Corses which his sword hath slain?'[48] Given that 'A Good Great Man' was followed by 'A Hint to Premiers and First Consuls' on 27 September there is a sense that Coleridge's position had moved from distant objective observer to seeing the Corsican as a personal rival with whom he could communicate indirectly through the British press.

If, as I am contending, French politics and the cultural association of Mont Blanc with the Revolution and Napoleon's crossing of the Alps were in the mind of Coleridge – and the minds of readers – in September 1802, then the shadow of Napoleon necessarily falls across the 'Hymn'. While the extent to which Napoleon can be traced in the earliest version of the poem is limited, a direct link between Coleridge's description of Mont Blanc and Napoleon can be read in later versions in the adjustment of line 29. At the very least, none of the aspects of the 'Hymn' that appear to allude to Napoleon are present in Brun's original poem. In the *Morning Post* edition of 1802, line 29 refers to Mont Blanc as 'And thou, O silent mountain, sole and bare'. By 1809, for a version published in *The Friend* on 26 October, the line had become 'Thou first and chief, stern Monarch of the Vale' and was used, as with later editions, to begin a new verse. In 1812 it was altered to the version that formed the basis of the poem for the *Sibylline Leaves* (1817) and the 'silent mountain' had become 'Thou first and chief, sole Sovran of the Vale!' (l. 29).[49] On one level the change could be dismissed as playing upon the inherited literary clichés in the language used to describe Mont Blanc and the monarchical motifs routinely applied to the mountain since Windham's *An Account*.[50] Certainly this appears the case with 'Thou Kingly spirit throned among the hills' of line 81. However, in no other text is Mont Blanc referred to as 'first and chief' and the specific nature of this monarchical motif is highly suggestive of an implied relationship between the mountain and Napoleon.

In his 1802 *Morning Post* articles, Coleridge routinely used the interchangeable 'First Consul' or 'Chief Consul' to refer to Napoleon.[51] The tautological 'first and chief' of the altered line 29 therefore suggests Coleridge is drawing a parallel between Mont Blanc and Napoleon. The 'first and chief, sole Sovran of the Vale' of line 29 is, on line 31, 'visited all night by troops of stars'. The use of 'troops' here adds a military image that further hints

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[48] *CP,* I.I, p.724, ll.7-9.
[49] For textual variations of the 'Hymn' see *CP, Variorum,* pp.922-933.
[50] Unusually for Mont Blanc literature, Brun does not use a regal motif to describe the mountain.
[51] For examples of their use in close proximity see *CE*, pp.319-320 and p.365.

at an allusion to Napoleon, the supreme military commander of the age. It is also possible to read a military connotation in 'Deep is the sky, and black: transpicuous, deep,| An ebon mass! Methinks thou piercest it | As with a wedge!' (*MP*. ll.8-10). One meaning of 'wedge' refers to a troop formation.[52] Milton used it in this manner in *Paradise Regained*: 'All Horsemen, in which fight they most excel; | See how in warlike muster they appear, | In Rhombs and wedges, and half-moons, and wings' (3. l.309). Later Percy Shelley did so in *Hellas*: 'Thrice their keen wedge of battle pierced our lines' (l.377). The borrowing from Milton is certainly possible. The line preceding the use of wedge in the 'Hymn' that describes a sky that is both 'black' and 'transpicuous' may have been inspired by a line changed by Richard Bentley, the editor of a well-known 1732 edition of *Paradise Lost,* from 'No light, but rather darkness visible' to 'No light, but rather a tran-spicuous gloom' (1. l. 63).[53] Transpicuous was a word Milton often used which is why Bentley chose it. Coleridge appears only to have written the word once more, doing so in a notebook entry of December 1803 to describe his urine. It is not unreasonable to think that Milton's 'utter darkness' (1. l. 72) that follows shortly after the 'transpicuous gloom' found its way into the 'Hymn' in the lines 'Who call'd you forth from Night and utter Death? | From darkness let you loose' (*MP* ll.39-40). Given this relationship, Coleridge does appear to be considering the 'wedge' referred to in the 'Hymn' in terms of its military connotation and as such it draws us once more towards engagement with Napoleon. In this sense, the presence of Napoleon in the poem is not just between the lines, as Liu suggests when reading Wordsworth's account of the Simplon Pass in *The Prelude,* but actually *in* the lines as Bainbridge suggests when countering Liu's reading of Book VI.[54]

If we accept 'first and chief' as an allusion to Napoleon, then later editions of the 'Hymn' position Mont Blanc as a rival to the First Consul of the French Republic. Indeed, the assertion of 'sole Sovran' promotes the mountain at the expense of Napoleon. Whether Coleridge had Napoleon in mind when he first wrote the 'Hymn' or whether the 'first and chief' is a retrospective insertion of Napoleon is difficult to say. A letter Coleridge sent to Sir George and Lady Beaumont in October 1803 included a manuscript version of the 'Hymn'. Both line 29 and line 30 are close to the *Morning Post* version of the previous year: 'And thou, thou silent Mountain, lone and bare! | O struggling with the Darkness all the Night'. However, Coleridge attached a note to line 30: 'I had written a much finer Line when Sca'Fell was in my Thoughts – viz – O blacker than the Darkness all the Night, [|] And visited & c –'. In the context of the letter the note is odd. The Beaumont manuscript version of the 'Hymn' has a number of significant changes and additions that are not in other

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[52] The wedge formation was used by the Romans as an aggressive means of piercing enemy lines.
[53] 'Transpicuous' was changed in later editions. By the time of the *Sibylline Leaves* it had become 'substantial'. 'Wedge', however, is consistent in all versions.
[54] See Chapter Three.

versions of the poem but no notes are added to these. The logic of the change makes sense: if the idea of Scafell in August at night is compared to Mont Blanc at night, the former with its grassy cover and dark rhyolite crags *could* be blacker than the darkness, while Mont Blanc, with its snow covered dome, could not. Why Coleridge would interrupt his transcription to point out the 'finer line' of a year earlier seems puzzling, but it does at least reveal that this part of the poem continued to be subject to Coleridge's doubts and rewriting. Indeed, line 29 is the line most adjusted across all eleven versions of the 'Hymn'. Consistent in all versions is the idea of the summit being in concert with troops of stars that magnify the command and power of the mountain. If in the autumn of 1802 Coleridge was contemplating the transience and demise of Napoleon in lines such as 'And this the third [truth], that thou must die!'[55] and 'this new Roman Empire will be of short duration',[56] it was in contrast to the greatness and permanence – that 'habitation from eternity'(l.12) and 'Parent of perpetual streams' (l.38) – that Coleridge was able to register in Mont Blanc.

Echoes of 'Kubla Khan' can be read in the 'Hymn' and suggest Coleridge recalled his earlier poem while writing the later one. Building upon the work of Pirie and Rudich among others, Bainbridge has argued the figure of Kubla Khan offered Coleridge an allegorical Napoleon.[57] This seems unlikely given that 'Kubla Khan' was probably written in 1797. However, if Bainbridge's argument is accepted, then the relationship between 'Kubla Khan' and the 'Hymn' may be seen as another means by which Coleridge was engaging with Napoleon. The interchange between nature, mountain, song and worship is a key motif of both 'Kubla Khan' and the 'Hymn'. Thoughts of the pleasure dome in 'Kubla Khan' are prompted by the recollection of a song about a semi-mythical mountain, Mount Abora. The idea of this song leads the speaker to muse: 'That with music loud and long, | I would build that dome in air | That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!' (ll.45-47). The bonding of song and mountain/dome is repeated in the 'Hymn', while the icy caves of the pleasure dome are recalled by the 'icy caverns' of Mont Blanc. In the 'Hymn' the speaker stares upwards from the valley to the summit and questions: 'Hast thou the charm to stay the morning-star | In his steep course – so long he seems to pause | On thy bald awful head' (ll. 1-3). The idea of Mont Blanc having a bald head in the 'Hymn' is borne from the resemblance of the summit to a dome.[58] The bald head formed by the icy summit in the 'Hymn' then either transmogrifies into a 'crystal shrine' or finds one in the starlit sky beyond the 'pierced' fabric of darkness. The crystal shrine appears to be a 'habitation from eternity' (ll.11-12) offering a glimpse of a world beyond our own. There is a sense here of the 'sunny pleasure-

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[55] 'A Hint to Premiers and First Consuls', *CP,* p.743.
[56] *CE*, p.334.
[57] See Bainbridge, 1995, pp.21-27.
[58] Thomas Whalley refers to the summit and its two shoulders as domes several times in his *Mont Blanc* (1788) and later Shelley would incorporate the dome into his 'Mont Blanc' (1817).

dome with caves of ice' from 'Kubla Khan'.[59] The awe felt at the pleasure dome in 'Kubla Khan' is mirrored in the 'Hymn' as the speaker stands before the dome of Mont Blanc in a state of worship: 'I raise my head, awhile bowed low | In adoration' (ll.75-76). It seems that the 'bald awful head' and 'habitation from eternity' in the 'Hymn' offers us that 'dome in air' promised in 'Kubla Khan'. Coleridge is probably drawing a symbolic association between dome and church here – and suggesting alternatives to power, whether that held by the church or by Napoleon, that offer a metaphorical deistic alternative constructed in nature – an idea Coleridge also promoted in 'To Nature' (1836, composed 1797-8 or 1820): 'So will I build my altar in the fields, | And the blue sky my fretted dome shall be'.[60]

A Climb 'transferred' to Mont Blanc

Patrick Vincent, Diane Piccitto and Angela Esterhammer have argued that there was a 'close association in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers' minds between Rousseau, Switzerland and the revolution in sensibility now known as Romanticism'. They suggest that this sensibility could be imaginatively displaced onto other settings, including Wales and the Lake District. In doing so, writers were 'hiding from sight the role that Switzerland played as an origin and primary locus of Romantic feeling'.[61] In the 'Hymn' this process of reading Switzerland onto domestic landscape is complicated by Coleridge re-reading the subsequent domestic landscape onto the Alps – creating a knotty exchange. The relationship between the Broad Stand descent and Mont Blanc is a difficult one to assess. Yet before venturing further in trying to understand its significance, it is important to assess the climb itself.

To my knowledge, no other critic looking at the descent has actually repeated the descent for the purposes of understanding Coleridge's experiences and descriptions. This includes Alan Vardy who has given significant attention to Coleridge's descriptions of the climb and Bainbridge who considered it briefly in 'Writing from "the perilous ridge": Romanticism and the Invention of Rock Climbing'. Cooper et al at Lancaster University have mapped Coleridge's walking tour for an experimental geocritical project using GIS tools. In support of this, they have pieced together Coleridge's notebook and letter descriptions of the climb to create a chronological documented account of the descent.[62] Alan Vardy, who offers the most detailed analysis of the descent in 'Coleridge on Broad Stand' appears to have been intent on discovering connections between the 'Hymn' and both

[59] *CP,* I.I, p.514. l.36.

[60] *CP*, I.I, p.993. ll.9-10.

[61] *Romanticism, Rousseau, Switzerland: New Prospects,* ed. by Angela Esterhammer, Diane Piccitto and Patrick Vincent (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), p.2.

[62] <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/mappingthelakes/Coleridge%20Introduction.html.> The GIS mapping of Coleridge's tour by the team at Lancaster University is a useful document. However, it contains a number of errors (see below).

the climb and the wider tour that are not always justified.[63] Indeed, he draws on a comparison between waterfalls seen in Eskdale with the 'five wild torrents' in the Hymn which actually represented the conventional contemporary view of the five glaciers coming off Mont Blanc that protrude into the Chamonix valley and have nothing to do with Eskdale. Vardy's fundamental difficulty in his essay is that although his literary analysis is rich, he does not properly understand Coleridge's descent because he cannot empathise with Coleridge on the route or as a climber. Attempting to understand the climb on the ground from Coleridge's perspective is of course naturally fraught with difficulty. Nonetheless, as with the other field research ventures in this thesis, there has been a degree of value in having done so.

Other critical analyses, including those of Vardy and Bainbridge, have been content to treat Coleridge's ascent of Scafell as an innate natural exercise.[64] However, it is worth questioning why he undertook the ascent at all. Although Coleridge did occasionally venture onto the high tops, it was not his habit to regularly climb mountains. No other critic appears to have noticed this. Indeed, on the rest of his nine day tour of the Lake District, despite unseasonably dry August weather, Coleridge did not visit another mountain summit. He does not offer an explanation as to why he chose to ascend Scafell. However, the impetus appears to be twofold. A primary reason, bound up with the second, is the height of Scafell. Coleridge reiterates the superior height of Scafell several times. Indeed, it is not impossible that Coleridge genuinely set out up Scafell – in Coleridge's mind the potential highest ground in England if not also Britain – as a substitute exercise for an ascent of that more famed highest ground, Mont Blanc. The transference played upon the fame of Mont Blanc as the highest ground in Western Europe and its status within British and European culture as a metonym for Alpine sublimity.[65] In his letter to Sotheby, Coleridge was clearly fascinated by the idea of height and magnitude. Likewise, in the letter to Sara Hutchinson on the 5 August, Coleridge notes: 'I ascended Sca' Fell' adding that it is 'believed by the Shepherds here to be

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[63] Vardy, Alan 'Coleridge on Broad Stand', Coleridge and his Circle: New Perspectives, *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net,* 61, April 2012

[64] Subsequent to his writings on Coleridge's climb, Bainbridge has given attention to the motivation behind various British mountain climbs (although not Coleridge's) see Bainbridge, 2018.

[65] Certainly the fame of Mont Blanc was such that the name 'Mont Blanc' was not used in either the body of the 'Hymn' or the letter to William Sotheby. This approach was not entirely successful. Line 3 of the *Morning Post* edition reads 'On thy bald awful head, O Chamouny!' while in the letter to the Beaumont's it had become 'On thy bald Top, O Chamouny!' Coleridge clearly had doubts about using 'Chamouny' as a substitute for the mountain that towered above it because the line was changed for the Lowell manuscript and by 1807 the line had become 'On thy bald awful Head, Sovran Blanc!' Only in a manuscript version of the Hymn, included in a letter to Sir George and Lady Beaumont on the 22 September 1803, did Coleridge name the mountain in full in the body of the poem; he did so in the title: 'Mont Blanc, the summit of the Vale of Chamouny, an Hour Before Sunrise – An Hymn'. The reluctance to name the mountain explicitly follows both Brun in 1791 and Wordsworth in 1793. Wordsworth chose the oblique 'mountain nam'd of white' (see *WDS*, p.47). Nonetheless, Coleridge, like Brun and Wordsworth, did refer to 'Mont Blanc' explicitly in an accompanying note.

higher than either Helvellyn or Skiddaw.'[66] Similarly, in a letter to Robert Southey of 9 August 1802 Coleridge writes: 'Thursday morning crossed the mountains, & ascended Sca' fell, which is more than a 100 yards higher than either Helvellyn or Skiddaw'.[67] The assertion of Scafell's superior height is significant. In comparative lists routinely published in the periodical press the highest mountain in Britain was given either as Skiddaw or Helvellyn. This was despite the fact that Scafell Pike and its lower sister, Scafell, were both higher and that these highest Lakeland fells were nonetheless considerably lower than many mountains in Wales and lots of mountains in Scotland. The highest ground in a country harbours a psychological and political importance for a nation far in excess of its geographical properties. This trend became apparent in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century with the increased exploration of mountains and high terrain.[68] The likely second impetus behind ascent was that a spirit of adventure and exploration had overtaken him. Almost certainly he had directions and information about the summit from local shepherds before making his ascent. Yet he offers no recognition and does not give voice to these locals. Instead, he emphasises that he is almost certainly the first non-shepherd to ascend the peak. The ego of being the 'first' to undertake something should not be underestimated. This was, after all, less than twenty years since Saussure had found fame for his ascents of Mont Blanc. Even a small share of an exploratory first may well have appealed to Coleridge – especially given that this was somewhere Wordsworth had not been and also because he was trying to impress Sara 'Asra' Hutchinson. He writes to Sara: 'I am now at this moment writing to you […] surely the first letter ever written from the Top of Sca'fell!' These are the words of a man pleased with his own achievement, revelling in his ego and advertising his masculine physical qualities to a desired mate. They also reveal the type of implicit class separation between the achievements of an educated gentleman and the lower classes – in this instance represented by local shepherds. A similar sense of subtle class biases has been discerned by Duffy, Hansen and others in how Saussure's ascent of Mont Blanc was received in comparison to the ascents by Paccard and Balmat.[69]

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[66] *CL*, p.839.

[67] *CL*, p.845.

[68] Presently this is the case for most of the world's countries. Examples in Europe include the representation of Triglav on the flag of Slovenia, the 1941-45 war memorial on Russia's Elbrus and the plaque on Scafell Pike that commemorates the Great War through Lord Leconfield donating Scafell Pike to the nation in 1919 (see McKeating and Crolla, 2009).

[69] See Hansen, 2013 for a detailed history that covers much of the class biases surrounding the reception of the early ascents of Mont Blanc.

Figure 24 The photo on the left is the statue of Balmat and Saussure erected in 1887, the one on the right is of the Gabriel Paccard erected in 1986. All three figures look towards the summit of Mont Blanc.

Coleridge left Burnthwaite Farm beyond Wasdale Head, where he had stayed previously with Wordsworth, and retraced his steps to Wast Water. His destination was Taw House at the foot of Hard Knott pass in Eskdale.[70] Had Coleridge's primary intention been to hike down Eskdale – a valley he was very much impressed by – he could have simply ascended to the easily navigable Mickledore Pass via what we now call Brown Tongue and Hollow Stones. Yet in heading to Wast Water he eschewed this option and crossed over Lingmell Gill. From Wast Water he ascended to Burnmoor Tarn. The summit of Scafell is not en route to Eskdale or Taw House. A fairly direct route to Taw House and Eskdale cutting nearly 700m of climbing from the day was a straightforward enough option from Burnmoor Tarn. It therefore took considerable effort for Coleridge to venture up Scafell. His descriptions make it clear that he had gained local knowledge about Scafell from shepherds. It seems reasonable to surmise then that his ascent of the mountain was not on a free-spirited whim or without a plan as to how to get down. Indeed, it is highly likely he had been given directions to safely reach upper Eskdale from the summit plateau of Scafell going via Foxes Tarn. Yet even if he had not been given such directions, visibility was good and from the summit of Scafell it is obvious that the most amenable-looking descent is the one that leads via Foxes Tarn, although the little-used route over Slight Side is also relatively straightforward.

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[70] As of 2019, but for a rusty tractor in the yard, Taw House appears to have changed little in the intervening 200 years since Coleridge's stay.

Comparing the terrain with Coleridge's descriptions requires a fair degree of unpicking. Vardy and the Cooper and Bushell et al team have found Coleridge's summit descriptions confusing. As a consequence, they make a series of factual mistakes. It is not my intention here to correct all of these. Rather, it is to point out that their mistakes emphasise the importance in geocritical analyses of experiencing described terrain first-hand, because misunderstanding the specificities of terrain has implications for how texts are subsequently interpreted. While it would be an error to describe Coleridge's collected accounts of Scafell as a precise geographical record, applying them to the material terrain in the field reveals that they provide a far better record than they have generally been given credit for. Having ascended from the southwest and eventually west, probably by Hardrigg Gill rather than the nearby Long Gill – Coleridge describes ascending beside a 'torrent' making either of these gills a possibility – he found his way to the true summit of Scafell before being drawn to Symonds Knott. Vardy is mistaken in his reading of Coleridge's route from the summit. This is significant because his analysis of Coleridge's Broad Stand descent is heavily reliant on understanding the details of the landscape, yet it is clear it is Vardy, not Coleridge, who is confused about the complexities and nuances of the terrain. According to Vardy, Coleridge 'descended along the ridge apparently leading to Scafell Pike which he mistakenly calls Bowfell'. Firstly, there is not a ridge but rather a broad plateau between Scafell and Scafell Pike until the separation of Scafell East Buttress and Mickledore, both of which cannot be seen from the true summit of Scafell. Secondly, contrary to Vardy's suggestion, Coleridge's organisation of peaks is fairly accurate and Coleridge is not remotely confused about the location of Bowfell. From the true summit of Scafell, Coleridge describes 'two huge pyramids nearly as high as Sca'Fell'. He refers to these as 'Broad Crag' and 'Doe Crag'.[71] The first, 'Broad Crag', is Symonds Knott (959m). Symonds Knott is only 5m lower than the true Scafell summit or 'Sca'fell Man' as Coleridge describes the true summit on one occasion. Symonds Knott is located 200m or so northeast across the summit plateau. 'Doe Crag' is the name Coleridge gives to the other pyramid, Scafell Pike. Scafell Pike (978m) is actually 14m higher than the true summit of Scafell, although for a long time after Coleridge's visit it continued to be regarded as being lower.

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[71] Deciphering Coleridge's descriptions is perhaps not helped by the fact that on modern maps Broad Crag is the name given to a summit east of Scafell Pike near Ill Crag before Great End is reached. This may explain some of the difficulty critics such as Vardy, and Cooper and Bushell et al, have had with Coleridge's descriptions.
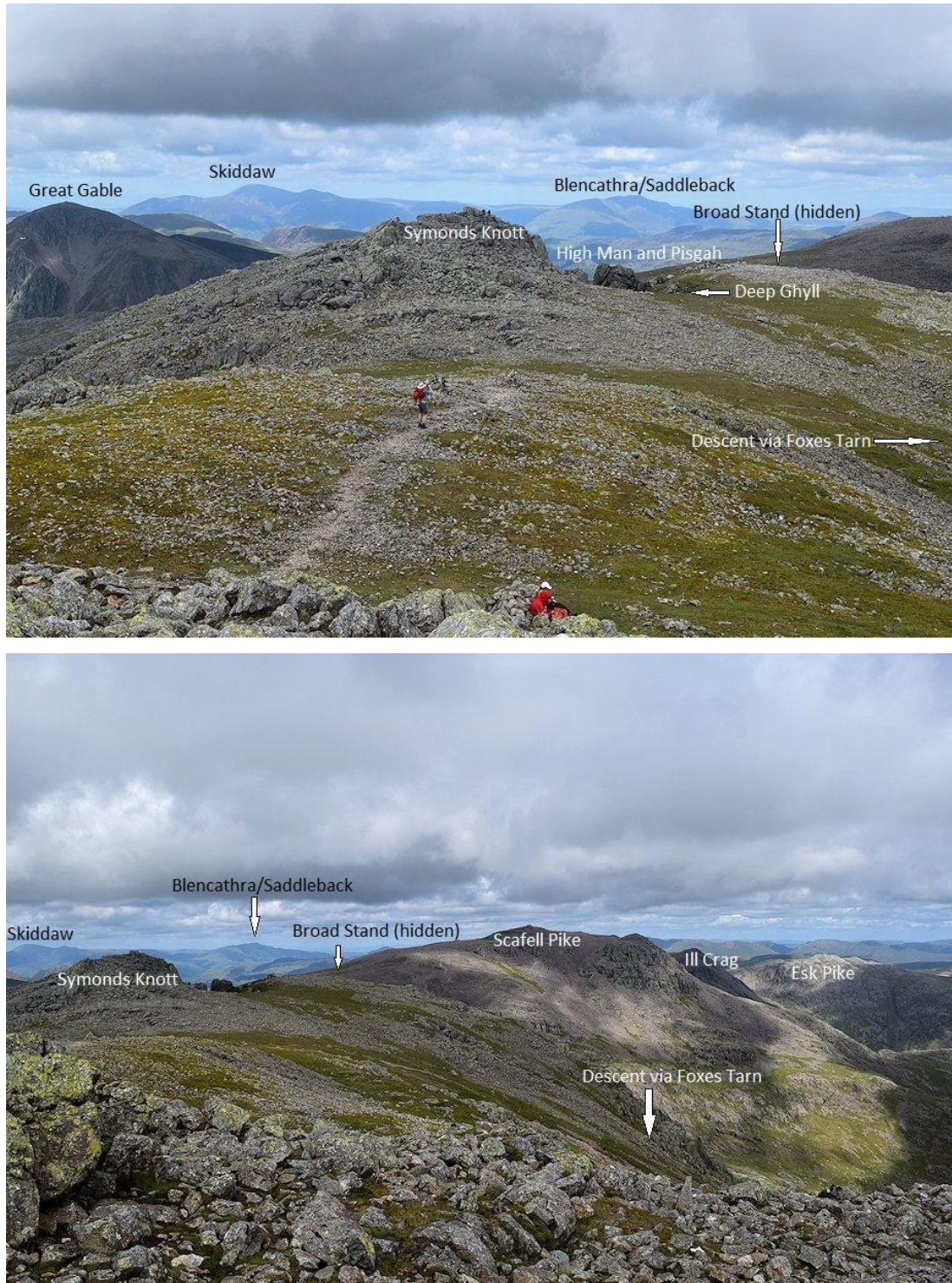
Figure 25 Two views from the summit of Scafell. Skiddaw would have been an easily recognisable clear marker for Coleridge to picture the relative location of Keswick and Greta Hall.

While the tour document compiled by Cooper and Bushell et al is generally very helpful and certainly a good starting point, it is clear that the editors have, like Vardy, been confused about Coleridge's organisation of the peaks in his descriptions. Indeed, despite elsewhere in the document being keen to translate Coleridge's references into the modern names for locations or speculate about what might be being referred to, the editors have

conspicuously avoided doing so in regards to both 'Broad Crag' and 'Doe Crag'. Likewise, mistakes are made in deciphering Coleridge's description of the crags in Eskdale. An incorrect justification regarding Coleridge's view from the summit of Scafell is offered: 'In the words of Molly Lefebure: "In his notebook, he [Coleridge] entered a description of the view, getting his "lefts" and "rights" confused in his excitement, while the extreme unreliability of the Hutchinson map resulted in his wrong identification of several mountains."' While Cooper et al and Lefebure are correct to find problems with Coleridge's naming of places, in part because of William Hutchinson's mapping, they are incorrect to find errors in Coleridge's lefts and rights and his organisation of peaks. Having addressed them on the ground it is clear to me at least exactly what Coleridge was referring to. While these appear small critical points of geographical exactitude, the implications are significant. Lefebure, and in effect Cooper and Bushell et al by using the Lefebure quotation, cast Coleridge in his 'excitement' as a somewhat disoriented figure on the summit of Scafell. Vardy likewise refers to Coleridge's 'giddiness' on the summit. These descriptions feed into an impression that Coleridge is somehow less controlled, even wandering haphazardly in a free-spirited manner. It is a misrepresentation of the poet in the Lakeland landscape. While Coleridge may have been free-spirited and eager to have and describe a sublime experience, he certainly was not disoriented or haphazard.

Coleridge moved to the summit of Symonds Knott. There he was impressed by the 'huge perpendicular Precipices' of Scafell Crag directly below and found by comparison that, 'the Coves and Precipices of Helvellin are nothing to these!' Having spent time climbing on both Scafell Crag and the precipitous east face of Helvellyn, I agree with Coleridge: Scafell Crag is the most impressive dark crag in England, while Helvellyn, although offering two classic scrambles on its flanks and some reasonable winter climbs on its east face, harbours no classic rock climbs and cannot really compare with Scafell Crag for sublime scenery. It is while on Symonds Knott, not the true summit of Scafell, that Coleridge wrote to Sara Hutchinson, 'the first letter ever written from the Top of Sca'fell!' On Symonds Knott he also describes the impressive High Man and Pisgah:

Figure 26 Climbers on Pisgah topping out of Jones's Route Direct from Lords Rake with High Man left, taken from the top of Deep Ghyll at the foot of Symonds Knott. Coleridge was impressed by the sublimity of these two 'pillars'.

Vardy is correct in reading Coleridge as describing a conventional model of the sublime at this point. Sheltered from the wind and safely 'lounded' – as Coleridge describes it – above the 'terrible' precipices of Scafell, Coleridge is the lone Romantic figure on the mountain top. He can see down Borrowdale in the far distance and make out Skiddaw, Derwent Water and imagine the location of Greta Hall. This view is a moment of sentimentality that both connects him with home and emphasises his separation from it.
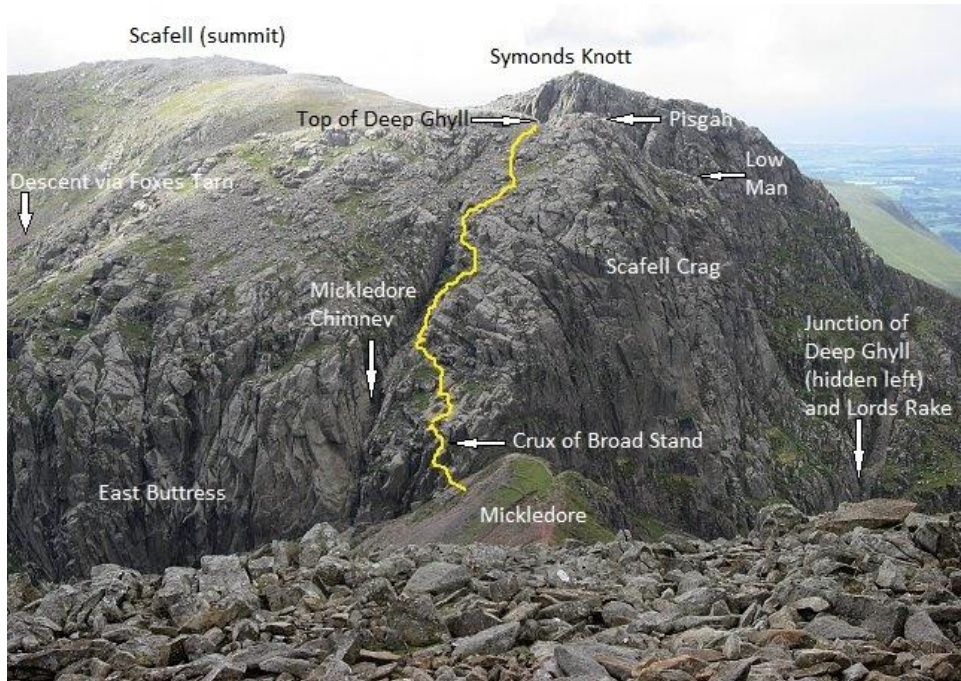
Figure 27 Scafell from Scafell Pike. The yellow topo line shows Coleridge's descent route. The final photo in this Chapter (see below) is taken from just above the crux, showing the significant descent Coleridge had already done and the tempting proximity of Mickledore.

Figure 28 The north facing Scafell Crag in the evening as seen from Hollow Stones. The crag is actually a series of buttresses.

From Symonds Knott it would have been straightforward enough for Coleridge to discover the descent to Eskdale via Foxes Tarn. However, having skirted the precipices of Scafell Crag, Coleridge explains:

> [I] found myself cut off from a most sublime Crag-summit, that seemed to rival Sca'
> Fell Man in height, & to outdo it in fierceness. A Ridge of Hill lay low down, &
> divided this Crag (called Doe-crag) & Broad-crag-even as the Hyphen divides the
> words broad & crag. I determined to go thither.[72]

Scafell and its sister peak, Scafell Pike, are separated by a 130m declivity and are joined by a col known as Mickledore. In seeing the geography through a typographic or calligraphic lens with Mickledore as a connecting 'hyphen', there is a sense that for Coleridge this landscape is already written; he need only give himself up to passage over it and he will become a conduit to its language.

Figure 29 Scafell Pike (centre) and Scafell (right) from Yewbarrow. Mickledore is the connecting 'hyphen' between the two. Pikes Crag on the west face of Scafell Pike is catching the sun and showing the best of the mountain, while the north facing Scafell Crag is mostly in shade. From this vantage point it is understandable why Scafell was long-considered higher than her sister. It is possible Coleridge had a view not dissimilar to this on his earlier visit to Wasdale with Wordsworth.

Scafell Pike, that 'most sublime Crag-summit', clearly exerted a powerful influence over his decision to descend Broad Stand. Scafell Pike is not, however, particularly attractive when viewed from Scafell:

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[72] *CL,* p.840.

Figure 30 Scafell Pike seen from midway on Broad Stand

A stronger influence was probably that Coleridge not only felt Scafell Pike to be a rival to Scafell in height, but suspected it was higher. The desire to stand on the highest possible ground in Lakeland almost certainly held great power over him. The idea that a poet might undertake an exercise without an eye to potentially transforming it into future verse is naïve. Indeed, Coleridge no doubt suspected he would be able to mine the experience for poetic inspiration. Despite this possibility, it is nonetheless difficult to fully comprehend Coleridge's decision making when it comes to his undertaking the descent of Broad Stand. Coleridge was not the most experienced of mountaineers. Yet before commencing the descent he had looked down the precipices of Scafell Crag and had established this terrain was beyond him. (Ironically, Deep Gill, which Coleridge had stared down and which looks fairly daunting from above, is a considerably easier – even relatively straightforward undertaking – compared with Broad Stand, although this would not have led directly to Mickledore.) It is possible that Coleridge's knowledge of Lakeland crags had persuaded him to consider the Broad Stand descent possible. In the Lake District, adjoining multi-faced mountain crags without a relatively straightforward separating breach are not common. Scafell is unusual insofar that its north-facing prospect, the collection of crags usually referred to as Scafell Crag, blends without a straightforward breach into the east facing Scafell East Crag. Broad Stand happens to be the most amenable breach of the East Crag but clearly, given its high number of accidents and deaths over the last century, it is not particularly amenable. Following the British adjectival system, the route has traditionally been graded a 'Difficult' rock climb. However, owing to its notoriety and the polished nature of many of its holds has also been given a grade of 'Very Difficult' in some more

recent guides.[73] It is not altogether impossible that a shepherd had suggested to Coleridge that a direct descent to Mickledore was possible. My instinct is that had such a consideration arisen in conversation, any shepherd aware of the descent would have recognised Coleridge as an outsider to the Lakes who was not only well-spoken but also from the non-mountainous south and therefore will have warned him away from such a route.

While on Symonds Knott, Coleridge spots a sheep down the precipices of Scafell Crag as being 'Crag' – short in this instance for crag fast, meaning it could not ascend nor descend. During his descent of Broad Stand he discovers the rent carcass a sheep that has recently fallen. The two sheep act as symbolic visions of the risks Coleridge is undertaking. They are a means by which Coleridge can emphasise to Sara the danger of his descent. However, Coleridge also finds a pile of stones on Broad Stand at what appears to be the last drop above the rift now known as Fat Man's Agony. He presumes a shepherd has piled the stones as an aid to rescue the sheep that has, while the shepherd is absent from the scene seeking help, fallen to its death. Interestingly, Coleridge explains that these suspicions are later verified. He does not explain exactly when or by whom they are verified, although it seems reasonable to presume Coleridge met the returning shepherd while hiking down Eskdale.[74] For Coleridge, the shepherd's pile of stones on Broad Stand is a hindrance. The stones have scattered and they make his descent – or rather the consequence of a controlled fall onto one of the ledges – far more hazardous. The stones are, nonetheless, a clear reminder that shepherds in search of lost sheep or a convenient short cut will undoubtedly have on occasion used Broad Stand as an ascent or descent.

On the surface, for Coleridge to undertake Broad Stand as a blind descent was either stupid, optimistic or both. (Although, as I have suggested, there remains the unlikely possibility that a local shepherd gave him the impression the descent was feasible.) While the upper catchment of the defile that leads into Broad Stand is amenable enough, it would not be fair to describe that catchment as a trap. In commencing the descent, Coleridge must have suspected the likelihood was that he would meet vertiginous terrain before Mickledore. Either way, his inexperience in undertaking the descent is apparent. Before undertaking the route, Coleridge likely assumed, as many inexperienced hikers do, that because it is easier to ascend than descend, if he should reach an impasse he would simply reverse his route. Coleridge describes the moment he recognises his error: 'So I began to suspect that I ought

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[73] See, for example, Al Phizacklea, *Scafell, Dow and Eskadale* (Cartmel: FRCC, 1988); Al Phizacklea and Ron Kenyon, *Scafell and Wasdale* (Cartmel: FRCC 2014); and Mark Glaister *Lake District Climbs* (Sheffield: Rockfax, 2019).

[74] The shepherd who guards his or her flock has traditionally taken a degree of responsibility for all beings moving through the landscape. Today, in formerly poorly-mapped mountain ranges such as the Prokletije range on the border of Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania, where the simpler way of life is not entirely dissimilar to that of early nineteenth-century Lakeland, shepherds are inclined to offer advice and directions to those passing through.

not to go on but then unfortunately tho' I could with ease drop down a smooth Rock 7 feet high, I could not *climb* it, so go on I must and on I went'.[75] It is important here to understand that reversing descents also holds a psychological danger that might not be apparent to non-scramblers or climbers because it is illogical: humans simply do not like admitting they have made a wrong decision. In reversing a descent to reclaim lost altitude, an individual is necessarily admitting their error. Because of this effect, it is often only when an individual has committed to something that they finally recognise that the promise to reverse should they get into difficulty can no longer be kept.[76]

Figure 31 The crux of Broad Stand from above during a roped-solo descent in heavy rain, conditions in which the rhyolite and lichen create a very slippery greasy film.

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[75] *CL,* p.841.

[76] I have rescued several hikers in mountains whose predicament and difficulty has been caused by having displayed this psychological reluctance.

In the dry weather Coleridge experienced, although still dangerous, the Broad Stand descent is a far safer prospect than in damp or wet conditions. The hang and drop technique Coleridge deployed would, in wet weather, have had a very high risk of death but it was hardly a controlled descent in dry conditions. Having already descended a considerable height, the tempting proximity of the Mickledore red scree visible in the photo above undoubtedly drew Coleridge down more than the feeling that he 'could not' reverse his route. It is not unreasonable to view Coleridge's optimistic descent as purely an accident of inexperience. However, it is in part owing to a degree of laziness too. Coleridge readily admits to his 'indolence' in undertaking the direct descent. This is because in order to reach the 'most sublime Crag-summit' of Scafell Pike that had attracted his eye, if Coleridge was to descend to upper Eskdale via Foxes Tarn he would be required to climb an additional 250m or so of vertical height back to Mickledore.[77] There were almost certainly more subtle forces that also influenced the climb and later the 'Hymn'. The prefatory notes to the 'Hymn' include a description borrowed from Brun of blue gentians that stand 'only a few steps from the never-melted ice of the glaciers'. Reflecting on this description Coleridge confesses, 'I thought it an affecting emblem of the boldness of human hope, venturing near, and, as it were, leaning over the brink of the grave.'[78] The 'human hope' in this instance is concerned with the individual's ability to venture towards new modes of living that had inherent political connotations. The 'emblem' of 'boldness' he recognises in the precarity of the gentians was explored literally by his precarious descent of Broad Stand. In a letter to Sara Hutchinson written on the 5 and 6 August Coleridge gives an account of the climb and describes how, on the most dangerous part of the descent, he stops and in essence peers over the 'brink of the grave': '[T]he ledge at the bottom was [so] exceedingly narrow, that if I dropt down upon it I must of necessity have fallen backwards & killed myself.'[79] Poised literally and metaphorically between heaven and earth, Coleridge presents us with the transient nature of human existence. Yet this is not alarming to him. The retelling of this moment in the letter to Sara Hutchinson inspires a stream of consciousness in which he presents a transcendental connectivity with God and nature. Cooper and Bushell et al, register the separation in time between the notebook account and the letter account of the descent, and view the latter as being somehow less representative of the experience. Too much is made of this. Coleridge wrote a limited note of the descent once he was safely down to Mickledore for two reasons: a storm appeared imminent – partly the reason he decided against continuing up to Scafell Pike – and he had just escaped with his life from an extremely risky venture. The stream-of-consciousness of the descent written that night at

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[77] Wanting to avoid that 250m climb is one of the reasons that I and many others climbers I know, have tended to favour the descent of Broad Stand over the years despite its technical awkwardness.

[78] *CP,Variorum,* II.I, p.925.

[79] *CL*, p.841.

Taw House and addressed to Sara Hutchinson is likely to be a genuine expression of his state of mind on and about the climb. The descent had nearly killed him and he was very unlikely to have calmed down by the evening.

Coleridge recognised his descent was an extreme act; he admits beginning 'to laugh at himself for a Madman'.[80] Neil Vickers has suggested that in this passage Coleridge is 'drawing on [Erasmus] Darwin's theory of epilepsy'.[81] While Vickers makes interesting lexical parallels, for Coleridge, the state of epilepsy was analogous with a state of forgetfulness. This is far from what is taking place on Broad Stand. Coleridge described being in a state of 'giddiness' on the summit of Scafell. Alan Vardy considers Coleridge 'out of his mind – undone by sublimity and power'. While Coleridge does laugh at himself 'for a Madman' – he is in no way mad or, as Vardy suggests, 'out of his mind'. Mortality is confronted by the very nature of such dangerous climbing. Contrary to Vickers and Vardy's assumptions, the concentration needed to avoid being killed generates a state of absolute clarity – this is perpetuated when a moment of relative safety is achieved. The idea behind the Kantian sublime exists because it is a natural rather than artificial state to find oneself in given such exposure. At a small belay stance halfway up a crag, adrenalized after having led a difficult pitch, too far from the top to consider the route's completion inevitable, too far from the bottom to consider retreat practicable, there is an extreme clarity of thought and feeling. It is this sublime clarity that Coleridge experienced on Scafell and 'transferred' to Mont Blanc and that enables him to see, hear and feel the song of nature, to consider his faith in God and combine it with a pointed political discourse that has solidified into a clear anti-Napoleon position.

The 'Hymn' and the climbing experience on Scafell that gave rise to it are more than simply critiques of Napoleon or exercises in religious sublimity. They present models for the individual to realise through the sublimity of mountain landscapes an alternative liberty. In contrast to the demise of liberal idealism symbolised by events across the Channel, Coleridge's concurrent climb generated an epiphanic 'state of almost prophetic Trance and Delight'[82] and suggested a new mode of experiencing the environment through a sublime visionary freedom for the individual beyond that offered by 'any form of human government'.[83] For Fulford, the climb led Coleridge to 'consider the psychological conditions necessary for subordination to power [... through which Coleridge] arrives at a new understanding of the sublime'.[84] It was a state in which 'reason' and 'will' could affirm

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[80] *CL*, p.841.
[81] Neil Vickers, *Coleridge and the Doctors: 1795-1806* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.143.
[82] *CL*, p.840.
[83] *CP, Variorum,* II.I, p.586.
[84] Fulford, 1996, p.238.

the idea of liberty through concentrated physical interaction with the environment and reveal the true power of the divine: 'O God, I exclaimed aloud -- how calm, how blessed am I now | I know not how to proceed, how to return | but I am calm & fearless & confident.'[85]

Between 1801 and 1803 Coleridge increasingly considered mountains as spaces with the power to inspire clearer perspectives on man's relationship to God, nature and political structures. Having moved to the Lake District in 1801, he discovered that in hiking and climbing among rugged mountain terrain he was able to experience a form of individual liberty outside of social structures. This constituted an alternative to the liberty that had been promised by the French Revolution and British radicalism in the 1790s but that had failed to materialise. As Fulford rightly suggests, '[t]he poet finds an uncontroversial familial harmony in nature which might act as a microcosm of the social reconciliation he is unable to conceive in political structures.'[86]

The August walking tour of 1802 that proved the impetus behind the 'Hymn' is likely to have been prompted by an agreement between Coleridge and the publisher Longman to write a walking guide to the Lakes. The guide never materialised, but the tour among 'that visible God Almighty' and the descent of Broad Stand that it included revivified the landscape poet in Coleridge.[87] Simultaneously, the tour energised his political convictions – many of which were continuing to be reviewed in light of events taking place across the channel. What becomes evident in this period is a subtle relationship between landscape and politics colouring his writings. In a letter to William Sotheby on the 18 July Coleridge marvelled at the morning brilliance of the 'Borrodale mountains' that seemed 'a Dream, such as lovers have – a wild and transfiguring, yet enchantingly lovely, Dream of an Object lying by the side of the Sleeper,' and concluded, 'Wordsworth, who has walked thro' Switzerland, declared that he never saw anything superior – perhaps nothing equal – in the Alps.'[88] The potential for Lakeland to be 'superior' to the Alps hints at how Coleridge was seeing his homeland through a lens of sentimental patriotism that was also evident in his political writings.[89]

His Broad Stand descent has been viewed as constituting one of the earliest known rock climbs other than those undertaken for economic, scientific or military purposes. It has

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[85] *CL*, p.841.

[86] Fulford, 1996, p.234.

[87] *CL*, p.714.

[88] *CL*, p.808.

[89] By 1801 Coleridge had become more sentimental about England. In a letter to Thomas Poole on the 24 March 1801, Coleridge recanted his earlier idealisation of America and conceded, 'my Country is my Country; and I will never leave it' (*CL*, p.710). After the move to the Lake District, mountains became an important feature of Coleridge's sense of nationhood. While Coleridge's writing routinely alludes to the idyll of his domestic mountains throughout 1801 and 1802, his inability to express it in verse was deeply felt. The day after writing to Poole he informed William Godwin on 25 March 1801: 'I look at the Mountains (that visible God Almighty that looks in at all my windows) I look at the Mountains only for the Curves of their outlines […] the poet is dead in me' (*CL*, p.713).

been claimed as the genesis of rock climbing as a pastime or sport.[90] This is a stretch. After all, the descent is probably better described as an accident of blind optimism by an inexperienced mountain hiker. Nonetheless, the Broad Stand descent, not to mention the first known ascent of Scafell by – in a Coleridgean phrase – an 'outsider' of the Lakes, were acts that had considerable political significance. He wrote again to Sotheby on the 18 August and described the climb that had taken place on August 5:

> O that you had been with me during a thunder-storm, on Thursday the 5/ I was sheltered (in the phrase of this country, lownded) in a sort of natural porch on the summit of Sca' Fell, the central mountain of our Giants, said to be higher than Skiddaw or Helvellin / & in chasm, naked Crag, bursting Springs, & Waterfall the most interesting, without a rival / When the clouds pass'd away, to my right & left & behind me stood a great national Convention of Mountains.[91]

The 'national Convention' of 'our Giants' can easily be construed as Coleridge seeing his homeland through a sense of political belonging in contrast to the French state and the failed promise of the Revolution's National Convention.

On the eve of the publication of the 'Hymn' Coleridge wrote once more to Sotheby to explain the relationship between the climb and the poem:

> [W]hen I was on Sca' fell […] I involuntarily poured forth a 'Hymn' in the manner of the Psalms, tho' afterwards I thought the Ideas &c disproportionate to our humble mountains & accidentally lighting on a short Note in some Swiss Poems, concerning the Vale of Chamouny, & its Mountain, I transferred myself thither, in the Spirit, & adapted my former feelings to these grander external objects. You will soon see it in the *Morning Post* -- & I should be glad to know whether & how far it pleased you.[92]

While 'lighting' on Brun's poem may have been an accident, the transference was not. A sense of modesty and affection – if not patriotism – is suggested by the term 'humble', while use of 'grander' intimates respect but also distance. How differently the passage would read if it referred to 'our *small* mountains'. Coleridge must have been cognisant of the political associations of Mont Blanc when he transferred to it from Scafell. It was a transference that moved from a virtually unknown provincial mountain on the fringes of Europe to a mountain at the heart of the Continent.

What I am suggesting here is that Coleridge's transference from high point to high point is not only a consequence of what Dufy has described as part of a 'poetics of ascent'

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[90] See Bainbridge, 2013, and Drummond, pp.84-85. For Coleridge's accounts of the climb see: *Coleridge's Notebooks* (Coburn, 1218 2.12 (b)); the two letters to Sara Hutchinson, 5 and 6 August 1802 in *CL*, pp.840-844; and the letter to William Sotheby, 10th September 1802 in *CL*, pp.861-866.
[91] *CL*, p.854.
[92] *CL*, p.865. The manuscript of the Scafell letter to Sara Hutchinson was lost and only Hutchinson's transcript exists.

where writers such as Coleridge apostrophised the power connoted by altitude in which the highest geographical ground was equated with the most elevated sublime power, but that on Scafell, Coleridge searched for – and perhaps found – a make-believe substitute for the iconic Mont Blanc he had read so much about. In *Swallowdale* (1931)*, the second book of the *Swallows and Amazons* series by Arthur Ransome, the Blackett and Wilson children reframe the Lake District's Old Man of Coniston as the Himalayan Kanchenjunga.[93] While playing on the Old Man of Coniston, they imagine themselves to be mountaineers in the Himalaya. In doing so, they are re-enacting the adventure stories that are being born from early twentieth-century explorations within the British Empire. I am suggesting that Coleridge's psychological attitude to Scafell was not altogether dissimilar to this version of childhood make believe. Only, in this instance, he is imagining himself in the Alps. Four months after the publication of the 'Hymn', Coleridge considered this relationship:

> I think, that my soul must have pre-existed in the body of a Chamois-chaser […] the feelings, & impulsive habits, & incipient actions, are in me, & the old scenery awakens them. The farther I ascend from animated Nature, from men, and cattle, & the common birds of the woods, & fields, the greater becomes in me the Intensity of the feeling of Life; Life seems to me then a universal spirit, that neither has, nor can have, an opposite. God is every where, I have exclaimed, & works every where.[94]

The marginalised alpine figure of the 'Chamois-chaser' that Coleridge identifies with emphasises the interchangeableness between his domestic ascents and the iconography of the Alps. This interchangeability is evident in the transference from the climbing descent on Scafell to Mont Blanc expressed in the 'Hymn'. Yet it also reveals idolisation and a playful child-like fantasy. Whether Alpine or domestic, mountains offer 'old scenery' that contrast with the tamed landscapes humans conventionally inhabit. As Duffy suggests, mountains are a physically higher plane that could be seen as allowing a metaphysically higher plain of perception regarding man's place in the world. The 'incipient' chamois-chaser is single-minded, uncluttered, simple, pure in his pursuit and moves with relative solitude through the landscape in which he works. Coleridge suggests this mode of living allows the 'universal spirit' and a deistic connection with God in all things to be realised. Coleridge's climbing descent of Scafell was undertaken in the spirit of the chamois hunter. At its very core was an apostrophe to an alternative form of liberty. Mont Blanc was preferred to Scafell because it was a mountain that could be understood by the broader public and it allowed him to engage with the politics of France that were preoccupying him in the summer and autumn of 1802. Within the historical context of the early 1800s and Coleridge's other writings, the 'Hymn' offered an interpretation of Mont Blanc that was familiar yet new. While the poem lacks the

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[93] Arthus Ransome, *Swallowdale* (London: Vintage, 2013)
[94] *CL*, p.915.

creative power of Coleridge's earlier poetry, it should nonetheless be regarded as a subtle political exercise inspired by a complex interaction with material space and negotiated the resonances of Western Europe's highest mountain at a key transitional moment in the demise of French liberty and the reshaping of British identity.

Chapter Three
'To act the God among external things': Wordsworth's Mont Blancs

Introduction

Wordsworth's Mont Blancs are not consistent. For Wordsworth, Mont Blanc was temporal, subject to translation and the contortions of his poesis as he matured. Geoffrey Hartman has suggested that English poetry took its direction from Wordsworth rather than from Coleridge, pointing to a clear philosophical divide rooted in the authenticity of experience and feeling.[1] He highlights the contrasting approach of Coleridge who transferred or 'displaced' himself from Scafell to Mont Blanc in order to produce 'Hymn Written before Sun-Rise in the Vale of Chamouny'.[2] Hartman sees little value in Coleridge's displacement. The idea that Wordsworth offers us in his travel poetry insights into genuine experiences has had considerable appeal. It is part not only of the cult of Wordsworth and the cult of the sublime, but is a fundamental component of the myth of the Romantic poet-figure who is able to be immersed in nature – to stand before the towering edifice of snow and ice or amble contemplatively beside the babbling brook – and *feel* it before translating it into verse. To suggest, as I will in this chapter, that there might be just as inauthentic a nature in Wordsworth's writing of Alpine landscapes as there is in Coleridge's displacement, is to challenge how we value that writing and the relationship between Wordsworth and physical geography.

In literature before the eighteenth century, mountains, although subject to the animation of meteorological and seasonal conditions, had tended to offer geographies of permanence and stability for literature that only apocalypse or the power of God or gods could move or reshape.[3] The permanence of mountains functioned as a metaphor for the power of overcoming the impossible and the power of faith: 'Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done' (Matthew 21: 21). Yet just as the savants of the eighteenth century were discovering how mountains in a geological sense were in actuality built and destroyed by nature's processes and therefore subject to constant change, so too were writers

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[1] See Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (London: Methuen, 1987).
[2] Hartman, 1987, p.xxviii.
[3] British attitudes to mountains before the nineteenth century have seen considerable critical attention, including from Nicholson, 1959, and McFarlane, 2008. As already noted in this thesis, discoveries in geology and physical geography have influenced how mountains were represented, see, among others, Rudwick, 2005, Heringman, 2004, and Leask, 2002.

increasingly constructing and reconstructing mountains on the written page, not as something stable but as something inherently unstable. This instability was embraced by Wordsworth and influenced his shifting versions of Mont Blanc. His shifting presentations of Mont Blanc do not offer windows into personal experiences, but are experiences refashioned as devices to serve the poems in which they are found. In this chapter I will suggest that the inconsistencies inherent in these depictions were a result of concerns about his public persona and the cultural reception of his work. In essence, Wordsworth used Mont Blanc and the Alps differently at distinct stages of his life to promote evolving poetic identities.

Mont Blanc appears in three Wordsworth poems: *Descriptive Sketches in Verse Taken During a Pedestrian Tour in the Italian, Grison, Swiss, and Savoyard Alps* (1793), *The Prelude* (1805) and 'Processions, Suggested on a Sabbath Morning in the Vale of Chamouny' (1822). These versions of the mountain give an appearance of being closely related to biographical events. The first two purport to represent the same source experience – the Mont Blanc of the 1790 walking tour to the Alps – yet contradict each other. In *Descriptive Sketches* Mont Blanc is depicted with a sense of awe; it is anthropomorphised, sublime and bound to radical liberal politics and the French Revolution. It is a Mont Blanc that reflects Wordsworth's identity as a radical with an international political outlook. In *The Prelude*, however, Mont Blanc when first viewed was disappointing enough to have elicited feelings of loss. However, I will argue that this disappointment was one that actually took place in 1790 at Lake Geneva, but was transposed to Mont Blanc in *The Prelude.*

A considerable number of works give attention to the Mont Blanc and Crossing of the Alps sequence in Book VI of *The Prelude* – one of the major canonical passages in one of the major canonical texts of Romantic writing.[4] As Liu, Duffy, Bainbridge and Vincent have each argued, the Mont Blanc of *The Prelude* retains a political significance – but this is different from that which Wordsworth conferred on the mountain in *Descriptive Sketches*. Indeed, responses to historical events, including the rise of Napoleon, the *failure* of the French Revolution, two Swiss Revolutions and the cultural trends associated with the mountain sublime have been registered by critics in varying ways. Certainly, in *The Prelude,* we have a Mont Blanc commensurate with Wordsworth's disappointment felt towards the direction of the French Revolution – what Hanley has called Wordsworth's 'Revolutionary trauma' and Butler has referred to as a 'disillusionment with the Revolution, […that] looks to us equally like a response to a deep new current of conservatism in English thinking'.[5] It

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[4] For a good overview of critical responses, see: Tim Milnes, *William Wordsworth: The Prelude: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
[5] Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley, *Romantic Revisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.124 and Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.67.

is a Mont Blanc that rejects the popularisation of the mountain outside of politics as an iconic landscape and is a significant moment of a writer questioning overwhelming British cultural trends. Duffy is correct to read the disappointments of the 'soulless image' of Mont Blanc and the crossing of the Alps as forming a mental 'defeat' in which 'the "rise" of the imagination in *Prelude VI* amounts to a conquest of the Alps' and in essence an alternative victory that could be 'the equivalent of Saussure's conquest of Mont Blanc or, following [Alan] Liu's reading, of Napoleon's conquest of the St Bernard Pass'.[6] I will suggest that egocentricity was intrinsic to Wordsworth's alternative 'conquest' as he sought to distinguish his writings from those of Coleridge and other writers that had represented the mountain.

'Wordsworth's changed position in 1804 regarding the mountain is an important signifier of his transition from an early radical poet to a later more conservative writer with an increasingly nationalistic and Anglican outlook. 'Processions, Suggested on a Sabbath Morning in the Vale of Chamouny' offers a third approach to the mountain and appeared after the more resolutely conservative post-war Wordsworth revisited Mont Blanc on his tour of the Continent in 1820. It was published in *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent 1820* (1822). 'Processions' has been largely ignored, even by critics with an interest in British representations of the Alps. John Wyatt is an exception. He discusses the poem in a book about Wordsworth's later-period travel poetry. His reading of the poem conditions my analysis here. In 'Processions' Mont Blanc is 'that exalted Mount!' with 'vaults of everlasting snow'.[7] The re-emergence of a sublime Mont Blanc in Wordsworth's poetry is merged with visions of religious rites. Wordsworth reconsiders his poetic imagination – what he momentarily describes as 'that licentious craving in the mind' (l. 65) – and the poem offers a paradoxical warning about imaginative power and its ability to enable a poet '[t]o act the God among external things' (l.66). In this third incarnation Mont Blanc is reanimated. The mountain helps promote Wordsworth as an Anglican didactic poet with a concern for misplaced faith similar to that of *Ecclesiastical Sketches,* which appeared the same year. Nonetheless, in this engagement with the mountain we still find a poet projecting the idea that imaginative power remains the essential catalyst to philosophical outlook.

Roger Meyenberg and Patrick Vincent in their geocritical reconsideration of Wordsworth's crossing of the Simplon Pass deploy a quotation from Bernhardt-Kabisch: 'Wordsworth frequently took considerable liberties with his settings, adding, rearranging, and telescoping specific details of an observed or remembered landscape to suit his poetic

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[6] Duffy, 2013, p.67.
[7] William Wordsworth 'Processions: Suggested on a Sabbath Moring in the Vale of Chamouny' (from *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent, 1820*) in Geoffrey Jackson, ed., *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems 1820-1845* (London: Cornell University Press, 2004), p.391, ll.54-58. [Further references will be in the text.]

purpose.'[8] This appraisal seems particularly apt when Wordsworth's responses to the Alps are considered collectively. Beginning with the 1790 walking tour before addressing *Descriptive Sketches, The Prelude,* and 'Processions', this chapter will reconsider the biographical matrix and the liberties taken with geographical experiences that gave rise to Wordsworth's varying Mont Blancs. Finally I will consider the influence of Coleridge upon the Mont Blanc of *The Prelude,* and suggest that in Wordsworth's relationship with Coleridge we can recognise Wordsworth's anxiety to project a distinctive poesis and public identity at different moments that could affect how he represented material place. In doing so I will suggest that arguments – notably those of Bainbridge and Alan Liu – that have considered the rise of Napoleon as a primary influence upon Wordsworth's changed perception of Mont Blanc, although important, may have overlooked some of Wordsworth's more egocentric and personal motivations.

The 'Biographical Matrix': Mapping and Understanding Wordsworth's representations of the 1790 tour

Stephen Gill has suggested that exploring *The Prelude* 'takes us unavoidably to the biographical matrix of the poem'.[9] Such a 'biographical matrix' also affects readings of *Descriptive Sketches* and 'Processions' because autobiographical writing tends to impart a subjective importance upon the thoughts and feelings related by it. Liu is correct when he argues that our best record of Wordsworth's 1790 excursion to the Alps is Wordsworth's letter to Dorothy of September 1790 and that this record is nonetheless a limited one. For Liu, the letter 'cloaks the sights later to be monumentalized in book 6 in the *The Prelude* within inexpressibility *topoi* and other clichés of circumvention' adding that in the Alps it 'is unclear what impressions were etched in the first place'.[10] In contrast to Liu's position, there has been an overwhelming tendency for critics to read the version of Mont Blanc presented in *The Prelude* as somehow offering an autobiographical truth. This is a problematic tendency. Important studies that have engaged more thoroughly with this disparity have been written by Harrington, Hooker, Hartman, Gill, Birdsall, and Hanley.[11] My approach in this area is more closely aligned with Liu in treating *The Prelude* sceptically and questioning the certainties of it and other apparent biographical records.

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[8] Ernest Bernhardt-Kabisch, 'Wordsworth and the Simplon Revisited', *Wordsworth Circle* ,10 (1979), p.381.
[9] Gill, 1991, pp.6-7.
[10] Liu, 1984, p.514.
[11] See: Hartman, 1961; Birdsall, 1986; Jeanette Harrington, 'Wordsworth's Descriptive Sketches and the Prelude, Book VI', *PMLA,* 44, 4 (1929), 1144-1158; Hanley in Gilroy, 2000; Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth: The Prelude* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Hooker, Edward Niles, 'Descriptive Sketches and the Prelude, Book VI', *PMLA,* vol. 45, 2 (Jun., 1930), 619-623.

Hartman, writing about the lack of unity in *Descriptive Sketches,* has suggested that, '[n]o doubt fidelity to fact played a part in this'.[12] Hartman's expectation that conforming faithfully to biographical truths must to some extent govern the poem's character is a somewhat striking consideration given the poem's heavy emphasis on myth, folklore and what at times are imaginary scenes detached from their source stories – such as those of the death of the chamois chaser or the Gypsey Woman of Grison whose baby is hunted by a wolf. While Hartman moves beyond an outlook governed by the conditioning form of biographical 'fidelity', it is clear that it nonetheless influences him – as it does numerous other critics – and he cannot resist informing us: 'We know from both *Descriptive Sketches* and *The Prelude* that during the poet's trip through the Alps many scenes both impressed and vexed his sight.'[13] Do we know this? Are we to view *The Prelude* and *Descriptive Sketches* as windows into biographical truths? Writing about Book VI, Gill is likewise affected by the biographical form:

> Wordsworth goes back to 1790, to the places and experiences which nourished his imagination for much of his adult life. Equally important, however, is the mind's activity in the here-and-now, that is during the composition of 1804. Throughout the book the illusion of historical time, conjured in a narrative that tries faithfully to record the feelings of 1790, is broken by urgent imaginative engagement with and in the present.[14]

Despite Gill's acknowledgement of the impact of imagination and the distance of memory in rendering the past, the problem of autobiography is clear: Gill asserts *The Prelude* offers us 'a narrative that tries *faithfully* to record the feelings of 1790'. Gill's attitude is effectively the same as that of Hartman in believing Wordsworth at least attempted veracity in his representation of the 1790 tour. There is then an irony in Gill that while his approach both recognises the problem with how critics have taken for granted the biographical authority of *The Prelude* and biographical inexactitude of *Descriptive Sketches,* he makes the same mistakes.[15]

Wordsworth almost certainly does not try to 'faithfully' record the feelings or experiences of the 1790 walking tour in *The Prelude*, just as he almost certainly did not attempt to do so in *Descriptive Sketches*. At the very least, *The Prelude* and *Descriptive Sketches* cannot both be faithful attempts to represent his perspective on Mont Blanc during the 1790 tour. The letters to Dorothy fill in a number of blanks and give a more systematic rendering of the tour. They are nonetheless not comprehensive and even with the inclusion

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[12] Geoffrey H. Hartman, 'Wordsworth's Descriptive Sketches and the Growth of a Poet's Mind', *PMLA*, 76, 5 (1961), 519-527 (p.519).
[13] Hartman, 1961, p.520.
[14] Gill, 1991, p.67.
[15] Gill, 1991, p.6.

of later sources that recall the tour a number of assumptions are necessary to plot the actual route and map how Wordsworth bridged certain locations.

Figure 32 Wordsworth's Continental tour in 1790 – the route to Mont Blanc from the Valais required a spur that it was necessary to reverse.

By looking at a map such as this or reading a brief summary of his itinerary, it is easy to overlook quite how colossal an undertaking Wordsworth's 1790 walking tour was. To rise each day for five months and hike twenty to thirty miles, often over hilly terrain and through mixed conditions with a variety of high and low temperatures required exceptional perseverance. The enterprise was a burst of quite incredible youthful energy. Indeed, simply to hike the spur from Martigny to Chamonix over the Col de Balme alone was a considerable task, and yet it was a tiny fraction of the overall effort. The extraordinarily circuitous route through the Alps on the map suggests Wordsworth's dedication to the tour diminished little throughout the summer. After already having achieved what appear to have been two distinct pre-tour objectives, to visit Mont Blanc and cross the Alps, Wordsworth was still able to postpone joining the relatively nearby and undoubtedly tempting eventual route homewards along the Aare and Rhine rivers in order to move back towards the highest mountains of the Alps and stay at Grindelwald. The undertaking is testament to Wordsworth's and Jones' impressive wills. Undoubtedly, Wordsworth had developed a rhythm of movement that had a momentum of its own. Such a pathological pattern of behaviour is discernible in a wide swathe of endurance literatures, from the destructive pathology of explorers such as Fawcett and Scott, to obsessional completists such as Rheinhold Messner (1998 and 1999) or Richard Asquith (2013), to the irreverent journeys

and accounts of Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods* (1998) or Josie Dew's *Travels in a Strange State* (1995).[16] Yet in contrast to those travellers, Wordsworth's writings convey little of the inevitable hardships. Likewise, the map of the tour might allow us to observe the distances and comprehend the ascents, but it cannot reveal how brutal such a prolonged exercise must have been. We cannot easily imagine the blisters, the rain, hail, storms, sweltering temperatures, sunburn, vulnerability or the economies that two young men who had only twenty pounds each had to make on a daily basis. Such hardships are absent from *The Prelude* and *Descriptive Sketches*. Instead, these poems separate us from the physical embodiment of Wordsworth's 1790 tour. By mapping the narrative locations in the two poems, it is immediately obvious they differ substantially from each other. Those narrative locations also differ from the route of the actual tour.
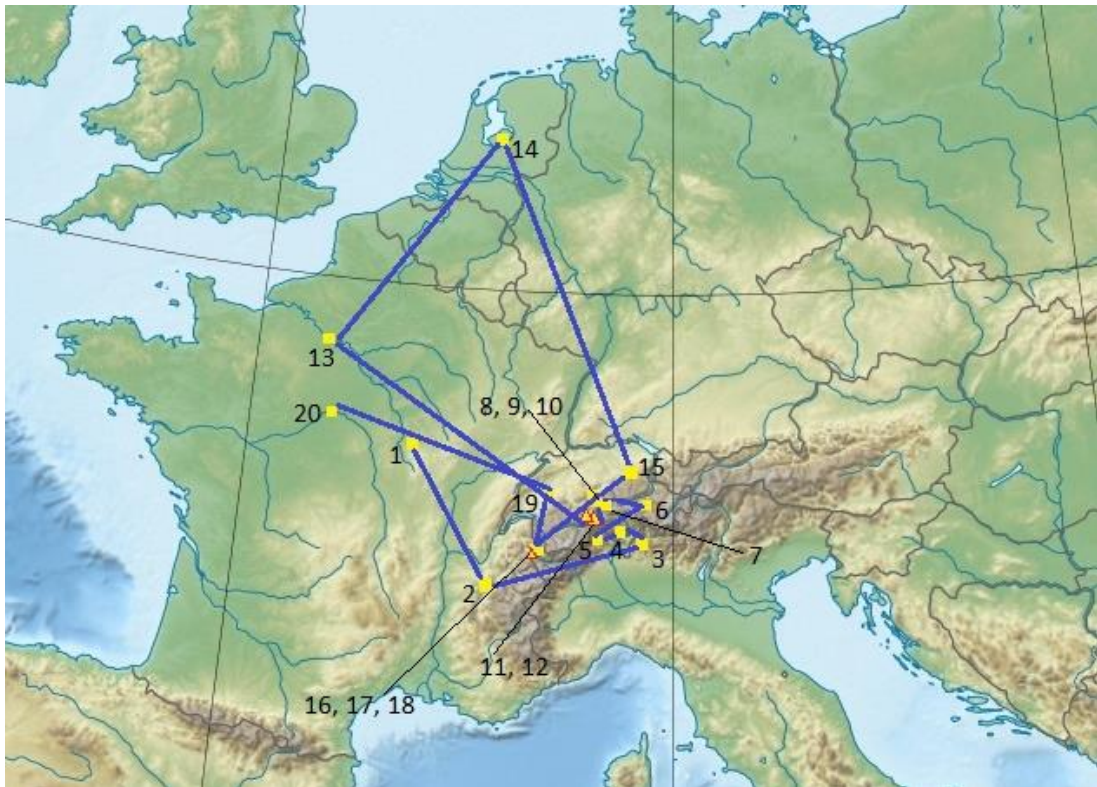
Figure 33 Narrative-subject locations in *Descriptive Sketches* omitting geo-semantic allusions

Key to locations in *Descriptive Sketches* (NAR is a narrative-subject location, FN is a location appearing in or clarified by a footnote and the unnumbered locations are unmapped geo-semantic allusions):

1. Gallia's wastes NAR
2. Chartreuse NAR
3. Lake Como NAR
4. Locarno NAR
5. Tusa River (probably River Toce (or Toccia), which the Rivers Doveria and Diveria become after the Gondo Gorge, but Wordsworth is using it to mean the river in the Gorge) NAR

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[16] See also Grann, 2010 and Lewis, 2012.

Simplon Pass FN

    6.   Viamala, 'infant Rhine' and Grison[s] NAR

    7.   Urseren NAR

    8.   Uri's Lake (Lake Lucerne) NAR

Canadian hills

Aosta

Zutphen

Langdale Pike FN

    9.   Aar River NAR (River that winds through an enormous swathe of Switzerland, but grouped here near Lucerne)

    10. 'Underwalden' (Unterwalden) NAR

Naeffels (Näfels) FN

    11. Schreck-Horn (Schreckhorn) (clarified by FN) NAR

    12. Wetter-Horn (Wetterhorn) (clarified by FN) NAR

    13. Seine NAR

    14. Batavia (Holland area) NAR

    15. Einsiedlen (Einsiedeln) NAR

    16. Chamouny (Chamonix) NAR

    17. Mont Blanc (clarified by FN) NAR

    18. Arve NAR

    19. Anet Marshes, Neuf Chatel (Neuchatel) NAR

Piedmont

Lugano

France

Loire

    20. Loiret NAR

    21. Orleans

Seine

La Fontaine

Nile

The map shows the non-linear and non-chronological nature of movements and locations in *Descriptive Sketches* when compared with Wordsworth's actual tour. *Descriptive Sketches* gives a knotty reordering of the places Wordsworth visited on his tour of the Alps. While there are surprisingly relatively few specific locations referred to in *Descriptive Sketches* and its footnotes, the poem nonetheless gives a greater sense of the Swiss and Savoyard Alps than that presented in *The Prelude*. Wordsworth writes to Jones in the dedication: 'You will meet with few images without recollecting the spot where we observed them together'. It seems hard to believe this could possibly have been the case. Rather, for large tracts of the poem Wordsworth favours a particularly vague impressionism. This generally works against tying descriptions to specific locations and even the three specified mountains in the verses of the poem (Mont Blanc, Shreckhorn and Wetterhorn marked on the map as 2, 11, and 12

respectively), are only named in accompanying footnotes – although, in the case of Mont Blanc it would be clear without the footnote that it is the mountain in question.

There are a number of major locations visited on the *actual* tour that are not mentioned in either *Descriptive Sketches* or *The Prelude.* From Geneva to the Chateau de Chillon is over sixty miles. It would have taken Wordsworth and Jones at least two but more likely three exceptionally long hiking days to reach the Chateau de Chillon via the northern shore of the lake. The eventual inefficient and difficult spur to Mont Blanc over the Col de Balme, rather than a direct linear route to the mountain via Cluses, was only necessary because of that route taken around the lake. It is to be presumed therefore that the lake and probably the Chateaux de Chillon were planned pre-tour points of interest. Yet surprisingly there is no sense in either poem about this section of the tour.

Figure 34 Linear plotting of the named narrative-subject locations in *The Prelude* (1805)

Key to locations in the Continental tour section of Book VI of *The Prelude* (1805) (NAR is a narrative-subject location and the unnumbered locations are unmapped geo-semantic allusions):

Cambridge (a sense that Wordsworth is setting off from Cambridge is evoked, although this is not clarified in the poem)

Alps

Europe

Alps

1. Calais NAR
2. Burgundy NAR
3. Soane (Saone) NAR

    4. Rhone NAR

France

    5. Chartreuse NAR

Country of the Swiss

    6. Mont Blanc NAR

    7. Chamouny (Chamonix) NAR

    8. Valais NAR

Italy

Alps

Nile (notably also one of only two non-European locations referred to in *Descriptive Sketches*. Wordsworth almost certainly consulted *Descriptive Sketches* when he wrote Book VI and in doing so was prompted to repeat the reference to the Nile)

    9. Locarno's Lake (Lake Maggiore) referred to twice in succession NAR

    10. Lake Como NAR

    11. Alps NAR (it is clear we are still at Lake Como)

    12. Gravedona NAR

Brabant (after leaving the Swiss 'exulting in the fate | of their neightbours' a reference while 'not distant far from home' is made to having crossed the 'Brabant armies' (ll.690-91). This gives a sense of a return home, probably through the Low-Countries as was the case with Wordsworth's actual tour, although this reference is not specified clearly enough to map)

In contrast to the mapped narrative-subject locations of *Descriptive Sketches*, the equivalent map of *The Prelude* provides what appears to be a logical linear movement through the Alps. To an extent the poem reflects this by giving an impression that the movements are more conventional and more reliably biographical than those of *Descriptive Sketches*. However, the impression masks the reality. The tour was more complicated and less efficiently neat than its representation in *The Prelude* suggests. Despite its importance to other writers and tourists, Lake Geneva is omitted. Likewise, Wordsworth's protracted tour through the Bernese Oberland is also missing. The references to the Schreckhorn and Wetterhorn present in *Descriptive Sketches* have disappeared, and Mont Blanc is the lone named mountain. These omissions may have been deliberate in order to heighten the importance of Mont Blanc in Book VI.

> In the letter to Dorothy Wordsworth dated 6 and 16 September 1790, he writes:
>
> From […] Martigny where we left our bundles [… we] struck over the mountains to Chamouny to visit the glaciers of Savoy. You have undoubtedly heard of these celebrated s[c]enes, but if you have not read of them any description which I have here room to give you must be altogether inadequate.[17]

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[17] Wordsworth, William and Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth 1787-1805,* ed. by Ernest de Sélincourt, rev. by Chester Shaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p.33.

Despite the importance of Mont Blanc to two of his major long poems, Wordsworth conspicuously does not mention it or describe the Savoyard Alps. Instead, to imply their power, he draws upon a cliché that was common in eighteenth-century tourist accounts – what Dorothy McMillan and others have described as the 'inexpressible sublime'.[18] The absence of Mont Blanc from the letter creates a biographical hole that numerous critics and biographers have sought to fill by using the two poetic depictions as reliable biographical sources. However, the importance of other sources to Wordsworth's Mont Blanc descriptions is often overlooked in a way in which it is not when it comes to Coleridge's use of Brun as source material for 'Hymn'. Wordsworth acknowledges three sources in his footnotes to *Descriptive Sketches.* As Duffy notes, Wordsworth emphasises his indebtedness to Ramond de Carbonnières for the descriptions of the Alps:

> For most of the images in the next sixteen verses I am indebted to M. Raymond's interesting observations annexed to his translation of Coxe's Tour in Switzerland (p.28n).

Yet given he had visited Mont Blanc, why did Wordsworth need to consult sources such as Carbonnières? While the idea that Wordsworth worked to refresh his memory seems plausible, being 'indebted' goes beyond this. It suggests he depended on such sources because of the inadequacy of his experience. When Wordsworth discusses the environs of Mont Blanc in *The Prelude* and informs us that 'With such a book | Before our eyes we could not chuse but read' (ll. 473-74), he reveals not just the environment as one that metaphorically writes itself, but a perception of environment pre-written through other texts. In a footnote Wordsworth added to the 1793 edition of *Descriptive Sketches* he asserts that '[i]t is only from the higher part of the valley of Chamouny that Mont Blanc is visible' (p.47). The valley of Chamonix was and is understood to be the valley from above the climb from Servoz to the head of the valley below the Col de Balme-Vallorcine area. The 'higher' part of the valley in this context almost certainly refers to the upper part of the valley north-north-east of Chamonix, and likely the areas around La Tour and Argentière where Wordsworth came into and exited the valley. The note therefore casts a degree of doubt on how much of Mont Blanc Wordsworth saw while he was in Chamonix because the summit is impossible to ignore from the town's streets.

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[18] 'Radcliffe's Travels' in Gilroy, p.61.

Figure 35 View of Mont Blanc's summit from the centre of Chamonix.

In 1787 Saussure even waved a flag from the summit to signify his success to his wife on the streets of Chamonix.[19] Likewise, given Wordsworth's *indebtedness* to Carbonnières and – likely – other texts, it is not unreasonable to suggest that he may not always have had good views of Mont Blanc on the 1790 tour. August is one of the wettest months of the year in Chamonix and prolonged low cloud sitting in the valley and smothering the Alps is not uncommon. Bad weather may therefore explain why Wordsworth offers no account of visiting the Mer de Glace or any other classic sites of Mont Blanc.[20] Significantly, at some point Wordsworth may have felt the note about the vantage point of Mont Blanc was not accurate, if he did it was most likely on his tour of 1820, for it was struck from the 1836 edition of *Descriptive Sketches*.

Descriptive Sketches

Descriptive Sketches is a political poem and Mont Blanc is the central pivot upon which its political treatise hangs. While a considerable proportion of the poem is dedicated to landscape poetry presented from aerial or elevated perspectives, the philosophical direction of the poem becomes clear from the moment the wild nature of Mont Blanc is introduced and juxtaposed with the political and social condition of Savoy – the 'Slavery of Savoy' that Wordsworth highlights in his prefatory 'Argument'. As such, Wordsworth confers on Mont Blanc a significant role that suggests the power of the mountain was, in the early 1790s at least, something he held great stock in. However, beyond its relevance to interpretations of *The Prelude,* considerably less attention has been afforded *Descriptive Sketches* than might be expected for such a long, albeit early, work. Hartman in *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814*

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[19] See Hansen.

[20] I once arrived in the Chamonix Valley in late July at the end of eight days of continuous rain and low cloud where even the lower slopes of the mountain had not been seen for a week.

reads *Descriptive Sketches* negatively by contrasting it with the imaginative power of *The Prelude.* Eric Birdsall, responding to Hartman and others who have judged *Descriptive Sketches* in relation to *The Prelude,* professes to analyse *Descriptive Sketches* on its own merits: '*Descriptive Sketches* has very little in common with *Prelude* 6, sharing only an origin in Wordsworth's 1790 walking tour' Birdsall writes, adding that '*Descriptive Sketches* is fundamentally *political* and only incidentally concerns itself with the mind of the narrator or the Swiss landscape.'[21] For Birdsall, '[o]ur assessment of the poem has been shaped by the influential reading of Hartman, who measures it against the artistry of *The Prelude*, book 6, and finds it inferior.'[22] Birdsall moves away from Hartman and other critical interpretations that have read *Descriptive Sketches* as a biographical travel poem focussed on the relationship between nature and imagination. Instead he argues that *Descriptive Sketches* has been 'misread' and emphasises the poem's political and social engagement with the rapidly evolving revolutionary climate of the 1790s. In doing so he asserts that the two key political moments in the poem that bookend the long descriptive passages about the Alps – the passage concerning Savoy and another detailing the present state of the Grand Chartreuse – serve Wordsworth's revolutionary identity in 1792. While Birdsall makes considerably more of the Grand Charteuse passage than I believe is justified, the central tenet of his argument, that Wordsworth is engaging sympathetically with revolutionary politics, is one with which I agree.

Mont Blanc is presented in *Descriptive Sketches* as *the* grand site of sublime nature already familiar in British literature. The increased attention afforded Mont Blanc undoubtedly owed a degree of debt to the picturesque movement and the argument that Mont Blanc simply became fashionable has some merit.[23] Yet for Wordsworth the picturesque was an inadequate model with which to appreciate the vastness of the Alps. In his introduction to *Descriptive Sketches* (1793) he writes, 'I had once given these sketches the title of picturesque; but the Alps are insulted in applying to them that term.'[24] Wordsworth like most of his contemporaries depended on the sublime as the means of interpreting the mountain:

> Alone ascends that mountain nam'd of white,[25]
>
> That dallies with the sun the summer night.

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[21] Eric Birdsall, 'Nature and Society in "Descriptive Sketches"', *Modern Philology,* 84, 1 (August, 1986), 39-52 (p.41).

[22] Eric Birdsall, 'Nature and Society in "Descriptive Sketches"', *Modern Philology,* 84, 1 (August, 1986), 39-52 (p.39). Birdsall is referring to Hartman, 1961 and 1964.

[23] Mont Blanc finds its way into the discourse of William Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, etc. Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; made in the Summer of the Year 1770* (1792), p.97.

[24] *WDS,* p.26. [Further references are given in the text.]

[25] Wordsworth's note regarding from where Mont Blanc can be seen is appended here.

> Six thousand years amid his lonely bounds
>
> The voice of Ruin day and night, resounds.
>
> Where Horror-led his sea of ice assails,
>
> Havoc and Chaos blast a thousand vales,
>
> In Waves, like two enormous serpents, wind
>
> And drag their length of deluge train behind.
>
> Between the pine's enormous boughs descry'd
>
> Serene he towers, in deepest purple dy'd;
>
> Glad Day-light laughs upon his top of snow,
>
> Glitter the stars above, and all is black below. (pp.47-8)

Mont Blanc is distinct from the other mountains in *Descriptive Sketches,* particularly in that it is anthropomorphised in a way that other mountains in the poem are not. Hartman has written of the atomization of imagery in *Descriptive Sketches* and points out how Wordsworth 'untiringly depicts a vacillation of mighty opposites' in contrast to the poet's mature style that uses a 'technique of blending'.[26] Hartman's 'vacillation' is identifiable in the 'snow' of the summit being contrasted by the 'black' of the valley below.[27] Yet the 'mighty opposites' Hartman correctly identifies elsewhere in *Descriptive Sketches* are difficult to recognise in the Mont Blanc passage. For while there is a sharp contrast between mountain and valley, and certainly a contrast between Mont Blanc and the social condition of Savoy in the passage that follows, the mountain itself presents a collage of blended images and ideas. Similarly, there is a degree of blending between Mont Blanc and earlier descriptions of mountains in the poem. The images of the distant Alps 'ascending white in air | [that] Toy with the sun, and glitter from afar' (p.8) or where a sunset 'in a mighty crucible expire |The mountains, glowing hot, like coals of fire' (p.26) are recalled by Mont Blanc as it 'dallies with the sun the summer night' – only in this instance Mont Blanc lives on while the other mountains die away. Blending is also used in the presentation of day and night on the mountain, leaving Mont Blanc positioned either in both times simultaneously or inhabiting the ethereal space between them. The sluggish 'wind |And drag' is at odds with 'assails' and 'blast'. Yet if the idea of 'lonely bounds' is undermined by the description of energy and movement, it is infused with religious, apocalyptic and regal imagery and blended to form a sublime mountain collage.

Central to the presentation of Mont Blanc within the poem is the use of religious sublimity and biblical language. Mont Blanc is 'lonely', but simultaneously not lonely, for on it we find Havoc and Chaos personified. Havoc and Chaos appear as apocalyptic angels with a 'deluge train'. Mont Blanc is masculine and god-like. It simultaneously towers

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[26] Hartman, 1961, pp.520-521.

[27] Hartman, 1961, p.521.

'serene' above the rest of the Alps and contrastingly harbours 'Horror' and 'Chaos' that 'assail' and 'blast a thousand vales'. Although Mont Blanc is violent and destructive, the narrator is in awe of this power in nature. As such the mountain is the antithesis of the 'soulless image' Wordsworth would later describe. The age of the mountain is given as '[s]ix thousand years'. This repeats the orthodox Christian dating of the earth by Archbishop Ussher as only 6000 years. However, the 'voice of ruin' here is paradoxically creative and suggests the geological processes of which Wordsworth was cognisant and that are constantly reshaping the mountain with glaciers and avalanches.[28] Certainly Wordsworth embraces contemporary Neptunist or Catastrophist theories that, in the tradition of the 'Deluge and Dissolution of the Earth' section in Thomas Burnet's *The Sacred Theory of the Earth,* promoted the idea that the Alps owed their formation to the deluge. Wordsworth is not, however, interested in finding a stable theory of the Alps. Rather, he is promoting imaginative impressions of those 'symbols of the Great Apocalypse' found later in *The Prelude* and forging imagery from religious sublimity with geographical discoveries in a way that Thomas Whalley had also done in his *Mont Blanc* of 1788 and that anticipates Percy Bysshe Shelley's apocalyptic visions in 'Mont Blanc'.[29]

Wordsworth projects masculine power and explores its relationship to femininity in *Descriptive Sketches*. In the poem the feminised beauty of Lake Como functions structurally as a geographical contrast to the later masculine and destructive power of Mont Blanc. Such opposition of soft feminine lake to hard masculine mountain was not an uncommon trope in eighteenth-century poetry. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter One, William Parsons employed the technique in his 'Ode to the Lake of Geneva' (1787). Early in *Descriptive Sketches,* Wordsworth – or the thinly veiled presentation of himself as poet-narrator – passes a village dance where 'maidens eye him with an inquiring glance' (p.7). There seems little reason for this detail beyond it being an effusion of ego. The fascination with pastoral maids continues throughout the poem. At Lake Como 'dark ey'd maids' perform a 'Lip-dewing Song and ringlet-tossing Dance'(p.12). This sexual image, softened partly by more standard pastoral fare such as the maids having 'sparkling eyes and breaking smiles that illume', continues until night falls on the lake and 'Soft bosoms breathe around contagious sighs, | And amourous music on the water dies' (p.12). Yet Lake Como and its maidens are reviewed again the following day and blended into a sexualised femininity as the narrator bids 'Farewell' to

Those steadfast eyes, that beating breasts inspire

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[28] As already noted, Wordsworth is using Carbonnières as a source to support his descriptions of the Alps. Carbonnières discusses Buffon's earth-cooling theory about the age of the earth. Even without Carbonnières, it was generally understood that the Archbishop Ussher's timeline was incorrect (see Wyatt, 1995, p.37).

[29] See Chapter 4.

To throw the "sultry ray" of young Desire;

Those lips, whose tides of fragrance come, and go,

Accordant to the cheek's unquiet glow;

Those shadowy breasts in love's soft light array'd,

And Rising, by the moon of passion sway'd (p.14).

The opposition between the harsh mountain and the beauteous lake foreshadows the key presentation of the political state of Savoy. Despite Como's beauty, Wordsworth acknowledges that thoughts of 'Slavery, forcing the sunk mind to dwell; | On joys that might disgrace a captive's cell' (p.14) cannot wholly be forgotten. It is these thoughts that return after Mont Blanc.

The Mont Blanc passage is sandwiched between two contrasting descriptions of the valley below it. This is a manipulation of the landscape experienced on the actual tour so that Mont Blanc can serve as the turning point in the poem. In the first instance, the Chamonix Valley is presented as a feminised alpine idyll, 'Bosom'd in gloomy woods' with 'her golden fields', 'wild flowers' and 'ever vernal plains' (p.47). This alpine idyll, though not sexualised like Lake Como, is beautiful. Yet while Lake Como prompted only a passing thought of slavery and social inequity, the sublimity of Mont Blanc seems to awaken in Wordsworth a political clarity. Having been confronted by the mountain he reappraises the Chamonix Valley and Mont Blanc proves the key turning point that allows the unveiling of political injustice in Savoy. The mountain functions primarily as a basis for a contrast between the grandeur of nature (a locus for individual liberty rather than social liberty in its purest Wordsworthian form) and the injustice of social and political inequity found in Savoy that follows the line 'all is black below' (p.48):

At such an hour I heav'd the human sigh,

When roared the sullen Arve in anger by,

That not for thee, delicious vale! Unfold

Thy reddening orchards, and thy fields of gold;

That thou, the slave of slaves*[30], art doom'd to pine,

While no Italian arts their charms combine

To teach the skirt of thy dark cloud to shine;

For thy poor babes that, hurrying from the door,

With pale-blue hands, and eyes that fix'd implore,

Dead muttering lips, and hair of hungry white,

Besiege the traveller whom they half affright. (pp.48-9)

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[30] Wordsworth's note reads: 'It is scarce necessary to observe that these lines were written before the emancipation of Savoy' (p.48n).

It is important to recognise that *Descriptive Sketches* is, as Birdsall suggests, a response to Wordsworth's feelings about the Revolution in 1792 more than it is a necessarily genuine response to material place. The publication date of *Descriptive Sketches* – 1 January 1793 – places it in the narrow passage of time between the invasion of Savoy by French Revolutionary forces in October 1792 and the commencement of Britain's war with France on 1 February 1793. As Bainbridge and others have suggested, the war between France and Wordsworth's native country would not on its own be cause enough for him to lose faith in the Revolution (there was the Reign of Terror, the invasion of Switzerland in 1798 and the rise of Napoleon for that).[31] The timing of the note added to the 'slave of slaves' line gives us insight. By January 1793, the invasion of Savoy had become an annexation. Despite this, Wordsworth sees the move as a symbol of political hope rather than a worrying foreshadowing of French empire building. He therefore appears to value the wider spread of liberal and indeed republican ideology – as espoused by the Revolution – above the self-determination of states or national groupings. Nonetheless, Wordsworth's public affinity with the objectives of the Revolution and the depiction of a subjugated Savoy enables him to project an image of a radical liberal poet fighting for a wider social justice. This youthful version of the self had at its centre not just a radical identity, but an *internationalist* radical identity. Mont Blanc suited this identity because it could not be limited by the reductive principles of state boundaries. Indeed, there is a sense of separation in Mont Blanc as if it is something above Savoy – that 'slave of slaves' where subjugated people belong not only to an autocratic Savoy, but an autocratic Savoy governed by the autocratic Kingdom of Sardinia. Mont Blanc appears to have cleansed Wordsworth's perception – to paraphrase Blake – and he sets out to unveil the social realities caused by political tyranny. In the mountain's shadow we are given the harrowing depiction of a blighted population reduced to 'poor babes' with '[d]ead muttering lips' – a clear contrast with the earlier depictions of '[t]hose lips' of the maidens with their '[l]ip-dewing Song'. It is a sudden shift that interrupts the flow of the alpine idyll and mountain sublimity that has characterised the greater Alps passage and Wordsworth, from this point onwards through the following eight pages that conclude the poem, emphasises the effect of political tyranny upon humanity.

As the poem progresses towards its conclusion the call for liberty becomes rhapsodic. The following recalls the scenes witnessed in Savoy:

> Oh give, great God, to Freedom's waves to ride
> Sublime o'er Conquest, Avarice, and Pride,
> To break, the vales where Death with Famine scow'rs,
> And dark Oppression builds her thick-ribb'd tow'rs. (p.54)

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[31] See Bainbridge, (1995).

In the natural world created by God, Wordsworth sees a metaphor for human liberty and its resistance to tyranny. Yet he is also cautionary. The beauties of nature, and of humanity as embodied in the maidens, have the ability to veil political realities. Sublime experience offers a means to clarity and a way in which the worst of our natures can be overcome. In this instance it prompts Wordsworth to reflect on his place in the world. In the first few lines following the description of Savoy, Wordsworth is drawn to thoughts of his 'native mountains bleak and bare; | O'er Anet's hopeless seas of marsh to stray' (p.49). This seems a deeply personal passage: the plight of the Savoyards has moved him to recall his 'native mountains', while the allusion to the Anet marshes near the Swiss Lake of Neufchatel seems a coded allusion to his love affair with Annette Vallon. Indeed, there is something steadfast though sombre and homely in the poem's conclusion that points tonally towards Wordsworth's direct addresses to Coleridge in *The Prelude*:

> To night, my friend, within this humble cot
>
> Be the dead load of mortal ills forgot,
>
> Renewing, when the rosy summits glow
>
> At morn, our various journey, sad and slow. (p.55).

The Prelude

Pamela Buck has considered Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journal of a Tour of the Continent in 1820* and describes an instance in which Dorothy and William's 'refusal to emulate [the guide book author] Ebel's aesthetic response [… may] belie their opposition to the rise of popular tourism'.[32] Buck has discussed the methodology behind such refusals, highlighting how Dorothy Wordsworth navigated preconditioned expectations for the Alps derived from the 'propaganda' or picturesque poems and 'visual representations' so that she could formulate her distinctiveness as a writer and traveller distinct from her fellow tourists. Indeed, Buck suggests how on the tour Dororthy 'also seeks to differentiate her tour from her brother's previous journey'. At the birthplace of William Tell, Buck relates how Dorothy celebrates a tower that was 'off the beaten path', suggesting that the tower 'evokes [Dorothy's] desire to have an experience apart from that of the typical tour'.[33] In essence, when William Wordsworth returned to the subject of Mont Blanc in his writing he did so with an approach not dissimilar to that of Dorothy's – a tourist and a writer seeking to differentiate his response to the Alps from the herd. It required him to reconfigure his earlier presentation of Mont Blanc and the Alps. There was precedent for Wordsworth rejecting iconic sites before 1804. Dorothy's *Recollection of a Tour in Scotland A.D. 1803*, reveals that Wordsworth had found disappointment in two popular British sites for tourism of the

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[32] Buck in Esterhammer, 2015, p.124.
[33] Buck in Esterhammer, 2015, p.120.

sublime in 1803.[34] These sites were the Cobbler and the Pass of Glen Coe. In the case of the latter she informs us:

> In comparing the impressions we had received at [the Pass of] Glen Coe, we found that though the expectations of both had been far surpassed by the grandeur of the mountains, we had upon the whole both been disappointed, and from the same cause: we had been prepared for images of terror, had expected a deep, den-like valley with overhanging rocks, such as William has described in these lines, speaking of the Alps.[35]

Dorothy follows this passage by inserting part of Wordsworth's Gondo Gorge sequence from Book VI of the 1805 *Prelude*. She begins with 'Brook and road' (l.553) and continues to the end of the imagination sequence: 'Of first and last, and midst, and without end' (l.572).[36] This is the inverse of the anticipated sublime. Rather than experiencing the sublime because they were expecting to do so, the expectation of the sublime works against the natural capability to experience it. The Gondo Gorge sequence here functions as the example for the genuine sublime response. My contention is that Wordsworth is probably working strategically in these instances as he is with the soulless image of Mont Blanc to promote his distinctiveness as a writer. It is not so much a question of whether the sublime is experienced or not, neither is it a question of whether the sites are impressive or not, but rather that Wordsworth cannot allow himself to succumb to the attitude of the popular tourist of the sublime, because doing so diminishes his poetic authenticity and authority.

In the main, readers had come to expect vivid descriptions of Mont Blanc's sublimity and grandeur. There were exceptions, however. Duffy has recognised a precedent in William Coxe whose *'Travels* frequently register frustrated expectations' that form a 'repeated pattern of "expectation" and "disappointment".[37] Likewise Thomas Whalley was 'so much disappointed' when he found 'the glaciers of [Mont Blanc] fell far short of expectation' and 'not deserving of all the praises that the overheated imaginations of some authors have bestowed upon their sublimity and splendour'.[38] However, Whalley's 'disappointment' does not extend to Mont Blanc, explaining that 'the august scene of rocks, and woods, and mountains round eclipsed the glaciers, in my eye, crowned by the imperial Mont Blanc, sublimest of all sublime objects'.[39] Wordsworth's *re-presentation* in *The*

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[34] The journal was re-written entirely in 1822 after the original journals of the tour had been lost. It was not published until 1874.

[35] Dorothy Wordsworth, *Recollection of a Tour in Scotland A.D. 1803*, ed. by J. C. Shairp (Edinburgh: James Thin, 1974), pp.177-8

[36] The inclusion of this passage from *The Prelude* could not of course have been in Dorothy's original journal of 1803.

[37] Duffy, 2013, p.39.

[38] Whalley, 1863, 1, p.411.

[39] Whalley, 1863, 1, p.411.

Prelude of his first sight of Mont Blanc might not have provided unprecedented disappointment, nonetheless it did challenge the predominant celebratory responses to the mountain as *the* grand site of European sublimity:

> That day we first
>
> Beheld the summit of Mount Blanc, and grieved
>
> To have a soulless image on the eye,
>
> Which had usurp'd upon a living thought
>
> That never more could be. (ll. 452-456)

The appearance of 'Mount Blanc' that has 'usurp'd upon a living thought' has been regarded, by Bainbridge and others, as the overthrow of an anticipated imaginary mountain by a material mountain. As Duffy (2013) has suggested, previous critics have read, in the tradition of Monk, this response to the mountain, and his subsequent realisation of the power of imagination in the Gondo Gorge, as following a Kantian model for the sublime laid out in the *Critique of Judgement*. In following a Kantian model, Wordsworth's sublime experience in the Alps can be seen as dependent upon the extreme contrasts between his emotional responses to mountain and gorge. Hartman sees such contrasts as resulting from a tension between place and imagination, and claims this is the reason for a degree of vacillation in Wordsworth's poetry. Yet Hartman also considers the tension as the product of a poet who is attempting to work out deep philosophical questions about the self, imagination and the sublime.[40] Most critics have interpreted the contrast between the *negative* first appearance of the mountain and the *positive* experiences of the gorge as something Wordsworth genuinely felt – whether he did so in 1790 or later, as Gill suggests, when reimagining the mountain and gorge while at home in the Lakes in March 1804. Gill may be correct to suggest the topography of the Lake District surrounding Wordsworth as he composed *The Prelude* probably filtered into Wordsworth's descriptions of the Alps.[41]

For Liu, the appearance of Mont Blanc disrupts a Georgic pastoral presentation of the Chamonix Valley: 'There is some strange devil of history, I suggest, behind [Mont Blanc's] "usurpation" that the poet-as-*agricola* would rather not see,' and that the 'whiteness at Mont Blanc' 'is the space in which history can ghost into the present; it is not no-meaning but a panic of too much possible meaning'.[42] Liu adds that, 'the whiteness at Mont Blanc – protruding like a heroic bone – is simply ploughed under again.'[43] Liu develops this by discussing the influence of Napoleon upon the workings of Wordsworth's

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[40] See Hartman, Geoffrey H., 'Wordsworth's Descriptive Sketches and the Growth of a Poet's Mind', *PMLA*, 76, 5 (1961) 519-527.

[41] In her Journal of the 1820 tour Dorothy Wordsworth discusses this reflexive process in relation to her perception of and writing about the Chamonix Valley in the 16 September entry.

[42] Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), p.20.

[43] Alan Liu, 'Wordsworth: The History in "Imagination"', *ELH,* 51, 3 (Autumn, 1984), 505-548 (p.534).

imagination in *The Prelude,* suggesting – to put it crudely – that Napoleon is present through his absence. Bainbridge has countered Liu's deconstructive approach to this passage with a cultural historicist reading that nonetheless complements Liu's thesis about the depth of historical influence. Bainbridge argues Wordsworth does not in essence plough the 'heroic bone' under, but instead writes about Napoleon both implicitly and explicitly in his presentation of Mont Blanc and the Crossing of the Alps.[44] Vincent has embraced both Liu and Bainbridge's reading of the influence of historical events upon the passage, but disagrees with Bainbridge that the Swiss Revolutions of 1798 and 1802 'had not directly changed Wordsworth's mind about the Revolution'.[45] Vincent writes that 'the Mount Blanc passage suggests on the contrary that the speaker's disappointment at the Col de Balme arises from a deep sense of betrayal that owes something to the Swiss revolution as well as to Napoleon.'[46] Hansen also values Liu's contribution, but argues that critics have overlooked the importance of Mont Blanc within Robespierre's Festival of Reason and the Temple of Nature. Hansen argues that 'the spoliation of "a soulless image on the eye […]" was Jacobin as much as Napoleonic, the usurpation by the revolutionary mountain'.[47]

While the influence of historical events upon this disappointment are each, in their own way, persuasive, what I am interested in here is how Wordsworth reformed his material experiences in order to express that disappointment. Likewise, I am interested in how it fitted into a pattern of disappointments in material place that may well have had as much to do with his personal relationships – particularly with Coleridge – as it did with political change.[48] Wordsworth's response to the image of Mont Blanc in this passage was turning against his own presentation of the mountain in *Descriptive Sketches.* However, it is important to remember that, as Gill has suggested, these five lines are a 'declaration of disappointment' that finds 'reconciliation' in the 'potentiality' of the '"dumb cataracts", "streams of ice" and a "motionless array of mighty waves"' in the following five lines.[49] To a degree, Wordsworth here anticipates the type of expectation and hope for Mont Blanc that Byron expressed in *Childe Harold* Canto III and that would be followed by the disappointment of Byron's eventual experience of the mountain.

It is likely the initial disappointment in the image of Mont Blanc as expressed in *The Prelude* did not actually take place. If we consider the 1790 letter to Dorothy that describes

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[44] See Bainbridge, 1995, pp.54-94. See also Chapter Two of this thesis for application of both the approaches of Liu and Bainbridge to my reading of Coleridge's 'Hymn'.
[45] Patrick Vincent, '"Switzerland No More": Turner, Wordsworth and the changed landscape of the Revolution' in David Spurr and Cornelia Tschichold, eds., *The Space of English* (Zurich: University of Switzerland, 2005), p.145.
[46] Vincent, 2005, p.145.
[47] Hansen, p.136.
[48] This relationship is considered in the final section of this chapter.
[49] Gill, 1991, p.69.

Wordsworth's approach to the mountain from Geneva via the northern shore of its lake followed by the journey over the Col de Balme, there is nothing to suggest the disappointment Wordsworth found in the image of Mont Blanc as it is expressed in Book VI. There is, however, an equivalent disappointment in Wordsworth's experience of Lake Geneva that in reconfiguring the 1790 tour to suit the narrative of *The Prelude* was very likely applied to Mont Blanc rather than Lake Geneva. In the 1790 letter, Wordsworth writes of the lake:

> The lower part of the lake did not afford us a pleasure equal to what might have been expected from its celebrity; this owing partly to its width, and partly to the weather, which was one of those hot gleamy days in which all distant objects are veiled in a species of bright obscurity. But the higher part of the lake made us ample amends: 'tis true we had some disagreeable weather, but the banks of the water are infinitely more picturesque, and, as it is much narrower, the landscape suffered proportionally less from that pale steam which before almost entirely hid the opposite shore.[50]

The process of disappointment at the lake is similar to the Mont Blanc experience as represented in *The Prelude*. A famed sight of nature does not live up to its 'celebrity'. Notably, despite theoretically poorer weather the eastern end of the lake is preferred to the better-known southwestern end. What is particularly striking about this passage is the word 'amends'. It is a potent word to use. '[A]mends' suggests that there has been a wrongdoing. The wrongdoing we can presume has been by those writers who have espoused the brilliance of the southern end of the lake. For Wordsworth, another geographical location is sought and found that can make amends for his disappointment. Tellingly, he deploys 'amends' again after he is first confronted by the disappointment in the image of Mont Blanc in *The Prelude:*

> …Which never more could be. The wondrous Vale
>
> of Chamouny did, on the following dawn,
>
> With its dumb cataracts and streams of ice –
>
> A motionless array of mighty waves,
>
> Five rivers broad and vast – make rich amends,
>
> And reconcile us to realities.

As Gill suggests, the initial disappointment in Mont Blanc is short-lived. Its glaciers, seen from the vantage of the valley the next day, do not merely make amends but 'make rich amends' – an echo of the 'ample amends' used in the letter to Dorothy. It seems likely Wordsworth probably read his 1790 letter to Dorothy when he composed *The Prelude* in

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[50] Wordsworth, William and Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth 1787-1805,* ed. Ernest de Sélincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), p.31.

1804. He only uses 'amends' once more in *The Prelude.* It appears in Book IX as part of an analogy about how he can make amends for his failings. It is not a word Wordsworth commonly used; I have found fewer than ten examples in Wordsworth's published writings and have been unable to discover an example of him using it in the manner of geographical recompense suggested by the letter to Dorothy and the description of the Chamonix Valley. It is likely therefore that Wordsworth simply transposed the feelings he expressed in the letter to Dorothy about Lake Geneva on the actual tour in 1790 onto his reconfigured version of Mont Blanc in 1804. This emphasises how neither *The Prelude* or *Descriptive Sketches* likely offer us a literalisation of Wordsworth's actual response to the alpine landscapes he experienced in 1790. Rather, they communicate Wordsworth's shifting poetic identities as he negotiated the political and cultural meanings associated with Mont Blanc in British culture between 1790 and 1804.

Wordsworth's use of the anglicised form 'Mount Blanc' differs from the 'Mont Blanc' of *Descriptive Sketches.* It has a jarring effect that may have been intentional, perhaps even political, in subtly reclaiming the mountain from its French name at a time when, as William Coxe writes in his 1801 edition of *Travels,* 'French rulers were not content with planting the tricoloured flag on the summit of Mont Blanc […] but purposed to form a series of dependent republics along the line of [France's] frontiers.'[51] However, fourteen years had elapsed since Wordsworth's visit – a visit I have suggested may have had significant limitations. It is far more likely the spelling migrated from Wordsworth's consulting – as a substitute for poor memory, experience, or both – guide books and travelogues that had employed that spelling.

The narrative vantage point from which Mont Blanc is observed in *The Prelude* is not the same as in *Descriptive Sketches.* In the early poem it appears to be seen from the valley, '[b]etween the pine's enormous boughs descry'd' and in the latter from a distance when crossing the Col de Balme. In their journals, both Dorothy and Mary Wordsworth describe following the same approach to the Chamonix Valley Wordsworth had used in 1790. Both read the landscape partly through the lens of Wordsworth's earlier 1790 experience and writings.[52] However, both give impressions of the landscape in 1820 that differs from William Wordsworth's poetic renderings. Marvelling at the sublimity of the Mont Blanc massif from the Col de Balme, a view that stretches from the summit and incorporates several peaks,[53] Dorothy writes:

> Oh! that I could describe – nay that I could remember the sublime spectacle of the
> pinnacles and towers of Mont Blanc […]. The pinnacles and towers above [the

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[51] William Coxe, *Travels in Switzerland in a Series of Letters to William Melmoth* (London: T. Cadell, 1801), p.xiv.
[52] See Pamela Buck in Esterhammer (2015), pp.117-131.
[53] I discuss this view in more detail later in the chapter.

valley] seemed as if they stood in the sky;– of no soft aerial substance, but appearing, even at that great distance, as they really are, huge masses of solid stone raised by an Almighty Power, and never, but by the same power, to be destroyed.[54]

For Dorothy, Mont Blanc is a symbol of divinity, a work of God. The repetition in the passage of 'pinnacles and towers' expresses the rapid overflow of powerful feelings she is experiencing. There is a clear sense here that this was a definite experience, rather than one reshaped or necessarily affected by other sources.

Contrastingly, the representation of the mountain we are given in *The Prelude* was fundamentally about narrative function and poetic identity, rather than fidelity to feeling and experience. The ordering of visual spectacle in Book VI corrupts Wordsworth's actual physical experience. Wordsworth describes an 'aboriginal Vale' before he describes Mont Blanc. Mary Wordsworth reports that Wordsworth informed her that the 'aboriginal vale' described in Book VI is correlated with the upper valley around Le Tour.[55] In her journal, Dorothy Wordsworth likewise makes this correlation. Although the description of the 'aboriginal Vale' in Book VI does not fundamentally deny Mont Blanc has been seen first, because of the chronological nature of Book VI up to this point, the impression is given that it is the first thing to meet Wordsworth's eye as he crosses the Col de Balme. This was not the case. The final arc of the old track from Martingny in Switzerland to the Col de Balme approaches from the north-north-west. If visibility was good, as Wordsworth climbed over the Col de Balme his first view would have been of Mont Blanc and the Aiguille Verte, a 4202m peak on the Mont Blanc Massif. In good weather the view of the two peaks on this approach would have been uninterrupted. Paintings and travelogue descriptions reveal that the original refuge took advantage of the leeward south side of the col by a significant distance. The refuge in the pass that interrupts the view today was not built on this site until 1877, so Mont Blanc would have been better framed in 1790 and have included the Dome de Gouter, which today is only seen as the refuge is passed:

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[54] Dorothy Wordsworth, September 14, 'Journals of a Tour of the Continent' in Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth, vol 2 (London: Macmillan, 1904), p.254.

[55] The passage reads: 'When W. & D. rejoined us, they told me that this selfsame spot, was the "Aboriginal Vale, that green recess" which had given an equal shock of delight to Wm – when Jones & he, two youthful travellers, came upon it, & entered from Martigny exactly as we did, – & this paradise was the first that impressed upon his mind the extreme beauty of the Swiss Vallies!' See Mary Wordsworth, MS DCMS 92 Travel Journal 11 July to 23 December 1820, Grasmere, Wordsworth Trust, 15 September.

Figure 36 Mont Blanc as it first comes into view on the approach to the Col de Balme from Martingny, Switzerland (2019)

The lay of the land, including a large scree field which in 1790 almost certainly held snow throughout the year, dictated that the path seen in the photo was the exact same one used by Wordsworth as he hiked over in the col in 1790. The Aiguille Verte and north face of the Dru, partly obscured by cloud, are to the left of the frame. A hill in the pass restricting the view is rounded just beyond the col that allows the Massif des Aiguilles Rouges to be seen. This massif would have dominated the view to Wordsworth's southwest. What Wordsworth would certainly not have seen first or indeed seen for a fair few minutes was the Chamonix Valley. As for his 'aboriginal Vale', this would not have been visible for a considerable time and distance. Only as he descended from the col would the Chamonix Valley have begun to come into view. It would have done so from its southern extent around Chamonix:

Figure 37 This photo is taken 500m south-south-west of the Col de Balme on the old pony track used by Wordsworth in descent into Savoy (the transverse track is a product of twentith-century skiing infrastructure). The Dru is peeping above the clouds on the left, with Mont Blanc centre. The glacier reaching closest to Chamonix is the Glacier des Bossons.

It is clear from the above photo that Wordsworth's 'aboriginal Vale' is completely hidden from view. The sense of intervening spaces, including the valley that accommodates the Mer de Glace would have become apparent the more he descended. However, the Mer de Glace, even with its greater depth and extent in 1790, would not have been visible to Wordsworth on this descent:

Figure 38 Aiguille de Verte with the north and north-west faces of the Dru adjoining (left) and Mont Blanc (right)

Figure 39 View 1km south-south west of the col, with the Dru (far left), Mont Blanc (centre) and the Aiguilles Rouges (right)

As this photo shows, the protracted nature of the descent actually diminishes the view of the Chamonix Valley for long sections. Wordsworth's 'aboriginal Vale' remains hidden despite 1km of descending.

Figure 40 The village of Le Tour on the descent from the Col de Balme.

The village of Le Tour (on a map of 1799 it is marked 'Fourt') and this secluded upper section of the Chamonix Valley are what Wordsworth was referring to when he described an 'aboriginal Vale'.[56] This view is over one mile from the Col de Balme and at roughly 1800m altitude. If armed with knowledge of the chronology of the unfurling geography and views that are experienced when the Col de Balme is crossed from Switzerland into – in 1790 – Savoy, then the description of Mont Blanc is understood to be an even deeper reflection on the past. It is not just '[t]hat day' twenty-four years ago, but also *earlier* '[t]hat day' twenty-four years ago. Wordsworth has disrupted the chronological experience of the 1790 tour to both accentuate the disappointment felt when Mont Blanc was first viewed and to celebrate the lesser-known space of the 'aboriginal Vale'.

To appreciate the strategic use of Mont Blanc and the aboriginal vale, it is necessary to understand how the mountain and the vale function within the full passage that describes the journey through the Alps and culminates with the imagination sequence in the Gondo Gorge. Duffy, engages with Thomas Weiskel in suggesting 'Wordsworth's apostrophe to the imagination' in the Gondo Gorge is a '"set piece" of the "Romantic sublime"' and values critical approaches that have viewed it as a versification of Kant's "Analytic of the Sublime"'.[57] However, Duffy is more interested in reading the apostrophe within the context of other writings about the Alps from Windham's *An Account* to those of the 1820s, and in

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[56] See Alprandi, pp.74-75.
[57] Duffy, 2013, p.28.

doing so pays close attention to the influence of Ramond de Carbonnières's *Observations* as an example of 'a wider genre of engagement with the Alpine sublime' or 'discourse of ascent' that fostered in British writings a 'poetics of ascent'.[58] He recognises a similarity between Carbonnières' apostrophe to the imagination in *Observations* and Wordsworth's evocation of imagination in Book VI and claims: 'Carbonnières provides a clear alternative and, from a contextual point of view, more obviously relevant and accessible, antecedent for Wordsworth's apostrophe to the imagination as the agent of the mind's "prowess" in the encounter with the Alpine sublime.'[59] I agree that Wordsworth appears to be responding to Carbonnières and as Duffy suggests also a wider 'discourse on ascent' formed by other texts and elements.[60] However, I am more concerned here with the exact way in which Wordsworth reshapes his material experiences of the mountain and why the Gondo Gorge rather than Mont Blanc is the locus for that great apostrophe to the imagination.

As my mapping shows, the narrative plane of *The Prelude* omits Lake Geneva entirely. The approach to Mont Blanc is given in a general sense hiking through the 'country of the Swiss' (l.425). Instead, Wordsworth focusses on establishing a wave-like up-down motion in the entire crossing of the Alps sequence and uses it to frame Mont Blanc's position in the text. Recognising this motion is central to understanding the function of Mont Blanc in *The Prelude*. On his walk of 'military speed', Wordsworth informs us, 'earth did change her images and forms | Before us, fast as clouds are changed in Heaven' (ll.428-430). This shifts our perspective from *down* on earth to *up* in the heavens. The motion is repeated on the following two lines. The pair are 'up early and down late', and they move 'From vale to vale, hill to hill' (ll. 431-32). We are told they are 'keen hunters' and once more we are drawn upwards and then downwards in rapid succession: 'Eager as birds of prey, or as a Ship | Upon the stretch when the winds are blowing fair' (435-36). Despite the high mountains anticipated when Wordsworth announces '[t]hence onwards to the country of the Swiss' (l.425) our attention is drawn downwards into pastoral idylls as Wordsworth considers the '[s]weet coverts' of 'pastoral life' found in '[e]nticing vallies' (ll.436-38). There is a rapidity to this unfurling physical world accentuated by valleys that 'flash and gleam' (l.439) into and out of view. A sense of inflation and deflation is produced when Wordsworth reflects upon the motion of passing through this material world: 'Oh! Sorrow for the Youth who could have seen | Unchasten'd, unsubdu'd, unaw'd, unrais'd |To patriarchal dignity of mind' (ll.441-444). The reflection upon geography becomes a reflection upon the limitations of 'Youth' that the poet of 1804, Wordsworth suggests, is capable of overcoming. The quick succession of words prefixed with 'un' maintains a sense

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[58] Duffy, 2013, p.67.
[59] Duffy, 2013, p.65.
[60] See Chapter Four.

of momentum, but also imparts a sense of spontaneity in the ordering of feelings where the right words are searched for but seem never fully realised. The succession of 'un' words is recalled in Wordsworth's reflection upon the whole Mont Blanc passage that again functions as a reflection upon his youthful self:

> Whate'er in this wide circuit we beheld,
>
> Or heard, was fitted to our *un*ripe state
>
> Of intellect and heart. By simple strains
>
> Of feeling, the pure breath of real life,
>
> We were not left *un*touch'd. (ll.469-473 – my emphasis)

If there is a sense of upwards motion in the growth from 'unripe' youth to mature 'patriarchal' poet, then there is also a sense that to move back in time and inhabit the vantage of the youth is to move downwards. Here the downwards movement is regressive, but also involves a process of over-writing the past and there is a pointed distancing from both an earlier self and earlier responses to Mont Blanc that were 'fitted to our unripe state'. In this sense the Mont Blanc passage offers a microcosm of the greater *Prelude* in exploring earlier versions of the self in relation to the growth of the poet.

Wordsworth is not, however, rejecting his youthful self altogether in the Mont Blanc passage. Rather, the younger self is now cast as the older self not yet realised: he was capable of the feelings, but only the successful poet of 1804 – now at the zenith of his powers – is capable of expressing them correctly. Hanley writes that:

> In the act of rewriting his Alpine experience in March 1804, it suddenly comes to Wordsworth that the imaginary signified may be re-articulated in an alternative discourse […] emerging without Oedipal struggle because [his creative power is] already there, and the mist that appeared to be withholding power simply dissipates.[61]

I agree with Hanley insofar as this is what the apostrophe to the imagination tells us. However, I am far more cynical about Wordsworth's spoliation of his earlier impressions and writings. The boy is not the father of the man, but rather the man is re-fathering the boy. The younger self – recast as an incomplete poet – allows Wordsworth to accentuate the brilliance of the poetic skill he has acquired by 1804. In the process, the geography witnessed by the younger self becomes plastic, ready to be remodelled by the accomplished mature poet.

The up-down motion is firmly established as we reach the Chamonix Valley. The section begins: 'My heart leap'd up when first I did look down'. This coming together of uplifting feelings and downwards movement fosters a relationship between internal

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[61] Hanley in Gilroy, p.79.

emotions and external action. Wordsworth expresses this in the elation he feels on discovering the 'aboriginal Vale':

> My heart leaped up when first I did look down
>
> On that which was first seen of those deep haunts,
>
> A green recess, an aboriginal vale,
>
> Quiet, and lorded over and possessed
>
> By naked huts, wood-built, and sown like tents
>
> Or Indian cabins over the fresh lawns
>
> And by the river-side. (ll.446-452)

In Johnson's *Dictionary* Aborigines are the 'primitive or original inhabitants of a country'.[62] The aboriginal vale emphasises space that has not been adulterated by outside influences – whether those influences were a feature of the autocratic Savoy of 1790, those of the French who invaded in 1792 or tourism.[63] In essence the 'aboriginal Vale' celebrates a Rousseauian primitivism and functions as a symbol of timelessness. Imagination is certainly at play here in the imprecise description of aboriginal dwellings which are 'wood-built' but nonetheless 'sown like tents | Or Indian cabins'.[64] This elation and delight in a landscape of Rousseauian primitivism is juxtaposed with the disappointment in the image of 'Mount Blanc' seven lines later.[65] As such, both the 'aboriginal Vale' and Mont Blanc function as a structural contrast within the up-down motion. Asserting a down-up motion from the lowest point of the 'aboriginal Vale', the 'river-side', we are drawn upwards not just to the mountain but to the summit: 'And by the river-side. That day we first | Beheld the summit of Mount Blanc, and grieved' (ll.452-53).

The importance of the aboriginal vale in critical analyses of Mont Blanc may have been overlooked because the first published edition of the 1805 *Prelude,* edited by Ernest de Sélincourt in 1926, distanced the vale from the mountain by partitioning line 452 and adding a line break before 'That day we first' – an editorial decision also adopted by The Norton Critical Edition of the 1805 Prelude.[66] There is no line break in the 1805 fair copy. Wordsworth inserted a break into the passage when the poem was reworked for what

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[62] Samuel Johnson, *Johnson's dictionary of the English language, in miniature* (London: Longman, 1799), p.4.

[63] William Parsons refers to the Alps as 'aboriginal' in 'Vallombrosa' (1787).

[64] The thought of Indian cabins may have come from the presence of Indian corn found – as Wordsworth describes – around Lake Como (*TP*, l. 594).

[65] The vale is unlikely to have been as primitive as Wordsworth it suggesting. Argentière, the main village at the head of the valley, had a sizeable population with the substantial l'Église Saint-Pierre d'Argentière that had been built in 1724 and remains a prominent church even today.

[66] See William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850,* ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams and Stephen Gill (London: Norton, 1979), p.212.

became the 1850 *Prelude*, no doubt influencing editorial decisions about the 1805 copy.[67] Line break or not, the aboriginal Vale is important. This secret vale is part of Wordsworth's search for distinctiveness in his celebration of landscape. It contrasts the tourist trappings of Chamonix and, like the Gondo Gorge, it is the opposite of the written-to-death Mont Blanc, Montenvers and the well-known scenes surrounding Chamonix. The aboriginal vale is seemingly the most distinctive of the 'sweet coverts' of pastoral life and the 'sanctified abodes of peaceful Man' encountered in the Alps before we reach Mont Blanc. The use of 'peaceful' here emphasises the difference between this space and the upheaval caused by the war that had consumed Europe since 1789. In contrast to the Chamonix Valley that was presented in *Descriptive Sketches* as suffering from political tyranny, here Wordsworth finds an enclave – a 'green recess' with 'deep haunts' – into which the political course of European history appears not to have reached. To an extent Wordsworth is presenting us with a pure space in the tradition of the alpine idyll familiar in other eighteenth-century writings. Yet it is in the contrast with *Descriptive Sketches* that we can see Wordsworth's changed position, and it is an uneasy one. The optimism and sense of expectation found in Wordsworth's footnote about Savoy attached to the 'slave of slaves' line in *Descriptive Sketches* had been effaced by 1804, only to have been replaced by a locality that seems to exist largely outside of politics and history. What we are seeing here is the consequence of Wordsworth's political despondency and the transition of a radical to an uncertain nationalist. If imaginative power in *Descriptive Sketches* opens his eyes to political realities, here imaginative power acts only as solace and a means of looking inwards.

The Gondo is an impressive gorge, particularly for the height and proximity of the crags. The narrow and vertiginous defile houses a series of powerful waterfalls, and though seeing various road and water management developments since Wordsworth's 1790 tour, it nonetheless exerts a powerful and at times oppressive and intimidating impression on the mind when it is walked through.[68]

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[67] He also inserted a line break seven lines earlier. This gives the 'aboriginal Vale' of 1850 a separate section.
[68] The Simplon and Gotthard tunnels, in addition to various freight passage restrictions for goods transport in Switzerland, have prevented the gorge from becoming unbearably congested and noisy.

Figure 41 A quiet Gondo Gorge at dusk (2019)

Nonetheless, the apostrophe to imagination in the Gondo Gorge and the timelessness Wordsworth discovers in this space exists in opposition to Mont Blanc almost certainly for the very reason that he could claim this space as his own. It was not famous like Mont Blanc, Olympus and Parnassus. The Gondo Gorge did not fill the pages of travelogues and seems to have been given very little attention by British writers. The area, as Wordsworth's descriptions of it rightly suggest, was not teeming with hungry tourists from across Europe ready to devour its visual wonder and proclaim the sublimity of their experiences upon seeing it. As such, for Wordsworth the gorge could function as a space of symbolic psychological rehabilitation insofar that it could make 'amends' for the disappointment of having discovered he had crossed the Alps. If the introduction of 'Mount Blanc', that 'soulless image on the eye' turns our attention from down in the Chamonix Valley *upwards* to the mountain, in crossing the Simplon Pass a climb *up* what Wordsworth describes as a 'mountain' (although only, as it transpires, to the top of a pass) leads to *downward* feelings of dejection. Conversely, the movement *downwards* into the Gondo Gorge generates *upwards* feelings of elation and revelation. This pattern is evident not only in the greater movements through the physical world as we shift from pass to valley to pass to valley, but in the depth of feelings imparted. Throughout the Alps section the frequency of the up-down motion is reduced, but its amplitude is increased in order to accentuate the apostrophe to the imagination in the Gondo Gorge.

Ultimately both the Alps of *The Prelude* and the Alps of *Descriptive Sketches* are spaces where Wordsworth moves between ideas of linear contemporary time and finds historical time, geological time and sublime impressions that climax with a recall to biblical time and a realisation of God that is less removed from Coleridge's 'Hymn' than might at first appear. Hence the ending of the crossing of the Alps sequence adapts Revelation 22.13 and in consequence the Lord's Prayer:

> Characters of the great apocalypse,
>
> The types and symbols of eternity,
>
> Of first, and last, and midst, and without end. (ll. 570-72)

While Wordsworth does not wholly ignore short-term time and the toing and froing of contemporary European state politics, it is clear that in *The Prelude* he is promoting the Alps as a space that in many ways is resistant to contemporary time and where 'the types and symbols of Eternity' (l.572) might be discovered if the correct physical stimulus to open the poetic faculties of the mind can be realised. This is a Christian reading of the landscape. It relies heavily on Christian motifs and faith. The description of witnessing the 'soulless image' of Mont Blanc connotes not simply a static physical entity and disappointment, but something distanced from God. Following the disappointments of both Mont Blanc and discovering he has crossed the Alps, Wordsworth does find religious sublimity in the 'unfather'd vapour' of his imagination in the Gondo Gorge: 'I was lost as in a cloud, | Halted without a struggle to break through, And now recovering to my Soul I say | I recognize thy glory' (ll.531-533). Wordsworth is suggesting that religious sublimity should not be forced through the expectations placed in iconic features such as Mont Blanc or in iconic events such as having crossed the Alps. As such, he is not so much making the case for the valorisation of lesser-known spaces like the Gondo Gorge, as much as he is suggesting that if an individual is receptive, sublimity will be discovered in peripheral geography or less expectant moments. That the Gondo Gorge, rather than Mont Blanc, energises the power of his imagination was probably because since writing *Descriptive Sketches* in 1792 Mont Blanc had become too popular, too written, too readily aligned with inauthentic expressions of faith. In the process of moving from the 'soulless image' of Mont Blanc to the imagination sequence in the Gondo Gorge Wordsworth cautions us to distrust the false idols of place and be wary of not finding God in oneself through the experience of landscape, but rather of the landscape itself becoming a substitute for God.

'Processions, Suggested on a Sabbath Morning in the Vale of Chamouny'

Returning to the Alps in 1820, thirty years after his first visit and now aged fifty, it would be a very different Wordsworth who would respond to the environs of Mont Blanc in his poetry. He did so obliquely – indeed so obliquely that it seems to have hitherto gone unnoticed. Part of the reason for this is location. The specific narrative location of Wordsworth in 'Processions' is fixed by a reference to the glacier above Argentière. Argentière is at the head of the Chamonix Valley. The mountains that rise above it to the east on the Mont Blanc side of the Valley are satellite peaks of the Mont Blanc Massif. These include the major peaks known today as the Aiguille d'Argentière and Aiguille Verte.

In 1820 the names of these peaks were not fixed, although the sense that a peak towards that end of the Mont Blanc Massif called Argentière was clear.[69] Despite this, the appellation 'Argentière' at this time more commonly referred to either the village or its glacier. When Wordsworth writes about 'the icy bed of bright Argentière' (l.45) he is referring to the glacier – one of the largest and most significant on the Mont Blanc Massif – rather than the base of a specific mountain. Therefore, in the verse that follows, '[t]hat exalted Mount!' refers to Mont Blanc. Here the biographical matrix is difficult to avoid, but it is useful in showing the way Mont Blanc was seen by the party not in the narrow sense of its summit or the mountain immediately above Chamonix, but as a broad massif that included its satellite mountains. On approaching the village of Argentière from Switzerland Dorothy describes in her *Journal*:

> Behold! To our left, the huge form of Mont Blanc – pikes, towers, needles, and wide wastes of everlasting snow in dazzling brightness! Below is the Arve, a grey-white line, winding to the village of Chamouny, dimly seen in the distance.[70]

It is clear that Mont Blanc here includes all the mountain space between Chamonix and the head of the valley on the south side. It was in response to Dorothy's journal that this third incarnation of Mont Blanc in Wordsworth's poetry arose. According to Dorothy, writing in a letter to Catherine Clarkson of 16 January 1822, her brother informed her 'I will write some poems for your journal'.[71] The poems for the journal expanded and 'Processions. Suggested on a Sabbath Morning in the Vale of Chamouny' appeared as the thirty-second poem in *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent, 1820* (1822).

For John Wyatt, 'Processions' 'is one of the most disturbed poems in *Memorials*', 'conveying ambiguities of feeling' by means of a 'strange collection of associations of ideas through alternating moods of assurance and doubt'.[72] Such 'ambiguities of feeling' occur because Wordsworth sees in the wild nature of Mont Blanc the same dangerous capabilities that the Alps possessed in *Descriptive Sketches*. Mont Blanc here is like those 'Italian *arts*' described in 1793: the mountain is beguiling and full of trickery – it is the 'Fable's dark abyss' (l. 72) that concludes the poem. Yet the mountain can both veil clarity of thought and paradoxically open up the faculties of the imagination so the poet can 'act the God among external things'. This is not, however, a reversion to the Mont Blanc of the late eighteenth

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[69] Byron distinguishes a peak he considers to be Argentière from Mont Blanc in his notes for *Childe Harold* (see Chapter One). Jean-Baptiste Raymond's map of 1799 places the Aiguille d'Argentierre where today we find the Aiguille Verte, while J. P. Pictet's map of 1818 that names more peaks than Raymond's map, does not refer to Aiguille d'Argentierre at all. Both maps highlight the glacier of Argentiere. See Aliprandi, pp.84-89.

[70] Dorothy Wordsworth, 'September 14' in *Journal 1820.*

[71] Dorothy Wordsworth in Wordsworth, 2004, p.352.

[72] John Wyatt, *Wordsworth's Poems of Travel 1819-1842: Such Sweet Wayfaring* (Palgrave McMillan: Basingstoke, 1999), pp.68 and 77.

century. Instead, the poem appears to be post-Shelleyan, being intentionally difficult and alluding to forces that may not be altogether amiable. This experience of Mont Blanc reveals the inherent instability of space perceived in the mind. It draws us close to the Gondo Gorge experience in *The Prelude,* however, the upheaval of space in the mind is less an affirmation of God in man, but rather a cautionary note on the power of man's mental faculties. If in *Descriptive Sketches* Mont Blanc opens the doors to perception and facilitates a clear political vision to materialise, here Wordsworth presents Mont Blanc as an unsettling space where the upheaval of the landscape in the mind draws us closer to the 'dark abyss' referred to in the poem's conclusion.

For Wyatt the poem reveals Wordsworth 'rejecting his own craft – the skill of seeking a moral or religious message in the experiences of the world and particularly nature'.[73] Rejection seems to go too far, but certainly Wordsworth is questioning his 'craft' and once more the relationship between imagination and the material world. The beginning functions as part of an opposition to the questioning we discover towards the end of the poem. The first four verses describe a spatial history of ancient religious rites and processions. Wordsworth refers to 'Rites such as Persepolis presents | Graven on her Cankered walls' (ll. 7-8), Hebrews who march round an altar near the walls of Jericho, the 'Priests and Damsels of Ammonian Jove' that 'Provoked responses with shrill canticles' (ll. 21-22), and 'Roman Pomps' that include the 'feast of Neptune' and the 'Cereal Games' (ll.28-30) until he begins to describe a Christian procession in the Vale of Chamonix that day (l.35). Tonally the opening half of the poem is in the didactic religious style characteristic of *Ecclesiastical Sketches.* The blending of the procession in Chamonix with Mont Blanc's sublimity at the mid-point of the poem, however, moves it in a different – and not altogether straightforward – direction:

> But O the fairest pageant of a dream
> Did never equal that which met our eyes!
> The glacier Pillars with the living stream
> Of white-robed Shapes, seemed linked in solemn guise,
> For the same service, by mysterious ties;
> Numbers exceeding credible account
> Of number, pure and silent Votaries
> Issuing or issued from a wintry fount;
> The impenetrable heart of that exalted Mount! (ll. 46-54)

In 1827 Wordsworth altered this passage significantly:

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[73] Wyatt, 1999, p.77.

> Still in the vivid freshness of a dream,
>
> The pageant haunts me as it met our eyes!
>
> Still, with those white-robed Shapes – a living Stream,
>
> The glacier Pillars join in solemn guise
>
> For the same service, by mysterious ties;
>
> Numbers exceeding credible account
>
> Of number, pure and silent Votaries
>
> Issuing or issued from a wintry fount;
>
> The impenetrable heart of that exalted Mount! [74]

On its introduction we find that the Mont Blanc of 'Processions' is anthropomorphised and no longer presents a static 'soulless image' as it first appears to in *The Prelude*. It is 'that exalted Mount' with 'his vaults of everlasting snow'. Wordsworth is to an extent resurrecting Mont Blanc as the masculine grand site of nature. The 'glacier Pillars' (l.48) recall the temples and sites of worship referred to earlier in the poem so that Mont Blanc functions as a potential temple of nature. In a footnote Wordsworth explains, 'the Glacier-columns' had a 'sisterly resemblance to the 'moving' Figures' and gave the procession 'a most beautiful and solemn peculiarity'.[75]

The procession in the poem matches the description of it given by both Mary and Dorothy Wordsworth in their journals. Observing the procession of 'a long train – in hooded vestments fair' (l. 42), Wordsworth blurs the religious rite with the surrounding mountain scenery. It is a ghostly procession that confronts Wordsworth, made more explicit in the later reworking as it 'haunts' him. The ghostly figures seem to issue like the 'glacier Pillars' from '[t]he impenetrable heart of that exalted Mount'. Yet they also likely reflect the distinct appearance of the glacier's mouth. The procession would have been a Catholic one in the penitent tradition, wearing a form of the Nazarene hood. Interestingly, the association between the penitents of the procession and their resemblance to glacial pillars has not proved unique to Wordsworth. The glacier phenomena below are known as glacier penitents or penitente:

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[74] Wordsworth, 2004, p.391n.

[75] Wordsworth, 2004, p.416.

Figure 42 Glacier penitents in the Andes, 2007[76]

The penitents are fewer and far larger at the mouth of the Argentiere Glacier than these glacier penitents of the Andes. Indeed, smaller pure white examples of penitents in the Alps are rare. However, the effect of the larger penitents is perhaps more ominous than those of the Andes.

Figure 43 Mouth of the Argentiere Glacier in 2019 with larger penitents[77]

In the last 100 years the Argentiere glacier has receded so that it no longer forms the backdrop to the south of the village:

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[76]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penitente_(snow_formation)#/media/File:Penitentes_Upper_Rio_Blanco_Argentine.jpg [Accessed Feb, 2019]

[77] https://www.chamonix.com/glacier-d-argentiere,47-53987,en.html [Accessed September, 2019]

Figure 44 Aerial comparison of the Argentiere Glacier in 1919 (left) and 2019 (right).[78]

However, a sense of the proximity of the glacier Wordsworth saw can be gained from pictures:

Figure 45 *La sortie du Petit âge glaciaire,* 1850.[79]

The sketch above is from 1850. The sketch clearly shows that during the visits of the Wordsworths in 1820 the glacier would have intruded into the immediate village space, giving a sense of encroachment upon the prominent church to which the procession described in the poem is heading.

The image of '[t]he impenetrable heart of that exalted Mount' offers a sense of the inner mountain that is built upon by Wordsworth's idea of his imagination having 'secret springs' (uncannily reminiscent of both Shelley and Coleridge). There is a sense of the poet being troubled by his own mortality as he sees these '[f]orms, that on the turf did glide |To that unmoving band – the Shapes aloft descried' (ll.62-63). The 'living stream' produced by

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[78] Aerial photos: Argentiere 1919 (left) – Walter Mittelholzer, ETH-Bibliothek Zürich and Argentiere 2019 (right) – Dr Kieran Baxter, University of Dundee (www.dundee.ac.uk/news/2019/new-aerial-photographs-shed-light-on-dark-days-for-mont-blanc.php [Accessed Oct 2019])

[79] http://glaciers-climat.fr/Glacier_d_Argentiere/Glacier_d_Argentiere.html REF [Accessed September 2019]

the glacier here is sinister, a humanised version of the threat posed by perpetually advancing ice or the avalanches of snow that otherwise threaten to overcome the stability of human life in the valley. The speaker explains how prosaic metaphors of white beauty would be misleading, informing us that they are 'Not virgin lilies marshalled in bright row' and 'Not swans descending with the stealthy tide' (ll.59-60). Certainly there is a gothic sublimity in all this. As the final verse commences we find that the speaker is 'Trembling' as he looks 'upon the secret springs | Of that licentious craving in the mind' (ll. 64-65). Wordsworth is exploring here – through the visual plane of Mont Blanc – imaginative power and its capacity to unfurl images and a sense of deeper time that destabilise the perception of the material world. Hartman finds this last 'stanza similar in tenor and directness to the apostrophe to Imagination in the sixth book of *The Prelude'.*[80] However, Wordsworth's response to the mountain here is difficult to reconcile with Wordsworthian philosophy. He appears to suggest that opening up imaginative faculties without restraint does not enable man to discover God in the mind but instead they produce a dangerous temptation that enables the mind 'to act the God among external things, | To bind, on apt suggestion, and unbind'. It is a temptation that can move an individual towards death – the 'dark abyss' that concludes the poem:

> Such insolent temptations wouldst thou miss,
>
> Avoid these sights; nor brood o'er Fable's dark abyss! (ll.71-72)

While 'Processions' suggests a questioning of poetic craft derived from a dangerous imaginative power, the poem itself presents a moment where Wordsworth simultaneously celebrates that poetic craft. Certainly the poem is cautionary and Wordsworth is exploring a momentarily confrontation with death. However, there is a sense of revelling in the terror here. Wordsworth is simultaneously troubled and enthralled by his inability to control the power of his imagination and, paradoxically, its ability to reform the external world and imbue him with a power over Mont Blanc that he has always had: the power in his verse to 'act the God among external things'.

Identity Projection in Wordsworth's Reimagined Mont Blanc: a Response to Coleridge?

Keith Hanley in his a part-psychoanalytic, part-cultural historicist reading of Wordsworth's presentations of the Alps, writes that for Wordsworth the Alps 'was a site of plural meanings' and suggests:

> [What Wordsworth] came to encounter in the course of his later descriptions [...] was precisely his power (the Wordsworthian imagination) of insisting on a continually imaginary reflection in different discourses, so that, though "The Alps"

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[80] Hartman, 1971, p.332.

might cease satisfactorily to represent a particular discourse that he had formerly seen in them (revolutionary idealism), they would still support self-representation that he most fundamentally needed in substitute discourses (crucially the literary sublime)'.[81]

I agree with Hanley that the mountain offers an 'imaginary reflection' for Wordsworth's self-representation. However, while Hanley considers the subconscious processes that influenced Wordsworth, I am more inclined to see Wordsworth's responses to Mont Blanc as conscious projections of a desired public self that was responding to the cultural meaning and status of the mountain.

Wordsworth's three poetic responses to Mont Blanc discussed in this chapter show varying responses to the same landscape. As I have suggested, critical analyses of these texts – and particularly the difference between *The Prelude* Book VI and *Descriptive Sketches* – have considered a range of significant influences: psychoanalytic factors; the rise and fall of Napoleon; Rousseau; Kant; Burke; and responses to the Alps that Duffy has broadly defined as a 'discourse of ascent'. To an extent, all of these influences can be viewed as adulterations in the purity of Wordsworth's responses to place. In this final section, I will suggest how Wordsworth's temporal Mont Blancs appear to be – if not quite artificial – then at least moments of identity projection rather than necessarily representations that apostrophise the authenticity of feeling and landscape-reaction. In particular, I will consider whether the way in which Coleridge responded to mountains and place may have given impetus to Wordsworth and influenced his reimagined Mont Blanc of *The Prelude* Book VI. My approach here casts doubt on critical assumptions sometimes made about Wordsworth that assume the *naturalness* of his responses to wild landscapes. Such assumptions have been fostered – even romanticised – by the notion that a poet who grew up among mountains had a special affinity with wild places. This may be so. However, his writings do not always show this. In essence, I am suggesting that the ego inherent in Wordsworth's need to fulfil and maintain his public identity as a nature poet and promote that sense of a *special affinity* should not be overlooked.

The subtle reference to Mont Blanc in 'Processions' was in many ways part of an ongoing tendency for Wordsworth to, if not entirely reject famous sites of nature as subjects for his poetry, at least be uneasy about regurgitating celebrations of them. Certainly Wordsworth had developed a counter-cultural habit of celebrating lesser-known places by contrasting them with popular celebrated sites. In Marjory Hope Nicholson's identification of a new aesthetic appreciation for mountains at the end of the eighteenth century and

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[81] Keith Hanley 'Wordsworth's Grand Tour', Amanda Gilroy, ed., *Romantic Geographies: Discourses of Travel, 1775-1844* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.77.

beginning of the nineteenth, she engages with a little-known Wordsworth poem and emphasises a degree of descriptive continuity with the poetry that had preceded it from the late seventeenth century onwards. However, the following passage from the beginning of Nicholson's chapter 'A New Descriptive Poetry' is illuminating more for what it omits than for what it includes:

> Pelion and Ossa were still more familiar in poetry than Helvellyn. Indeed as late as 1801 Wordsworth, who had done so much to break down conventions, wrote: 'Pelion and Ossa flourish side by side […] | While not an English Mountain we behold | By the celestial Muses Glorified.' [82]

Nicholson quotes only nine lines of the sonnet. This omits Wordsworth's purpose for using 'Pelion', 'Ossa', 'Parnassus' and 'Castaly' in the first part of the poem. The final omitted five lines are revealing for they actually do 'break down conventions':

> What was the great Parnassus' self to Thee,
>
> Mount Skiddaw? In his natural sovereignty
>
> Our British Hill is nobler far; he shrouds
>
> His double front among Atlantic clouds,
>
> And pours forth streams more sweet than Castaly. [83]

By suggesting that Skiddaw might be 'nobler' than Parnassus, Pelion or Ossa, Wordsworth is adopting a position that, like his disappointment in the image of Mont Blanc, disrupts received popular clichés about celebrated mountains. It is possible to view this type of transition as a consequence of an increased tendency for writers such as Wordsworth to actually visit mountain areas and climb upon certain mountains. With very few exceptions, almost no one visited the famed mountains of antiquity. Indeed, most of the material peaks to which signifiers had been applied were at best approximations anyway. The 'Mount Ida' referred to by Homer, for example, had over time been attributed to both the highest mountain on Crete or a mountain in Anatolia in Turkey – a separation in distance that reveals the inexactitude of locating literary mountains. Even when approximations were fairly reliable, they do not appear to have resulted in significantly increased visitor numbers. Mount Olympus is the highest mountain in modern Greece. It is clearly visible from the Aegean and there is a likelihood that the modern mountain is the same as the one referred to by Homer. Nonetheless, while it has an impressive rocky summit worthy of being a seat of the gods and not an especially hard mountain to climb – certainly nowhere near as difficult as Mont Blanc – it did not see its first recorded ascent until 1909. Wordsworth's general

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[82] Nicholson, p.325.

[83] William Wordsworth, *Poems in Two Volumes and Other Poems 1800-1807,* ed. Jared Curtis (London: Cornell, 1983), p.547.

refusal to celebrate natural wonders and yet praise lesser-known places probably had less to do with genuine disappointment and more to do with rejecting the 'celebrity' of those locations simply because they were famous.[84] By rejecting them, he could emphasise his distinctiveness from other writers and tourists. In the September 1790 letter to Dororthy, after leaving the Alps Wordsworth is once more disappointed by a celebrated site:

> From Constance we proceeded along the banks of the Rhine to Schaffhausen, to view the fall of the Rhine there. Magnificent as this fall certainly is, I must confess I was disappointed in it. I had raised my ideas too high.[85]

Taken in isolation, Wordsworth's tendency to have 'raised [his] ideas too high' and have over-inflated expectations seems a genuine response. However, as the disappointments continue and the pattern asserts its character either Wordsworth did not learn to manage his expectations or – more likely – he actively approached such sites with the opposite of the anticipated sublime: anticipated disappointment.

This anticipated disappointment and Wordsworth's search for distinctiveness in his mountain writing was bound up in his complex relationship with Coleridge. While the relationship between the two poets has understandably attracted considerable critical attention, the relationship between their respective Mont Blancs has not. Coleridge was impressed by *Descriptive Sketches* which he read in 1794, the year after it was published. He recollected in *Biographia Literaria*:

> During the last year of my residence at Cambridge, I became acquainted with Mr. Wordsworth's first publications, entitled *Descriptive Sketches*; and seldom, if ever, was the emergence of an original poetic genius above the literary horizon more evidently announced. […] The language was not only peculiar and strong, but at times knotty and contorted, as by its own impatient strength; while the novelty and struggling crowd of images acting in conjunction with difficulties of the style, demanded always a greater closeness of attention, than poetry (at all events, than descriptive poetry) has a right to claim.[86]

Given Coleridge's reaction to *Descriptive Sketches,* it is not unreasonable to suggest that both the poem and perhaps Wordsworth's description of Mont Blanc in conversation influenced 'Chamouny; The Hour Before Sunrise. A Hymn' (1802) beyond the already unquestionable source material of Frederike Brun's 'Chamouny Beym Sonnenaufgange' (1795). There is a great deal of similarity between the Mont Blanc in the 'Hymn' and in *Descriptive Sketches.* Indeed, both poems anthropomorphise the mountain and consider Mont Blanc at night and how it interacts with the dawn; the significance of the stars above

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[84] Wordsworth, 1935, p.31.
[85] Wordsworth, 1935, p.35.
[86] Coleridge, *Biographia,* 1983, p.77.

the summit; the flowers that grow close to the ice; the simultaneity of the seasons; the origins of the earth; and the Deluge. However, these subjects were likewise common features of Mont Blanc writings, and no conclusive allusion can be discerned. For example, in *The Prelude* the 'five rivers broad and vast' (VI l.462) could be seen as recognisable in Coleridge's 'five wild torrents' (l.39) of the 'Hymn' but also the '[f]ive streams of ice [that] amid her cots descend' into the Vale of Chamonix in *Descriptive Sketches* (p.47), as much as they are Martel's description of five glaciers, as recorded in Windham's *An Account,* and any number of eighteenth-century Mont Blanc texts.

Through the 1790s the Wordsworths had fostered in Coleridge a love of mountains and were instrumental in pulling him towards mountainous locations including, eventually, his permanent move to the Lakes. That is not to suggest that Coleridge always responded to mountains in a way that aligned with the Wordsworths' perceptions. In February 1799 Dorothy and William sent him a joint letter from the Hartz mountains. Dorothy writes:

> I ought to have said that before this we had a view of the Brocken, the Mont Blanc of the Hartz Forest, and the glory of all this part of Germany. I cannot speak of its height as compared with any of our British mountains, but from the point from which we saw it, it had nothing impressive in its appearance.[87]

Dorothy's writes for herself and her brother when she describes the disappointment of viewing the Brocken. This responses to the 'Mont Blanc of the Hartz forest' is an early instance in a pattern of the Wordsworths exposing the 'glory' of celebrated sites of the sublime as failing to meet expectations.

Coleridge followed the Wordsworths to the Brocken. He did not share their habit of visiting renowned wonders of nature and wild geography only to be disappointed by them. He celebrated the 'Great Brocken without a rival the highest Mountain in all the north of Germany, & the seat of innumerable Superstitions' and was fascinated by its role in German culture.[88] In a letter to Sara Coleridge that gives an account of ascending the mountain, he ventured a transcription of what became known as 'Lines Written in the Album at Elbingerode, in the Hartz Forest'. In the poem he uses the grandeur of the Brocken and his position on its summit at the start of the poem ('I stood on Brocken's Sovran height') to assert his pride in England and his homesickness before offering a pantheistic vision '[t]hat God is everywhere'.[89]

To an extent, Wordsworth had taken the lead on explorations, with Coleridge following in his footsteps and often engaging with the same geographies. Once Coleridge began exploring the lesser-known areas of the Lakes in 1802, however, the potential for

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[87] Wordsworth, *Letters,* 1967, p. 218.
[88] *CL*, p.505.
[89] *CL*, p.505.

Wordsworth to be following Coleridge increased. Tension and competition can be traced in their working relationship and the appearance of the 'Hymn' may well have irked Wordsworth and given further motivation for a reassessment of Mont Blanc. In a letter to an unnamed recipient in 1819, Coleridge recorded Wordsworth's response upon reading the 'Hymn':

> Mr Wordsworth, I remember, censured the passage as strained and unnatural, and condemned the Hymn in *toto* (which nevertheless I ventured to publish in my *Sibylline Leaves*) as a specimen of the mock sublime.[90]

The 'Hymn' relies on other writings for its source material and gives the impression that Coleridge is actually in the Vale of Chamonix an hour before sunrise. Wordsworth's condemnation of the 'Hymn' is rooted in its inauthenticity; he is aware Coleridge has not seen Mont Blanc. As such it was a condemnation of the chosen subject, Mont Blanc – a mountain that like the Brocken was an emblem of sublime landscapes. Had Coleridge written a similar poem about a genuine mountain experience on a lesser-known mountain, such as the one he had on Scafell, Wordsworth might have been more generous.

On the surface Wordsworth imaginatively responds to an *authentic* experience of material geography in the Alps that differentiates his work from that of the 'Hymn'. Yet underpinning the 'Hymn' is its moment of inspiration: the authentic material experience of descending Broad Stand. Coleridge's claim to a mountaineer identity was physical in a way that contrasts with Wordsworth's more measured experiences on mountain terrain. In his letter to Sara describing the descent of Broad Stand, Coleridge relates a transcendental epiphany that was only achieved by a willingness to gamble his life and accept physical scarring. He proudly informed her: 'the whole of my Breast (from my Neck to my Navel) [… was] filled with great red heat-bumps, so thick that no hair could lie between them'.[91] Wordsworth almost certainly never had such a vivid edge-of-death mountain experience. Even the more dangerous activities of his formative years cannot compare, whether they were climbing for eggs on Yewdale Crags or a night time ascent of Snowdon. By the early 1800s such enterprises had been firmly consigned to Wordsworth's past in favour of a more conservative approach to mountain activity. By 1804 Wordsworth had shaped a public identity as a 'mountaineer' – meaning a person native to mountainous areas – that he would

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[90] *CL*, p.974. We do not know exactly when Wordsworth gave this damning indictment. He was away in France settling the Annette Vallon affair when Coleridge published the poem in the *Morning Post*. However, Wordsworth returned to the Lakes and renewed his working relationship with Coleridge within three weeks of its publication. Being one of Coleridge's major works of 1802 and given the close working relationship of the two poets, we can reasonably assume Wordsworth's dismissal of the 'Hymn' was in the autumn of 1802. Clearly, Wordsworth's reaction to it had a profound effect on Coleridge in that it still played on his mind so many years later.

[91] *CL*, p.842.

maintain throughout his life.[92] The association between Wordsworth and the mountains of the Lakes conferred on him an authority when writing about wild landscape. Nonetheless, Coleridge now had an identity as a mountain and wild nature poet and this was at the forefront of Wordsworth's mind when he composed Book VI. Although Wordsworth regards Coleridge as a kindred nature-lover, he is nonetheless keen to diminish his authority by reminding him of his childhood spent in London: 'I speak to thee, my Friend; to thee |Who, yet a liveried school-boy, in the depths | Of the huge City [….]| From the heart of London, and from Cloisters thou camest' (*VI*. ll. 275-289). It is a reasonable supposition that Coleridge's mountain activities, like his writing about Mont Blanc, appeared to Wordsworth as encroachments upon space he had become accustomed to viewing as his own. To write about Mont Blanc again in 1804 was, therefore, an opportunity to reassert his authority.

It appears significant that Wordsworth's two disappointments in Book VI, the first on seeing Mont Blanc and the second in realising the Alps had been crossed, are defined by the use of the word 'dejection'. 'Dejection' appears in *The Prelude* on four occasions. Only in these two instances, however, is it used to describe Wordsworth's feelings. Wordsworth's 'dejection' on line 481 recalls the great disappointment of Mont Blanc earlier in the passage. We might fairly expect Coleridge to identify this passage as alluding to his 'Dejection. An Ode'. For Wordsworth the feeling forms part of the elated-deflated feelings and up-down motion that characterise the greater crossing of the Alps passage: 'Dejection taken *up* for pleasure's sake […] | Did sweeten many a meditative hour' (ll.481-486; my italics). If such a dialogue with Coleridge is taking place in his crossing of the Alps passage, then it is striking to consider that while Coleridge sees the invisible manifestation of God in Mont Blanc, the 'soulless image' of Mont Blanc Wordsworth sees in *The Prelude* appears to deny the mountain, at least in its appearance, such religious sublimity.

This potential dialogue with Coleridge's Mont Blanc has implications for how we interpret Wordsworth's engagement with Napoleon in *The Prelude*. If, as I have suggested, the 'Hymn' is read as a reflection of Napoleon that complements Coleridge's other writings in the late summer and autumn of 1802, then Wordsworth's re-positioning in regard to Mont Blanc in 1804 may have been influenced by it. Wordsworth was responding to similar historical forces and would have been aware of the symbolic meaning of Mont Blanc in British culture. As mentioned above, for Alan Liu the denial or repression of history suggested by the conspicuous absence of Napoleon in the reimagined Crossing of the Alps section only serves to reveal the effect of Napoleon upon the work.[93] For Bainbridge,

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[92] In 'France. An Ode', Coleridge shows an affinity with the plight of Swiss inhabitants when he writes how regrettable it is 'To taint the bloodless freedom of the mountaineer—' *CP, I.I*, p.466, l.77.

[93] See Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), pp.3-33.

however, the presence of Napoleon is not denied, but clearly alluded to. 'Between 1802 and 1804', Bainbridge writes, 'Wordsworth became obsessed with Napoleon'.[94] Focussing on the appearance of Mont Blanc in Book VI and Wordsworth's use of the terms 'usurp'd' and 'grieved' in particular, Bainbridge puts forward a convincing argument to discuss the engagement with Napoleon in *The Prelude*.[95] Napoleon, as both Liu and Bainbridge point out, was often referred to as 'the usurper' in contemporary discourses:

> Certainly, looked back on from 1804, the usurpation would seem the largest historical landmark with which to symbolize the failure of the French Revolution – the final 'step' 'of our degeneracy'. One might use the formula that retrospectively Wordsworth 'grieved' to have Bonaparte, the 'soulless image' usurp upon a 'living thought that never more could be' – his hopes for the French Revolution.[96]

Wordsworth, who had joined the Grasmere Volunteers in 1803, might well have changed his attitude to Mont Blanc because of its association with Napoleon. He now considered himself a patriotic anti-Napoleonic poet, and as such responded to the mountain from a different political vantage to that of the radical internationalist poet who had written *Descriptive Sketches.* Although, we cannot ascertain whether Wordsworth is intentionally drawing Napoleon and Mont Blanc together because Coleridge had done so, I nonetheless agree with Bainbridge that Wordsworth was connecting them.

The geocritical approach in this chapter has revealed the ways in which Wordsworth subtly manipulated his actual tour and responses to landscapes. The fieldwork exercise at the Col de Balme has revealed how the material realities of the landscape were reshaped to produce poetry that could be aligned with Wordsworth's desired public identity. The juxtaposition of the aboriginal vale and Mont Blanc was not an authentic or true response to landscape in the purest sense, but a reimagined response. By using geocriticism to map Wordsworth's tour and poems, we have seen the relationship between visitations to similar places or places visited within days of each other. As in Chapter One, geocriticism has helped unveil the relationism between lake and mountain and shown the importance of Lake Geneva for Wordsworth's Mont Blanc. That Wordsworth appears likely to have transferred his original disappointment at Lake Geneva and projected it onto Mont Blanc, is an act of landscape manipulation not altogether dissimilar to Coleridge's transference for the 'Hymn' – regardless of textual outcome. It seems very likely that the 'mock sublime' of Coleridge's Mont Blanc had almost certainly agitated Wordsworth before 1804. Likewise the vivid nature of the Broad Stand climb would likewise have been recounted to Wordsworth and this too may have influenced how Wordsworth wrote about place. The 'soulless image on

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[94] Bainbridge, 1995, p.55.
[95] Bainbridge points to Wordsworth's most well-known poem about Napoleon, 'I Grieved for Bonaparte', in relation to 'And grieved to have the soulless image on the eye'.
[96] Bainbridge, 1995, p.71.

the eye' is an attempt to reclaim the mountain in response to Coleridge's 'mock sublime' and a wider climate of writers and tourists who had celebrated chosen well-known sites over other lesser-known locations. The similarity in Wordsworth and Coleridge's approaches is in itself significant and the 'Hymn' may have been as provocative for Wordsworth's presentation of Mont Blanc as many critics have felt it to have been for Shelley's 'Mont Blanc'.[97]

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[97] See Chapter Five below.

Chapter Four
Anxiety and Death in Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' 1817

Introduction

Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' is simultaneously a response to an idea and an experience of material place in which the imminence of death pervades. The poem is an expression of existential crisis wrought with anxiety, vulnerability and a sense of threat. Shelley's experience of Mont Blanc and the wider Alps in the summer of 1816 has seen considerable critical attention. Elements of the type of threat posed by the Alps and a sense of Shelley at times in a state of if not crisis then upheaval that influenced 'Mont Blanc' have long been recognised. There is – with the pun very much intended – a *mountain* of critical analyses of Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Mont Blanc'. The field this chapter enters into is therefore a crowded one with much well-trodden ground. My intention is not to retrace that well-trodden ground, but rather to re-contextualise the poem and these elements of it using a geocritical approach centred on the relationship between actual mountain experiences and Shelley's psychological condition when faced with the threat of death. The sense of mortality that shapes 'Mont Blanc' can still be registered today by individuals visiting the mountain and following in Shelley's footsteps – it is my intention here to suggest the actual mountain and its environs can tell us something about the poem and Shelley.

To undertake geocritical fieldwork and walk today in Shelley's footsteps enables us to recognise the sense of threat the mountain posed for him, but also to see first-hand how representational precedent and the activation of geological forces and geographical phenomena may have shaped 'Mont Blanc'. It is an approach that facilitates a different perspective that can complement more conventional modes of analysing the poem. Yet, any analysis of Shelley's Mont Blanc will be one that stands on the shoulders of giants, for the critical discourse surrounding 'Mont Blanc' is extensive and complex. A number of key areas are broadly definable. Individual critics have inevitably tended to move between several areas in their analyses. My approach will similarly do so. The poem's abstruseness has been an underlying subject. William Beckford's early private response to 'Mont Blanc' in his marginalia to the *Six Weeks' Tour* described it as 'overwhelming, an avalanche of nonsense'.[1] While few critics since have been so damning, acknowledgement of the poem's

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[1] William Beckford in *PBSP*, p.506.

difficulties and how they can be understood or transcended has been a key driver in analyses. W. B. Yeats, for example, suggests that, '['Mont Blanc' is] so overladen with descriptions in parentheses one loses sight of its logic' before considering what that logic might be.[2]

An effect of the poem's abstruseness has been that it has a peculiar capacity to invite varying interpretations. Many critics have acknowledged the poem's indeterminacies – whether in overall meaning or in the meaning of given lines and passages. Those indeterminacies have been read in relation to a central focus of the poem – the relationship between the mind and the material world. A geocritical assessment of that relationship opens yet another avenue. However, the process admittedly adds to the variety of interpretations. In suggesting, as I do here, that the poem manifests anxiety about mortality in response to landscape, the relationship between mind and place is once more considered. What Shelley is telling us about the mind has led to abstract and at times challenging if not overly theoretical assessments of the poem. F. R. Leavis in 1936 developed a key critical debate by recognising the confusion in the poem between the material and the imagined and seeing the mechanics of the poem as reflecting the workings of the mind in being inconsistent and not easily understood.[3] J. Kapstein followed this approach, emphasising that assured conclusions were less important than offering multiple interpretations for given passages. Earl Wasserman argues that Shelley in 'Mont Blanc' asserts the idea that the '[m]ind cannot create it can only perceive'[4] while Judith Chernaik considers the poetic mind at play through the course of 'Mont Blanc' as working subconsciously to give meaning. Chernaik suggests that the poem tells us that 'the external world may in fact be dependent if not for its existence then for its meaning and value on the mind which perceives it'.[5] Contrastingly, Frances Ferguson writes that, 'Shelley insists virtually throughout the poem upon […a] confusion between [material] activity and agency as he continually treats the mountain as a person'.[6] For Ferguson, Shelley is revealing that the 'programmatic confusion' of the 'sublime experience […] never allows matter to remain material but rather co-opts it or transmogrifies it by continually mistaking the activity of the material world for agency, by taking it to be as intentional as any human activity'.[7] By this process, she suggests 'Shelley thus revamps the argument […that] the human observer […] converts the object into a found

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[2] W.B. Yeats in *PBSP,* p.507.
[3] See Leavis, 1936.
[4]Earl R. Wasserman, 'The English Romantics: The Grounds of Knowledge' in *Romanticism: Points of View*, 2 edition, ed. by Robert Gleckner and Gerald Enscoe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), p.344.
[5] Chernaik, 1968, p.588.
[6] Frances Ferguson, 'Shelley's *Mont Blanc:* What the Mountain Said' (1973) in Arden Reed, ed., *Romanticism and Language* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p.213.
[7] Ferguson, 1973, p.213.

object, not merely matter but matter designed by its perceiver'.[8] Leighton has likewise embraced Shelley's subconscious creative faculties and has read 'Mont Blanc' in relation to Shelley's engagement with the sublime, viewing him as an interpreter of Mont Blanc through language 'which belongs, in the tradition of the sublime, not to art but to nature'. Leighton acknowledges the 'inability' of the poet to 'speak apart from himself' and truly communicate nature's voice. However, she suggests this difficulty is what Shelley seeks to overcome: 'Shelley's manifesto for political change is one which advocates a return of language to its source, a return of art to nature, so that composition might be very nearly inspiration once again'.[9]

The geocriticism in this chapter will suggest how the landscape communicated a range of death-associations. The nature of Shelley's anxiety about death in relation to his experience of Mont Blanc is intrinsic to the existential questions and spiritual meanings of 'Mont Blanc'. Michael O'Neill regards the poem along with 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' as 'sound[ing] a new note in Shelley's poetry' that reveals 'Shelley's revolutionary desires extend to spiritual matters as well as political systems'.[10] However, Shelley's spiritual position and the religious meaning and implications of the poem pose questions that are not easily resolved. There are broadly two critical camps. One takes a view roughly similar to that adopted by Jerold Hogle, that suggests Shelley co-opts Coleridgean and Wordsworthian pantheistic notions of god's power in nature and 'deliberately repeats those forms so as to draw out something other than what is supposed to be in them'.[11] The other camp is more sceptical about the separation between Shelley, God and faith. Indeed, Michael Erkelenz goes as far as to read the poem as a conflict in faith and religion that engages with the problem of a Christian reconciling faith in the creative power of nature and faith in the creative work of God. At the heart of the debate has been a tradition of reading the intertextuality and referential precedents influencing 'Mont Blanc' in relation to the sublime and religious sublime. Many critics, including Robinson, Bloom, Hogle, Hartman, O'Neill, Leask, and Leighton, have viewed the poem as – at least partly – a response to Coleridge's the 'Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouny' – and by degrees this makes it also a response to the its source material by Frederike Brun.[12] Coleridge's 'Hymn' is introduced with a declaration of an empirical belief in God: 'Who would be, who could be, an atheist in this valley of wonders!' Critics have long pointed to Shelley's signing 'atheist' in registers

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[8] Ferguson, 1973, p.214.
[9] Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.69.
[10] Michael O'Neill, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.38.
[11] Hogle, 1991, p.110.
[12] See Harold Bloom, 1959, pp.10-19; Leighton, 1984, O'Neil, 1989 and 1993; Hogle, 1991, p.108-127; Leask, 1998; and Hartman, 2010.

in and around Chamonix and, as Michael O'Neill has suggested, have read 'Mont Blanc' as a 'sceptical reply' to Coleridge's 'Hymn'.[13]

Duffy is more circumspect than many in his approach to the relationship with Coleridge's 'Hymn'. He suggests 'Mont Blanc' responds to 'the pious, Christian account of the natural sublime that informs Coleridge's *Hymn'*. While Duffy nonetheless offers a reading partially in relation to both the 'Hymn' and its source poem by Frederike Brun, he suggests it is impossible to see how Shelley is specifically responding to Coleridge's 'Hymn' rather than to the general body of religious sublime writings associated with the mountain because any echoes of the earlier poem are also echoes of stock phrases of religious sublimity found in other writings about the mountain from Wordsworth, Carbonnières, Whalley, Helen Maria Williams and any number of travelogue accounts.[14] Indeed, as Hitt has written, '[n]o other Shelley poem […] is more densely intertextual than "Mont Blanc"'.[15] The main thrust of Duffy's reading of 'Mont Blanc' is to better understand the poem in relation to the eighteenth-century sublime. He challenges Leighton, Endo and other critics whose understanding of the poem is premised on 'mistaken notions about the British Romantic discourse on the natural sublime'. Duffy rejects readings that take for granted what Leighton describes as 'Kantian idealism' and argues that Shelley's progressive philosophical and political consideration of the relationship between the mountain, cultural tradition and the imagination is Rousseau-inspired.[16]

Fulford has suggested that 'Shelley, who admired both [Hutton and Wordsworth] saw Mont Blanc more as a process than a place, since the mountain is being built and destroyed by nature's huge forces as the poet, fascinated, watches.'[17] By deploying geocriticism to complement more conventional modes of analysis, this chapter looks at the specificities – or vagueness – of Shelley's place representations and experiences. I will suggest that Shelley manipulated his scientific-based understandings of the mountain in order to explore death-anxiety through means of the supernatural. Certainly, the relationship between Shelley's engagement with eighteenth and nineteenth-century scientific developments, particularly in the fields of what we now term geology, glaciology and physical geography, has long been a subject of critical focus on the poem which has often overlapped with readings of its religious elements. Nigel Leask has interpreted 'Mont Blanc' as Shelley's response to a religious sublime that had accommodated catastrophist readings of geological discoveries on Mont Blanc and suggests the poem should instead be read 'in

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[13] O'Neill, 1989, p.46.

[14] Duffy, 2005, p.111.

[15] Christopher Hitt, 'Shelley's Unwriting of Mont Blanc', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language,* 47, 2 (2005), 139-166 (p.144).

[16] Duffy, 2005, p.5. See also Bainbridge in Goulbourne and Higgins, pp.51-74.

[17] Tim Fulford 'Science' in *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide* ed. by Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.91.

relation to the restorative earth-cycle of eighteenth-century Scots geologist James Hutton'.[18] Leask argues that while many early Romantic period British writers responded to the mountain through a Rousseauian lens, the geological context exerted greater influence upon writers by 1816. Similarly Heringman, Jeffrey and Duffy have emphasised the varied influence upon 'Mont Blanc' of contemporary geological theories and Shelley's interrogation of *natural* apocalypse both in the form of destructive and creative cycles as espoused by Cuvier, Buffon, Saussure and Hutton, among others.

Shelley arrived at Montenvers seeing the landscape through a lens already conditioned by what he had read. When he came to describe Montenvers, representational precedent exerted considerable influence. Having hiked through oppressive heat up the same path from Chamonix as that used by Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley in 1816, I arrived at Montenvers in the early evening.[19] Nearly every British account in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, described Montenvers as a 'summit' or a 'top'. It is an odd appellation to have used. No amount of imagination can construe Montenvers to be a summit; it is barely even a shoulder on the long gradual ridge which emanates from the Aiguille de Grepon and Aiguille de Charmoz. Shelley managed to resist this precedent, although Mary Shelley did not.[20] However, the influence exerted by representational precedent can be registered in Shelley's description of the surface of the Mer de Glace, with Shelley's descriptions proving almost identical to Martel's description in Windham's *An Account* (1744) or any number of other clichéd accounts that appeared in between.

When Shelley visited Montenvers, it is likely to have been fairly busy. On a quiet evening at Montenvers I established the whereabouts of the former location of Blair's hospice and then explored Bourrit's Temple of Nature – both of which were almost certainly visited by Shelley. The extent to which Shelley registered such buildings as detracting from the wildness of Mont Blanc and marked Montenvers as space refashioned into tourist place is difficult to know. If we are to trust his account in the letters to Peacock, the buildings do not appear to have affected his awe at the Mer de Glace. Leask, Duffy (2013), Mercer (2019) and Colbert (2005) have each recognised the influence of tourism upon Shelley and the wider Diodati circle. Indeed, Mary Shelley described 'beaucoup de Monde' as having set out with them on the journey to Montenvers.[21] As Leask has noted, Percy Shelley was a conventional British middle class tourist in the Alps who 'participated in the commodification of the mountain sublime', but nonetheless expressed 'intellectual hauteur

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[18] Nigel Leask, 'Mont Blanc's Mysterious Voice: Shelley and Huttonian Earth Science' in *The Third Culture: Literature and Science,* ed. by Elinor Shaffer (New York: Grunter, 1998), pp.182-204, p.182.
[19] See thesis introduction.
[20] *MWSJ,* p.118.
[21] *MWSJ,* p.118.

and disdain for his fellow tourists in his letters to Peacock'.[22] Nothing Shelley did, nor anywhere that he visited, was in any way particularly out of the ordinary. When, on his way to Mont Blanc, he compares Cluses to Matlock in his 21 July entry into Mary's journal, what he reveals is not a deep knowledge of mountain environments, but rather a general knowledge of mountain tourist sites and his status as a tourist. Indeed, despite the Diodati circle's professed disliking for fellow tourists during that 1816 summer, their letters and diaries reveal an inability if not slight unwillingness to fully escape them. For Shelley there may have been something both appalling and paradoxically reassuring for his anxieties about the number of tourists. Inevitably, there is usually a psychological safety in numbers. Indeed, to walk on an empty glacier or climb a peak devoid of other humans feels very different to experiencing landscapes with 'Beaucoup de Monde'.

Interventionist eco-critical readings of 'Mont Blanc' over the last thirty years have been a way of understanding how Shelley was responding to the material Mont Blanc. Advancing theories proposed by Jonathan Bate's readings of Wordsworth poems in *Romantic Ecology* (1991), Louise Economides has suggested '"Mont Blanc" may prove to be 'ecologically instructive' in both invoking and revising Wordsworth and Coleridge's metaphysical construction of nature.'[23] Both Wood and Higgins have turned their attention to 1816 as the year without a summer and have argued that the eruption of Tambora helped shape not only 'Mont Blanc', but other writings of the Diodati circle in 1816.[24] Indeed, Higgins' reading of the poem within a broader context of a 'quotidian sense of the catastrophic that pervaded Romantic culture' is points to the sense of anxiety about death in the landscape that I am focusing on here.[25]

When Shelley walked on the Mer de Glace in 1816, he needed only to make a short descent from Montenvers on a wooded path to step easily onto the ice from more or less level ground. Today the former levels of the glacier are marked by date plaques labelled '1820', '1850' and so on to show the exponential retreat of the ice. This has accelerated markedly in a post industrialised world. AS of 2019 the glacier level at Montenvers is roughly 150m of vertical height below that of 1820. Not only the depth but the appearance of the glacier has changed immensely. Directly beneath Montenvers the ice is now buried under tons of granite moraine. While the surrounding peaks remain wild and beautiful, outside of winter the glacier has the appearance of an opencast mine works, but without the redeeming sense of utility. During my 2019 visit two diggers and a bulldozer were parked on

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[22] Leask, 1998, p.184.
[23] Econmides, pp.99 and 102.
[24] Gillen D'Arcy Wood, *Tambora: The Eruption that changed the World* (London: Princeton University Press, 2015)
[25] Higgins, 2017, p.8.

the debris by the ice grotto where in order to access the glacier I surreptitiously ignored 'closed' signs and circumvented chain-barriers.[26] Since 1946 a version of this ice grotto has been dug into the glacier to lure visitors down to the retreating ice. It has proved a profitable paid attraction that has a lineage to the eighteenth century in which the touristic potential of the ice was first exploited. Today, as a fixture in popular tourist itineraries, Montenvers and the Mer de Glace are poised between two contradictory conceptions of the natural world. The Chamonix tourist board, the Refuge de Montenvers hotel and the highly profitable railway that serves the sites market them firstly in a traditional – if outside of winter now misleading – manner that focuses on the appearance of the Mer de Glace as a site of beauty and the sublime. The Montenvers hotel website shows footage of the glacier where the ice remains wave-like. However, these glacier sections are so far up the valley that they cannot actually be seen from Montenvers. Such misrepresentations form part of a collective suspension of disbelief often adopted by visitors in which the Alps continue to be viewed as an unsullied idealisation of natural grandeur despite realities. A second approach, however, offers an alternative narrative for the Alps of the twenty-first century. This frames the Mer de Glace as a new mecca for global environmental catastrophe. Here the *true* effects of climate change and global warming can be measured and understood by pilgrims to Montenvers with equal ease and horror as they come to practise their environmental credentials and apprehend the former grandeur that is being lost. Shelley's fascination with the mountain reveals this same duality as he moves between celebrations of natural grandeur and anxiety about environmental catastrophe – but also between the realities of place and its fictionalisation.

Shelley may have been lent rudimentary crampons or simply relied on alpenstocks while his guides cut steps for his hike on the glacier. In 2019, after surmounting an ice slope to access the glacier, I found there is no need for crampons as loose boulder piles, rather than crevasses, pose the immediate risk. Despite the likely presence of many other tourists and the relative safety of his guided hiking on the glacier, Shelley was undoubtedly surrounded by reminders of mortality from the mountain's inherent natural forces. After a few hundred metres hiking up the glacier bed in 2019, I noticed a roped party of three crossing the glacier – the only other people around that evening. They were midway across the glacier when the valley was filled by a deafening explosion of rock and a massive collapse on the Aiguille de Charmoz unfolded:

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[26] Particularly useful in this instance as I was planning to solo the vertical via-ferrata alpinists access route which proves a second means of descending to the glacier.

Figure 46 Three photos of the Aiguille des Grands Charmoz (3445m) from the Mer de Glace: before collapse (top left), during immediate collapse (top right) and during continued collapse (bottom).

I watched the party of three in the fall line. They had no time to outrun the collapse. Instead, they stood motionless and seemingly resigned to their fate as huge quantities of debris raced down the Charmoz's north face. With death or at least serious injury imminent, the party proved fortunate and survived because most of the serious debris was captured by the hollowed cirque that once housed the Glacier de Thermia below the north face:

Figure 47 Party of three (circled) fatalistically observe the debris racing towards them.

Shelley records witnessing an avalanche on his approach to Chamonix, and had to cross sections of track that had been badly affected by avalanches, rock fall and landslides.[27] Indeed, Mary Shelley noted that the group saw 'several Avelanches – some very smalls others of great magnitude which roar[e]d & smoaked – overwhelming every thing as it passed & precipitating great ~~pea~~ pieces of ice into the valley below.'[28] indeed, like the mountaineer caught in a storm that is forced to disengage from their dream of the summit and the beauty of their surroundings so as to deal with the nightmare that has engulfed them, Shelley's experience of the Alps was seemingly punctuated by constant similar reminders of the fragility of both human, and more specifically his, existence to that experienced by the roped party of three.

As threatening as the phenomena of the mountain would be, Shelley's mountain terror had its precursor at the lake. On Lake Geneva he was confronted by 'waves of frightful height' that 'covered the whole surface with a chaos of foam' and that momentarily engulfed Shelley and Byron's vessel near St Gingoux on the 23 June.[29] The threat of submersion in the lake was pronounced: not only did both poets remove their coats in readiness, but Shelley later noted that the storm had felled 'an immense chestnut tree'.[30] In not knowing how to swim, Shelley was in an acute predicament.[31] He elaborated on the experience to Thomas Love Peacock: 'I felt in this near prospect of death a mixture of sensations, among which terror entered, but subordinately'.[32] The idea that terror was subordinate to his other feelings and that Shelley seems to have been less bothered that he might die than by the 'humiliation' he would feel at causing Lord Byron undue risk in having to save him from drowning, suggests a farcical gentlemanly pride. Yet it also

[27] For accounts of the avalanche, see *PBSL*, p.495 and *MWSJ,* p.115.
[28] *MWSJ,* pp.116-117.
[29] *Six Weeks' Tour*, p.120-120.
[30] *Six Weeks' Tour*, p.124.
[31] For an account of the incident see Holmes, p.335.
[32] *Six Weeks' Tour*, p.122.

suggests a melancholic and fatalistic attitude to his own existence and his responsibilities as a father. If we are to trust these pronouncements, then Shelley could be seen as expressing symptoms of mental illness and depression. We know from Polidori's account of the night of the ghost story competition on the 18 June that Shelley was eminently not of sound mind that week. There is no reason Byron's reading of Christabel should have been particularly disturbing. Yet after the reading, 'when silence ensued' Polidori describes 'Shelley suddenly shrieking and putting his hands to his head, ran out of the room with a candle'.[33] This was not for effect; Dr Polidori, in his professional capacity, was required to treat Shelley – who had hallucinated – for hysteria. Shelley's subsequent description of traumatic visions during the fit suggests he was deeply troubled, unstable and death was at forefront of his mind.

Whether the near-death experience on the lake produced a post-traumatic stress disorder in Shelley in the weeks and months that followed cannot be known. However, the conditions were certainly ripe for Shelley to be affected by the incident in a deeper and more pronounced way than his initial reaction in its immediate wake details. John Sheppard writes in his travelogue for the same week that Shelley visited the mountain of seeing a monument to a gentleman who had died in a crevasse. Shelley would have been likely to have seen this same monument or at least other such remembrances of deaths as he passed through the landscape. When seen, monuments of this type remind us to look well to each step but also have a tendency to take deeper root in the subconscious and come to mind later. On Kebnekaise, the highest mountain in Sweden, a harder approach route in a rock and ice gully above the Borling Glacier has a plaque to a dead mountaineer – the unfortunately named Marcus Severed. I hardly registered it until later when I had not donned crampons for the super-exposed compressed ice of the Kebnekaise's Nordcap summit, the plaque came to mind as a warning I should have heeded. The highest mountain in Slovenia, and the Julian Alps, Triglav, has the plaque below at its foot.

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[33] Polidori, 1911, p.128.

Figure 48 Memorial plaque on Triglav, Slovenia in 2005

Such visual reminders may not always have been dwelt upon in Shelley's accounts, but undoubtedly they were part of the climate and discourse during his excursion. Before my ascent of Mont Blanc, a Hungarian told me a story of his first attempt in the 1980s when he turned back after a sudden storm tore 'a lot' of people from the summit ridge to their deaths. I saw him after my return from the summit – the memory of his earlier climb had mixed with that day's storm and he had seen the storm as a final omen so curtailed his ambitions and, despite having a hard day's climbing under his belt, headed down without a summit-bid. In some instances, such stories of mountain woe are apocryphal – but mostly they are not. Today these stories are part of the climate of high mountains. Yet it was the same during the Romantic-era. We know from John Hobhouse's journal account of Lord Byron's excursion to Mont Blanc and Mary Shelley's journal that tales of woe and mountain tragedies were routinely discussed by guides and other tourists. Indeed, countless popular travelogues and guide books, including those by Windham, Bourrit, Coxe and Saussure, routinely recounted tragedies among the mountains that may have fed into a state of anxiety for Shelley before he travelled to the mountain. While mountaineers or climbers may be aware of previous deaths on the routes they are undertaking, it is 'omens' – I use the word pointedly – such this that have the more troubling impact and, undoubtedly, play tricks on the mind. While some

visitors no doubt listened to such tales with a degree of detachment, I am suggesting that Shelley did not.[34]

Reminders of human vulnerability in mountain landscapes become magnified and increase anxiety if an individual is in any way nervous about the terrain into which they are heading, This climate of associated death likely created a context of anxiety for Shelley when on the 24 July his party made it only halfway to Montenvers and the Mer de Glace before being driven back by 'torrents' that 'wetted to the skin'.[35] Descending on a wet path, Mary writes: 'Shelley went before and tripping he fell upon his knee – this added to the weakness occasioned by a blow on his ascent – he fainted & was for some minutes incapacitated from continuing his route.'[36] Shelley was a poet who had never quite experienced such terrain and yet he writes that he 'narrowly escaped being precipitated down the mountain'.[37] This, like his experience on the lake, was another brush with death. The two falls and his fainting are then potentially further important psychological disturbances that, like Coleridge landing on a ledge on Broad Stand, may have both disturbed and inspired the poet. In short, during his excursion to the mountain Shelley discovered a material world of alluring beauty, but also of genuine threat because of the difficulty of the terrain, his inexperience of such landscapes and the violent natural forces inherent in the mountain, the glacier and the Arve. The death-potentialities of these hidden forces no doubt deepened the stormy nature of an already anxious and unsettled condition – what Richard Holmes has described as Shelley's 'mood of morbidity and oppression'.[38] Mont Blanc and the Arve together offered a landscape not of vacancy or emptiness onto which Shelley could map his mind, but of fullness and an overload of potential that almost certainly mapped itself deep into his psyche. It is for this reason that his experience of place proved an external catalyst to a psychological exploration of the mind's dark inner recesses and made 'Mont Blanc' a product of Shelley's confrontation with his own mortality.

Composition Date

The composition date for 'Mont Blanc' is disputed. This poses a problem for a geocritical analysis that views Shelley's excursion to 'Mont Blanc' as exerting a strong influence on the poem. As such, it is worth pausing here before undertaking an analysis of the poem to give it attention. According to Mary Shelley in the 1839 edition of Shelley's *Poetical Works*, 'Mont Blanc' 'was inspired by a view of that mountain and its surrounding peaks and valleys, as he

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[34] See Simpson, 2003 and 2007 and Harrer, 2005, for how the ill-fated decision by the Hinterstoisser-Kurtz-Reiner-Angerer party to pull the rope through and cut away an escape route now functions as an omen on the Eiger Nordwand.

[35] *MWSJ,* p.118.

[36] *MWSJ,* p.118.

[37] *Six Weeks' Tour,* p.164.

[38] Holmes, p.328.

lingered on the Bridge of Arve on his way through the Valley of Chamouni'.[39] This may not give us the full picture, however. At the very least, Mary's note only tells us he was on his way 'through' rather than *going to* or *coming from* the mountain. While we know that the SDN version of the poem was composed before Shelley left Geneva for London on the 29 August, we do not when it was composed or whether, importantly, this was the first version of the poem. Percy Shelley promises in the preface to *Six Weeks' Tour* that the poem was 'composed under the immediate impressions' of the scenes it describes, implying that it was written during the visit to Chamonix. If unlikely, it is not altogether impossible that the 'immediate impressions' refer to the proximity of the Alps more broadly. In *Six Weeks' Tour* the 23 June is given for the composition date at the end of the poem. Given the assertion of the preface, the nature of the poem and that Shelley did not begin his excursion to Mont Blanc until 21 July this date has been widely rejected by scholars. O'Neill writes of the date, 'this is clearly a mistake'.[40] To my knowledge there are no advocates for 23 June. While I am not about to go against critical consensus and argue for 23 June as the composition date, I am less convinced the date should be as readily dismissed as it has been.

If the 23 June is incorrect, the reliance at the time of compiling *Six Weeks' Tour* upon writings in which dates are emphasised – as they are in Mary Shelley's Journal and Percy Shelley's two letters to Peacock – makes the inclusion of the 23 June a glaring error. This is especially so given that the letters to Peacock, although dated in their original forms, are not given dates in *Six Weeks' Tour*. In many later editions of the poem Mary Shelley did not change or remove the date. The 23 June – incidentally roughly the date 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' was composed – may be relevant as an early conception date for 'Mont Blanc'. The 23 June is either the first or the second day of the boat tour of Lake Geneva that Shelley undertook with Lord Byron.[41] This would eventually take Shelley to the eastern end of Lake Geneva and the Chateau de Chillon. However, far better views of Mont Blanc can be had from the surface of the lake than from the area around the Villa Diodati as Mary Shelley recognises in a key moment of *Frankenstein*.[42] Even if unlikely, the date may nonetheless be a meaningful reference to that boating outing as a moment of early inspiration or even to an early pre-excursion version, perhaps even as a reminder of Shelley's near-death experience during the storm, with the poem then evolving over the next two months and naturally substantially affected by Shelley's excursion to the mountain.

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[39] Shelley, *Works*, III (London: Moxon, 1839), p.35
[40] *PBSP,* p.522.
[41] Holmes, 2005, views this as the day they set sail, while Mercer, 2019, regards it as the second day of the tour.
[42] See Chapter Five.

Like so many unknowns in English literature, critics are reliant on subjective leaning when it comes to the composition date for 'Mont Blanc'. The idea that Shelley, long before visiting Mont Blanc, was armed with enough knowledge derived from various writings to compose 'Mont Blanc' – or at least a now lost early version – cannot be entirely dismissed. Idiosyncratic representations of specific experiences that link 'Mont Blanc' incontrovertibly to Shelley's prose accounts of the excursion and not simply to a mass of popular prose accounts are limited. The most concrete detail appears to relate to Shelley's description of the Cascade d'Arpenaz. In *Six Weeks' Tour* Shelley describes the waterfall as 'resembling some colossal Egyptian statue of a female deity' and 'imitating a veil of the most exquisite woo[l]' (p.145).

Figure 49 Three photos of the Cascade de l'Arpenaz from different locations.

The photo taken from the distance of a mile (left) gives context to the relative size of the two falls. The split-falls at the bottom of the cliff is the more apparent of the two split-falls when the cliff is foreshortened (centre and right). His description of the falls correlates most closely with the bottom falls. In contemporaneous travelogue descriptions of the falls and the word 'veil' and a comparison with an Egyptian deity – or any other statue – do not appear to recur. Shelley's material experience of the cascade is therefore the likely inspiration for 'the ethereal waterfall, whose *veil | robes* some unsculptured image' [my emphasis] (p.176).

The idea that there is merely an error with the month i.e. '23 June' being written rather than 23 July, on the surface seems a plausible explanation for the pre-excursion date. However, this is not satisfactory. It is helpful at this point to be reminded of Shelley's itinerary:

Itinerary of Mary and Percy Shelley's excursion to Mont Blanc

- Sunday 21 July: 8.30am leave Maison Chapuis (Switzerland) – arrive evening Sallenches/St Martin (Savoy). They have two guides.

- Monday 22 July: 7am leave St Martin – visit the Cascade de Chedde, cross the Arve by either the Pont Pélissier or the Pont-Des-Chèvres, witness an avalanche and pass near to the Glacier de Bosson – arrive 7pm Chamonix.

- Tuesday 23 July: Morning – MWS and PBS visit Source of the Arveyron. After dinner MWS stays in Chamonix (looked like rain), while PBS visits Glacier de Bossons with guide Ducree. In evening MWS copies PBS letter to Peacock (a part of what becomes Letter IV in the *Six Weeks' Tour*).

- Wednesday 24 July: Trip to Col du Balme cancelled (poor visibility). 10am leave for Montenvers and the Mer de Glace: it rains and they make it only halfway before turning back (Percy has two falls: injures his knee and knocks himself out). Rest of day in Chamonix. According to MWS, PBS 'writes part of letter'.[43]

- Thursday 25 July: Leave 9am to Montenvers and Mer de Glace. Dine on the mountain. They spend some time walking on the glacier. Visit Montenvers hut – this may be either Blair's hut or Bourrit's Temple of Nature. Afterwards, Shelley visits/looks for an asbestos mine and is disappointed by what he sees. Return to Chamonix 6pm.[44]

- Friday 26 July: Col du Balme trip cancelled once again. Leave Chamonix – pass once more over the Pont Pélissier. Stay in Mont Blanc Inn, St Martin.

- Saturday 27 July: 12pm Leave St Martin – arrive 9pm Villa Diodati. Dine with Byron. 12am return to Maison Chapuis, 'kiss our babe [William] and go to bed'.

Duffy suggests '*Mont Blanc* was composed in the environs of Chamonix around the 23 July'.[45] Higgins, like Everest and Archman, argues for the 24 July as the composition date. Feldman and Scott-Kilvert also lean towards the 24 July given the itinerary of the 23 July.[46] Mercer is even more convinced:

> The following day (24 July) shows the Shelleys at work on their literary efforts at the same time; MWS's journal entry reads 'write my story – Shelley writes part of letter' (the former referring to the *Frankenstein* draft and the latter to 'Mont Blanc').[47]

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[43] *MWSJ,* p.118.
[44] The mine has never been located; the 'mine' may conceal a more deviant activity.
[45] Duffy, 2005, p.86.
[46] Paula Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, *MWSJ*, p.118n3.
[47] Mercer, 2019, p.65.

Quite why the 24 July has had so much appeal is difficult to say. After all, the 24 would mean 'Mont Blanc' was composed before Percy Shelley had made it to Montenvers and seen the Mer de Glace in all its glory. I find this unlikely. While Mary Shelley in her journal describes Percy Shelley writing 'part of a letter' – almost certainly part of the letter to Peacock that becomes Letter IV in *Six Weeks' Tour* – she does not refer to the composition of a poem and there is no reason she should not.[48]

My view is Percy Shelley most likely wrote 'Mont Blanc' after returning from the excursion and resuming his routine at the lake at the end of July and early August. It is notable that the Pont Pélissier – a location important enough for Shelley to use in the title of the Scrope Davies Notebook manuscript version of 'Mont Blanc' – is not referred to on the approach to Chamonix, but only as part of his return. He may not have crossed the Pont Pélissier on his way to Chamonix at all. After visiting the Cascade de Chedde the party had the option of crossing the Pont-Des-Chèvres as Richard Boyle Bernard and George Bridges had done on their respective excursions from Geneva to Chamonix in 1814.

'Mont Blanc'

In *History of a Six Weeks' Tour,* 'Mont Blanc' is separated from the body of the main travelogue by a title page that reads: 'LINES. WRITTEN IN THE VALE OF CHAMOUNI' (p.173). The poem follows on page 175 with the title 'MONT BLANC. LINES WRITTEN IN THE VALE OF CHAMOUNI'. The Scrope Davies Notebook version of the poem is 'Scene – Pont Pélissier in the Vale of Servox' (1816). The different title for the published poem has been read as a move by Shelley to allude more patently to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Chamouny; The Hour Before Sunrise. A Hymn' (1802).[49] However, the change is not simply a toponymical one; it is a change that subtly repositions the narrative situation of the poem. The 'Vale of Chamouny' and the 'Vale of Servox' are distinct areas, although this is less obvious to visitors today who pass between them quickly by means of auto-vehicles or trains. The former is the large hanging valley in which Chamonix is situated. The latter is the immediate area around Servox directly below the elevation that separates that hanging valley from the middle course of the Arve on its journey to join the Rhone. Travelling on foot or by mule as Shelley had done, that elevation functions a little like a wall that when passed over – or rather through – gives a psychological impression of having moved from one space to another. While the difference in the locations appears slight, the implication is that we can see Shelley willing to subtly manipulate or exchange landscapes –

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[48] *MWSJ,* p.118.
[49] See for example, Leighton, and O'Neill, 1989.

much as Wordsworth had done with his presentation of crossing the Col de Balme – so that landscapes could better fit with what he was trying to convey.

That manipulation of landscape extends to the selection of the bridge in the first instance. As Duffy has noted, the Pont Pélissier does not offer a view of the summit of Mont Blanc. Indeed, the vantage it offers is not as impressive as might be expected, although on clear days the glaciers of the Aiguille de Bionnassay can be seen. The reference to the bridge in the SDN version of the poem is important, however. According to Mary Shelley the bridge was the key catalyst inspiring Shelley to write the poem – although she does not clarify whether this was during the approach to the mountain or on the return. I have already suggested, it seems logical to regard the poem's narrative moment as being on Shelley's return because in crossing the bridge the speaker is able to reflect upon the things that he has seen during the preceding days of his tour. In any landscape a bridge forms an elemental psychological border of indeterminacy. For Shelley, the bridge crossings of the Arve on the journey to and from Chamonix were probably important psychological Rubicons. As a narrative location, the selection of a bridge is appropriate for a poem that presents ideas of place with such distinctive indeterminacy. A bridge is a place of transience that positions an individual between one place and another and offers a moment of reflection and introspection above the void. Yet in the potential precarity of any bridge – usually just a trick of the mind rather than a structural liability – may have meant that for Shelley the bridge was akin to the cliff face in *Manfred* upon which the hero teeters, and functioned as a locus for exacerbating – or exploring – his death-anxiety.

Despite the implied narrative locations of 'Mont Blanc' in the titles of the poem in the SDN and the *Six Weeks' Tour*, part I – the opening section of the poem – functions as a prologue and argument. In it, the speaker does not respond to a specified or even suggested place. Rather, topographical elements – 'lone mountains' 'feeble brook' 'wild woods' 'rocks' – are used to form a metaphorical analogy between the variability of nature and the workings of the mind. Judith Chernaik has considered this prologue as representative of the emphasis Shelley places on a passive mind to be open to receive from what is witnessed, suggesting that 'the complicated analogy of the mind to the valley of the Arve in *Mont Blanc* explores the relationship of mind to the external and perhaps transcendent reality'.[50] A distinctive feature of this prologue is Shelley's consideration of the idea of immortal thought: the 'universe of things' is 'everlasting'. However, the source of human thought is 'but half its own'. As Shelley describes the varied temperaments of the mind, the envisioned upheaval is wrought with a grasping for the stabilising perpetuity of the everlasting. The character of the analogous sphere from which thought is born is a place characterised by the

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[50] Judith Chernaik, 'The Figure of the Poet in Shelley', *ELH*, 35, 4 (1968), 566-590 (p.588).

eternal, where 'waterfalls' 'leap *for ever*' and a 'vast river' 'bursts and raves' '*ceaselessly*' (my emphasis). This desire to locate the immortal seems a moment of anxiousness that seeks to allay concerns about the fragility of human existence.

In wrestling with the question of whether Shelley projects or interprets Mont Blanc, Eric Wilson exaggerates the poem's paradoxes and 'infinite' possibilities in a way that diminishes the potential importance of Mont Blanc as *actual* material place in a delivery heavily reliant upon metaphorical prose: '[t]he poet's mind is a glacier, creating and destroying as it flows with the universe of things'.[51] The '[t]hus' that commences Part II immediately begins to reveal the complexity of the poem. Here the metaphorical analogy between nature and the mind's workings presented or argued for in Part I are applied to and entwined with Shelley's poetic response to the real places of Mont Blanc and the Arve. Consequently, the potentially stabilising loco-descriptive positionality of an address to the real 'Ravine of Arve' that opens Part II is immediately destabilised. The metaphorical topographies of Part I have real versions – what Hogle refers to as 'a visible analogue' in Part II: the brook or the vast river and the woods of Part I find their counterparts in the Arve and the 'brood of pines' described in Part II.[52] F. R. Leavis has recognised this intractable blurring between imagination and the material world and writes that in the poem 'the metaphorical and the actual, the real and the imagined, the inner and outer, could hardly be more unsoundly and indistinguishably confused.'[53] Indeed, even the ravine's 'giant brood of pine' that are '[c]hildren of elder time' – may be evidence of Shelley mixing less obvious real aspects of the landscape into the scene with layered meaning. During field research at the Pont Pélissier I found a profusion of elder bushes among the pines near to the bridge that continued along the cliffs of the Monts Pélissier. The ancestors of the elder bushes were likely present when Shelley visited. In folklore the elder is generally regarded as a tree of beginnings and endings, of birth and death. Read in this context, 'elder time' has a potential secondary coded meaning. For a poet who in his youth had been 'discovered in a circle of blue spirit flame apparently trying to raise the devil' and on other occasions attempted to commune with ghosts by carrying a skull, it is not impossible that the associations of the elder bushes formed part of Shelley's 'trance sublime'.[54] Indeed, the elder has many varied associations with witches.[55] Whether Shelley is playing upon such folkloric associations here or not, the dichotomised juxtaposition of 'children' and 'elder' complements the search

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[51] Wilson, p.126.
[52] Hogle, 1991, p.123.
[53] F. R. Leavis in *PBSP*, p.507.
[54] Holmes, 2005, p.24.
[55] Shelley did not use the word 'elder' often in his poems. I have found four cases where it means either older than or in older times. And one instance where – in context – it refers to the elder bush. In *Prometheus Unbound*, he refers to 'mild winds shake the elder brake'.

for beginnings and endings in the poem. Simultaneously, the anthropomorphic 'children of an elder time' imparts a sense of mystery about the past forms of the landscape.

Shelley's idea of a 'Power' emanating from the sphere of Mont Blanc – what Leighton describes as the 'presence of a hidden Power in landscape' – has several functions in the poem. Leighton reads it as belonging in the first instance to the 'tradition of the sublime' in a way that resembles the hidden pantheistic power of landscape that exists in Coleridge's 'Hymn'. However, Leighton recognises the complexity of the 'Power' and argues that it forms part of a central feature of a greater scheme across 'Mont Blanc' and 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' in which Shelley makes 'testing inquiries into the workings of the imagination as it confronts a landscape that is desolating in its emptiness'. This critical reliance on the notion of 'emptiness' has itself become a cliché; it seems more sensible to regard those 'inquiries' as resulting not from a confrontation with 'emptiness', but with an excess of material space and its potentialities. Duffy finds Leighton's interpretation of the Power unconvincing. He regards the Power, like the Power in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', as 'material necessity' – the 'law of Nature' – that although it cannot be seen directly can nonetheless be registered in likenesses in the form of 'manifestations' of 'natural phenomena'.[56] Jerold Hogle writes of the 'Power' that, 'if it exists' it 'speaks in a sound that cannot strictly be called its own – nor be regarded as God's own'.[57] The 'Power' seems more significant in posing the idea of a sense of mortal danger and potentiality, than expressing necessity, literal action or even – as in Hogle – needing to exist at all beyond Shelley's imagination. If destruction is the horror, contemplating the potential of that destruction is the terror. Shelley deploys the terror inherent in the hidden Power to investigate the processes of the sublime imagination in order to confront death and the meaning of having lived.

The 'Power' appears to be masculine; for when Shelley refers to 'his secret throne', he seems to be referring to the throne of the 'Power' rather than to Mont Blanc. In this respect the Power bears a striking resemblance to the Spirit of Mont Blanc in *Manfred*.[58] For Hogle, the 'Power' and the receiving in the mind of 'fast influences' is literally a *head-fuck* analogous to the 'way the vaginated bed of the Arve takes in and directs the various "comings down" of the Power'.[59] I am less convinced the Power has an overtly sexual potency in the tradition of gendered landscape writings we have seen in the masculine-mountain and feminine-lake analogies apparent in Chapter One of this thesis. However, the idea of shifts in 'Mont Blanc' between frenzied and post-climactic landscape movements that emphasise the volatility of the mind, perceiver and mountain admittedly allow space for Freudian interpretations such as Hogle's. The idea of the Power – potentially supernatural –

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[56] Duffy, 2005, p.100 and p.114.
[57] Hogle, 1991, p.109.
[58] See Chapter Five.
[59] Hogle, 1991, p.124.

fundamentally looks beyond the material world and in essence makes material place less tangible.

The process of diminishing the significance of material place is furthered by the suggestion that what lies before the speaker might be only a vision: 'I seem as if in a trance sublime and strange | To gaze upon my own separate fantasy'. The idea of a poetic trance pervaded the Romantic consciousness. It underscored the notion of the poet as being somehow more receptive to the truth of nature. Such a device was not new to Mont Blanc poetry. Thomas Whalley promoted the idea of a speaker's vision in his *Mont Blanc* of 1788: 'Seize! Seize! The glowing images that pass | Like transient shadows on the mimic glass!' (p.8).[60] The trance notion may have been a response to Coleridge. Charles Robinson has drawn parallels between 'Kubla Khan' and 'Mont Blanc' and suggested that Shelley was 'equally indebted to "Kubla Khan" for some of the images of '"Mont Blanc"' as he was Coleridge's 'Hymn'.[61] While Robinson suggests Byron was in possession of *Christabel; Kubla Khan: A Vision; The Pains of Sleep* by August, it was published by John Murray on 25 May 1816. There is no reason that Shelley had not read 'Kubla Khan' by the night of the reading of 'Christabel'.[62] Kelvin Everest has likewise suggested the vagueness and disorientating nature of 'Mont Blanc' form a fragmentary vision that 'echoes' Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan'.[63] The preface to *Six Weeks' Tour* offers an explanation for the form of 'Mont Blanc':

> It was composed under the immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects which it attempts to describe; and as an undisciplined overflowing of the soul, rests its claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate the untameable wildness and inaccessible solemnity from which those feelings sprang.[64]

The 'powerful feelings' and 'overflowing' here recall the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: 'For all good poetry is the spontaneous *overflow* of *powerful* feelings' (my emphasis).[65] But as Duffy has noted, they also reflect Shelley's response to Rousseau's *Julie*.[66] The suggestion of a vision gives Shelley a layer of insulation through which to explore the anxieties of his subconscious as '[t]he everlasting universe of *things* | Flows through the mind' (p.176)). At this moment the 'things' appear as unfiltered sensorial responses to the material world. This

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[60] The term 'mimic glass' here is unusual in eighteenth century poetry and seems to denote scrying. Samuel Johnson later used 'mimic glass' in an early version of the poem 'To a Young Lady, On her Birthday' that was first published posthumously in 1811. But for Johnson it appears to merely mean a mirror (albeit one that distorts what it reflects).

[61] Robinson, p.36.

[62] See Robinson 1976, pp.36-37.

[63] See *The Poems of Shelley: Volume One: 1804-1817,* ed. by Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Archman (London: Longman, 1989), p.535.

[64] *Six Weeks' Tour,* p.vi.

[65] William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. by Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.98.

[66] Duffy, 2005, p.110.

process hints at the material world having supernatural agency over the conscious creativity of the poet – as Shelley had already imagined: '[n]ature was the poet'. Leighton has embraced this idea viewing Shelley as an interpreter of Mont Blanc through language 'which belongs, in the tradition of the sublime, not to art but to nature' arguing that 'Shelley's manifesto for political change is one which advocates a return of language to its source, a return of art to nature, so that composition might be very nearly inspiration once again'.[67] There is then a degree of irony in that the trance or dream-like state the speaker compares his experience to is one of several layers of insulation separating him from material nature. Place becomes a more abstract concept. Indeed, the term 'things' seems an especially vague interchange with the material world and 'the clear universe of things' proves anything but clear.

By 1816 familiarity and scientific revelation were theoretically stripping Mont Blanc of its superstitious power by dispelling the myths of the Alps or, in the words of Fergus Fleming, '*Killing Dragons*'.[68] In 'Mont Blanc' Shelley seems nostalgic for what was being lost, yet simultaneously reimagined what was being found out. In this way the poem appears to be a reaction to science that accentuates what Leask has dubbed the 'spectacularism' or apparent quasi-supernatural drama of what was being discovered about the formulation and processes of its landscape.[69] Certainly, Shelley seizes the opportunity to embrace and meld geological science and the supernatural through language that is simultaneously superstitious and figurative: 'Is this a scene | Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young | Ruin?' (p.179). Leighton has claimed that 'there are no mythological presences in "Mont Blanc", no gods of good and evil'.[70] Duffy recognises Shelley adoption of sublime terror with geological allusion at its core as part of a wider critique of the general acts of the 'vulgar' imaginations perpetrated by visiting tourists within the wider fashion for the sublime. This is plausible. However, I am inclined to agree with Wilson that the glacial power Shelley expresses in 'Mont Blanc' reveals that '[s]cience […] is not sufficient to account entirely for the floods of ice' adding that, '[a]wed beyond the concepts of empiricism, Shelley grasps for magic'.[71] The supernatural allusions seem less like engagements with clichéd anthropomorphic versions of Mont Blanc than they do manifestations of Shelley's subconscious that indicate an unstable mind venturing towards the uncertain existential questions posed by death; in essence, this is Shelley in a virtual séance with nature striving for 'gleams of a remoter world' (p.178).

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[67] Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.69.
[68] See Fergus Fleming, 2000.
[69] See Leask, 1998, p.185.
[70] Leighton, p.61.
[71] Wilson, p.105.

Shelley's vision of the 'still cave of the witch Poesy' (p.177) is a significant superstitious moment during a summer of superstitious considerations. Elements of nostalgia for the supernatural appeared in June when he wrote 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty':

> While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
>
> Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
>
> And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
>
> Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.[72]

Regardless of whether this passage has a genuine biographical basis or not, the nostalgic 'ghosts' are searched for in places that include a cave. It is a place-association we subsequently find in 'Mont Blanc'. In the 'Hymn', the 'shadow' of beauty results in the 'ecstasy' of a sublime that can replace what Leighton describes as Shelley's 'boyhood enthusiasm for romance and the supernatural'.[73] This in turn is a substitute for faith and God. Duffy has suggested this moment in the 'Hymn' forms part of Shelley's wider consideration of a Godwinian 'cultivated imagination' and its relationship to necessity, beauty and the sublime.[74] However, I am struck more by how these *memories* of attempts to communicate with 'the departed dead' continue to represent a preoccupation with the supernatural that summer. Indeed, the composition of 'Mont Blanc' followed the ghost story competition at the Villa Diodati. In such a context the 'ghosts' and 'shadows' of the cave in 'Mont Blanc' are as much a reflection of Shelley's interest in the gothic, the supernatural and the occult, as they are ideas about the mind and the nature of writing. Two weeks after the return of the party to Diodati from Chamonix, Percy Shelley wrote in Mary's journal:

> *We talk of Ghosts. – Neither Lord B. or M. G. L.* [Matthew Lewis] *seem to believe in them* […] *I do not think that all persons who profess to discredit these visitations, really discredit them, or if they do in the daylights, are not admonished by the approach of th loneliness & midnight to think more respectfully of the world of Shadows.*[75]

While the folkloric legends of dragons that frequented the upper glaciers of the Alps had long since gone, ghosts are for Shelley clearly an altogether different matter.

Despite this biographical context, most critical attention afforded to the cave sequence in 'Mont Blanc' has tended to have been drawn towards wider Shelleyan philosophical positions and the relationship between writing and the mind. Earl Wasserman follows Kapstein's reading in considering the cave as relating to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, although while Kapstein suggests that it is a *possible* reading, Wasserman is more

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[72] *PBSP*, p.76, ll.49-53.
[73] Leighton, p.56.
[74] Duffy, 2005, p.105.
[75] *MWSJ,* p.126.

assertive.[76] Both regard the cave sequence as evidence of Shelley thinking about the nature of writing, with Wasserman suggesting:

> The world of the introspective trance reveals that the body of thoughts so fashioned is capable of two acts, one of which is to enter "the still cave of the witch Poesy" in the mind's interior ravine (44) – poesy in its original sense of making, or constituting.[77]

Shelley undoubtedly saw convenient parallels between the unknown recesses of caves – whether of rock or ice – and the recesses of the mind. The cave borrows from the idea of a fountain of poetic inspiration originating with Castaly from the recesses of Parnassus – a feature of, among others, Helen Maria Williams' poetic response to Mont Blanc. Critics such as Everest and Higgins have suggested that the cave alludes to 'Kubla Khan'. Duffy argues that 'Shelley is more probably recalling Bacon's primitive and reactionary idols of the cave than Plato's famous parable', but also suggests that the cave under the Mer de Glace at the source of the Arveyron which Shelley visited may have been the inspiration.[78] Yet the focus of the poem has not at this point moved from the immediate ravine of the Arve to consider the mountain beyond. Likewise, the idea of caverns and chasms of unknown depths are a recurrent trope of both Mary and Percy Shelley's responses to the environs of Mont Blanc that summer just as they were in countless other British responses to the Alps. The sheer number of caves to be found on the mountain and among the gorges of the Arve makes settling on any specific source of inspiration difficult.

While Leask recognises the potential influence of 'superstitious rituals' associated with caves that are discussed by 'contemporary mythographers', he nonetheless posits that for Shelley the cave forms a cave/summit or rather catastrophist/neptunist dichotomy in 'representing the rival claims of idealist and materialist natural philosophy respectively'.[79] Hogle, advancing his Freudian reading of 'Mont Blanc', has moved away from physical or literary referents and interpreted the productivity of the cave as 'manifestly gendered as feminine (a 'witch')' and the cave itself as 'the container of a womb'.[80] Hogle in essence positions Shelley in an interchange between place and imagination in which the poet takes on the roles of father ejaculating and impregnating and also mother birthing and feeding in order to create the verse. In his abstract reading of gendered landscape, Hogle considers the interchange between mind (conscious and subconscious) and mountain as Shelley's attempt

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[76] See Kapstein, I. J. 'The Meaning of Shelley's "Mont Blanc"', *Shelley, Shorter Poems and Lyrics*, ed. by Patrick Swinden (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976), pp.170-171.

[77] Earl R. Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), p.227.

[78] Duffy, 2005, p.116. Francis Bacon's 'Idola specus' or Idols of the Cave are in *Novum Organum Scientiarum,* (1620).

[79] Leask, 1998, p.193.

[80] Hogle, 1991, p.125.

to comprehend how the mind exists at all. While Shelley's attempts to understand the workings of the mind are certainly at play, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that the cave places a dark hole at the heart of the poem and that the idea of ghosts and witches that populate it appear to be rising up from Shelley's disturbed subconscious. As such, it is surprising that the importance of the witch as an actual witch rather than as solely the beguiling anthropomorphic imagining of poetic inspiration has been largely overlooked. Wilson, despite acknowledging that in 'Mont Blanc' Shelley's 'mental space is witchy', restricts his reading of the witch to a symbolic personification of poetic inspiration.[81] While Duffy offers a footnote that directs us to *The Witch of the Atlas*, it is to recall the use of the cave rather than the witch. The witch was a literary figure familiar from Shakespeare, fairy tales and folklore. Shelley drew on both fairy tales and the supernatural elements of Shakespeare in his poetry. He melded both to form the character of *Queen Mab* (1813). *Queen Mab* had recently been revised by Shelley, probably after August 1815 for 'The Daemon of the World. A fragment' published in the *Alastor* collection of 1816.[82] It seems reasonable to suggest that he is also drawing here on alpine superstitions about witches frequenting caves in the upper reaches of the glaciers that he has garnered from conversations with guides and from travelogues he has read.[83] Byron would include a witch character in *Manfred*; it is plausible that, like the existence of ghosts, witches were something the Diodati circle discussed that summer. If for Shelley poesy is a witch, then there is a sense here of spell-casting that contrasts with the 'Frail spells' of the 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty'.[84] He is hinting at possession by a witch that is both the material superstitious witch of folklore and the internal metaphorical witch that prompts the need to write. Whether by design or coincidence, the witch Poesy – manifested by the poetry Shelley is writing in 'Mont Blanc' – takes us back to the association Charles Robinson has seen between the poem and 'Kubla Khan' for the witch has a mysterious power akin to the vision of the Abyssinian Maid of 'Kubla Khan' who has come to Coleridge '[f]rom the fountain' of those 'caves of ice' and whose song the speaker wishes to revive.[85] In 'Mont Blanc' the witch has a function beyond the personification of poetic inspiration; she is a sinister fairy tale aspect that, like the mysterious Abyssinian Maid in 'Kubla Khan', has a peculiar capability to unnerve. As such, the witch is a manifestation of the mental instability Shelley displayed after the reading of 'Christabel'.

The repetition of 'some' in the last lines of part II, 'some shade of thee, | some phantom, some faint image' (p.177), emphasises the instability of the speaker's visionary

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[81] Wilson, p.120.
[82] See *PBSP*, pp.446-452, for a discussion of the composition dates.
[83] See Windham, p.10.
[84] *PBSP*, p.75, l. 29.
[85] *CP*, p.513, l.34.

experience in the same way as the repetition of 'now' on lines three and four animates the visionary response at the start of the poem: 'Now dark – now glittering – now reflecting gloom – | Now reflecting splendour' (p.176). Like describing a dream, Shelley's landscape seems to resists attempts in language to make sense of it. For Economides, this type of 'failure' is Shelley's method to 'deconstruct the anthropocentrism at the core of […] representing nature' that mirrors how 'individual consciousness eludes articulation'.[86] However, it is difficult to see this shifting as a 'failure' when it is the means by which the apparent 'untameable wildness' of Mont Blanc's environs can be replicated by the form of the poem. Like a person observing the landscape whose eye rests on a given feature, there are also moments of stillness and apparent clarity in the vision. Indeed, having reached a destabilised position with the cave where what is being seen or imagined is uncertain, Shelley momentarily appears to stabilise the poem. The word 'some', that softly echoes the preceding cave passage is used to open part III and introduce a reflective philosophical tone about meaning: 'Some say that gleams of a remoter world | Visit the soul in sleep' (p.178). This prompts the first two of five unanswerable questions:

> I look on high,
> 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
> Its circles? (p.178)

On looking upwards, the speaker does not initially see Mont Blanc, but rather an intangible barrier prohibiting an understanding of life and death. The premise underpinning both questions is that something prevents us – whether the ignorance of a metaphorical sleeping mind or a mysterious omnipotent entity – from understanding the true nature of being. Shelley continues to reach for the supernatural here. An 'unknown omnipotence' that veils rather than unveils has a bewitching sinister quality. While likewise, the idea that the speaker might exist in a dream state seems to extend beyond the boundaries of sleep or poetic trance in order to consider a state of living death.

From a moment of calm philosophical reflection, we have reached the moment of crisis at the heart of the poem. Leask has interpreted this moment in the poem as shifting the speaker's position in such a way as the speaker becomes analogous to a Saussure-like figure in having a view that separates him from the 'crowded and commercial-viewing platform of the tourists'.[87] I am not convinced that the positional difference Leask recognises is justified. Indeed, Shelley reminds us that the speaker is looking upwards from the valley. Most

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[86] Economides, p.100-101.
[87] Leask, 1998, p.187.

visitors do not view the mountain as a landscape painting. Rather, they imagine what worlds make up its upper and hidden reaches beyond the immediate view – to look at place is to imagine space. As Shelley's trust in reality is destabilised he is therefore confronted with unknowns. In response, his 'very spirit fails'. Yet he layers meaning here, shifting the idea of spirit as an emotional state and personal resolve to blend it with the image of a metaphorical ghost spirit that is '[d]riven homeless from steep to steep' until it 'vanishes among the viewless gales!' In doing so, the narrative subject is drawn upwards not to a view of the divine, but to a moment of loss. Indeed, as Bryan Shelley has suggested in relation to this passage, '[t]he image of the vanishing or dissipating cloud [is] a biblical metaphor for death'.[88]

The appearance of Mont Blanc for the first time in the poem suggests a potential resolution to this central crisis. Yet even in the more conventional approach with which Shelley describes the mountain's physical nature here, death pervades and no optimistic notes are sounded or resolution given. Instead, like the ghostly cave, the mountain offers sinister spaces among its 'unearthly forms'. We discover among the 'city of death' a dead chamois hunter has become carrion: 'the eagle brings some hunter's bone, | And the wolf tracks her there' (p.179).[89] Thomas Whalley in *Mont Blanc* (1788) followed the flight of an eagle and imagined the 'orbit of his radiant eye' (p.21) to enable views of the mountain that accentuated religious spectacularism. The eagle device was also adopted by Wordsworth in *Descriptive Sketches*. Here Shelley dismantles the majestic flight of the eagle in favour of a raw natural action. Likewise, the dead chamois hunter at the heart of 'Mont Blanc' contradicts the representational precedent associated with a much romanticised figure. Reducing the hunter to a single bone dismantles the heroism of his existence on the mountain and there is little nobility or even drama in his death. The bone draws out the mountain's sinister quality. This is furthered by the presence of a wolf. Indeed, Shelley had seen the wolves of the Alps as unsettling. In Letter IV he relates: 'Did I tell you that there are troops of wolves among these mountains? In winter they descend into the vallies […] and devour every thing that they can find out of doors' (p.172). That the wolves have a ferocious appetite and 'devour every thing' suggests Shelley views them not just as a natural inhabitant of the Alps, but as one more monstrous entity lurking in the recesses of an anxious mind.

The idea that Shelley confronts the mountain as an obstinate atheist challenging religious convention has long framed analyses of 'Mont Blanc'. Intrinsic to this view has been Shelley's entry in the register at the Hotel d'Londres. In the entry he describes his

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[88] Bryan Shelley, *Shelley and Scripture: The Interpreting Angel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.52.

[89] Thomas Whalley followed the flight of an eagle and imagined the 'orbit of his radiant eye' (p.21) in *Mont Blanc* 1788. It was a technique also adopted by Wordsworth in *Descriptive Sketches*.

destination as 'L'Enfer' and makes the claim in Greek that, 'I am a lover of mankind, a democrat and an atheist'.[90]
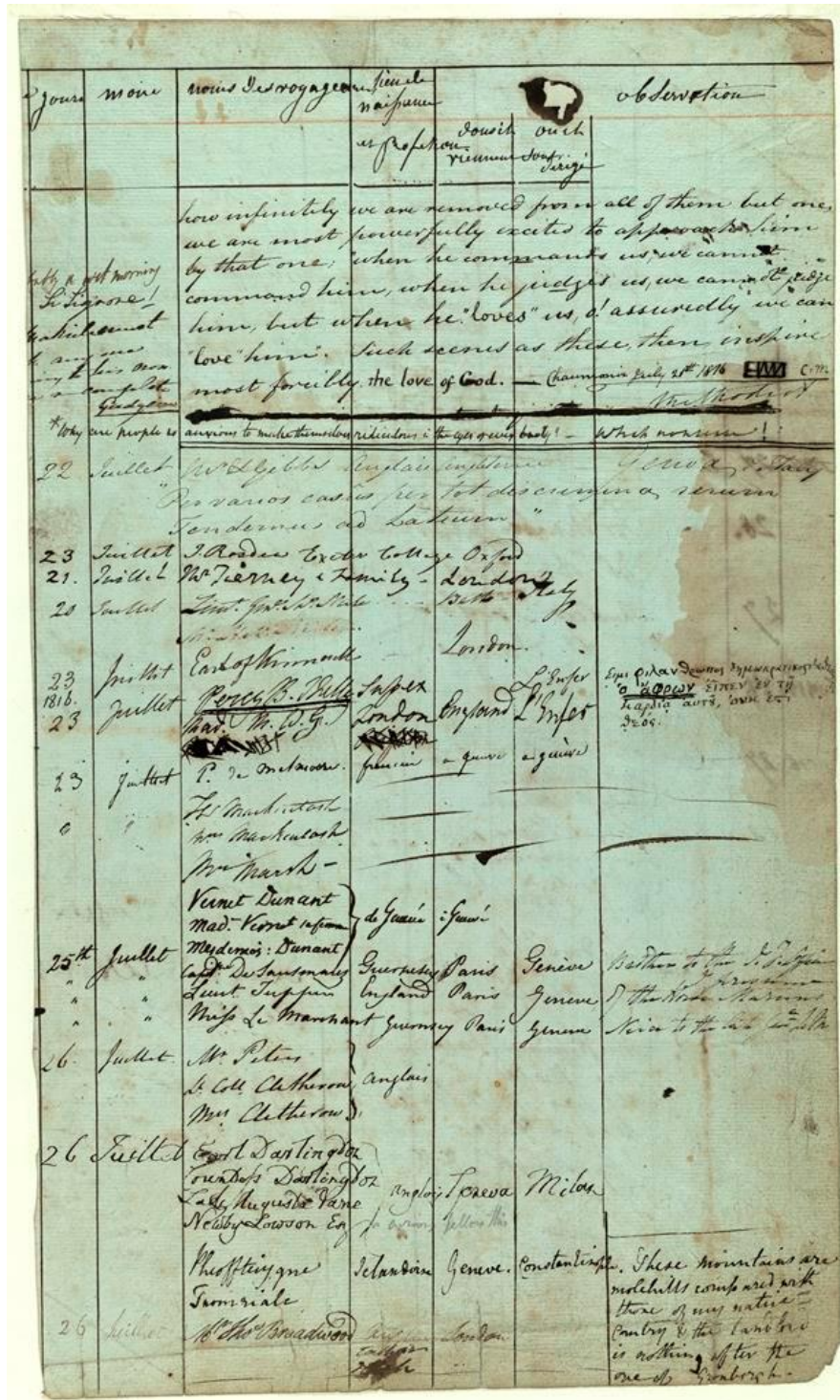
Figure 50 The page torn from L'Hotel de Londres, Chamonix (Trinity College, Cambridge).[91]

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[90] I have relied on Ross Wilson's translation of the Greek (see footnote below).

[91] For this page and Ross Wilson's overview of it, see <https://trinitycollegelibrarycambridge.wordpress.com/2016/07/22/shelley-and-the-birth-of-frankenstein/#comments> [Accessed July 2018]. Photo by Graham Henderson <http://www.grahamhenderson.ca/blog/Day/8/Year/update> [Accessed September 2017]. See also Gavin de Beer, 1945, pp.64-77 and Duffy (2017).

Graham Henderson follows other critics who have suggested Shelley's 'atheist' comment, rather than being a pre-ordained rejection of Coleridge's 'Hymn', is a response to the effusive Christian outpouring of the 21 July entry that concludes: 'Such scenes as these then inspire most forcibly the love of God'. There is a good possibility that the 21 July entry in the register at the Hotel de Londres was written by John Sheppard, who included in his epistolary travelogue a Mont Blanc poem – 'To Mont Blanc' (1817).[92] A basic graphological comparison of Sheppard's handwriting from the 1830s suggests that the effusive religious entry at the top of the page is in his hand.[93] Likewise, the language of the entry is tonally similar to that used by Sheppard elsewhere.[94] Sheppard appears to have gone largely unnoticed. Benjamin Colbert, proves an exception, although he does not acknowledge the correlation between the timing of Shelley and Sheppard's respective visits.[95]

Sheppard's 'To Mont Blanc' was inspired by an excursion contemporaneous with Shelley's excursion. The poem is a cautionary didactic celebration of mountain climbing seen through a religious lens. It presents the prowess of a 'young investigator' on Mont Blanc who '[c]an balance unperturb'd above clefts | Of yawning and unfathomable ice'. The speaker warns the youth that only with 'thy soul's needle touched | With Heaven's own

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[92] Sheppard's time in the valley overlapped with the Shelley party and they may have met. Like the Shelleys, Sheppard approached the Chamonix Valley from Geneva. He spent most of the 24 July indoors, just as the Shelleys had done. He does not, however, mention any members of the Diodati Circle in his travelogue. Nonetheless, Sheppard reveals a readiness to engage with contemporary poets who were describing the Alps by offering excerpts from the Alps poetry of Jean-Baptiste Claray, who he describes as the 'Swiss Milton'. See John Sheppard, *Letters after a Tour through some parts of France, Italy, Switzerland and Germany in 1816* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, 1817), pp.197-198 and John Sheppard, *Thoughts Chiefly Designed as Preparative or Persuasive to Private Devotion*, 6 edition (London: Whittiker, Treacher, 1832), pp.307-328.

[93] An intention to insert a photographic sample for this thesis from the British Library has been hindered by the Coronavirus pandemic.

[94] David Ellis has claimed that the religious entry in the register was 'written by someone who called himself a 'methodist'' – *Byron in Geneva: That Summer of 1816* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), p.115. However, the word 'Methodist' on the register does not appear at all to be in the same hand as the entry above it. There is also a line clearly separating the two entries. The 21 July entry appears to have had an initialled signature that has been boxed and obfuscated. I think it is far more likely that the word 'Methodist' was meant as a derogatory comment upon the 21 July entry i.e. 'only a Methodist would feel the need to scrawl such overly pious effusive nonsense across the hotel register.' As such, the word 'Methodist' may be a lone comment. Alternatively, 'Methodist' may belong to an entry directly below the July 21 entry that has been struck-through. The stuck-through comment appears to be continued or corrected by another entry below it, although if this is a distinctive entry, then it offers yet another possible hand for 'Methodist'. The entry below the struck-through writing reads: 'Why are people so anxious to make themselves ridiculous in the eyes of everybody? What nonsense?' This may in part be a general annoyance at the fact that the offer of the 'ridiculous' entry has inconsiderately written across the page.

[95] See Benjamin Colbert, *Shelley's Eye: Travel Writing and Aesthetic Vision* (London: Routledge, 2005). In his travelogue, Sheppard reveals a readiness to engage with contemporary poets who were describing the Alps by offering excerpts from the Alps poetry of Jean-Baptiste Claray, who he describes as the 'Swiss Milton'. See John Sheppard, *Letters after a Tour through some parts of France, Italy, Switzerland and Germany in 1816* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, 1817), pp.197-198.

essence' can the glory of Mont Blanc and the glory of God be realised.[96] The 173 lines of 'To Mont Blanc' culminate with the night-time reappearance of Mont Blanc for the climbing youth, who has earlier been troubled by the mountain's sinister qualities:

> Emerging in mid-heaven, thy glistening top
>
> Oh Sion! and the God that rul'd *his* day
>
> Hath not departed; for he poureth now
>
> His radiance on thy summits […]
>
> > Was the noon-day dark?
> >
> > It was:- but eve is cloudless; night is peace;
>
> Rapture shall gild the never ending-morn.[97]

The reappearance of a radiant Mont Blanc 'mid-heaven' in Sheppard's poem is mirrored by the sense of reappearance given by the second (and last) time the mountain is referred to by name in Shelley's 'Mont Blanc'(1817): 'Mont Blanc yet gleams on high: – the power is there' (p.182). Indeed, the individual searching the mountain for a hidden power in both poems reiterates how Shelley's process of confronting the mountain was not altogether different from that of religious-sublime poets. Indeed, as Hartman intimates, in the 'unseen power' of Mont Blanc Shelley expresses a Christian version of God in all but name: 'No god-term appears, although […] the poet [is drawn] close to the traditional rapture leading from Nature to Nature's Creator.'[98] John Rieder identifies a similar religious analogy to Hartman and suggests Shelley 'interprets the mountain, as if he were a priest and it a sacred text' in such a way that positions him as analogous to Moses standing before the voice of God on Mount Sinai – a 'transmitter of a sacred law or "code"'.[99]

If Shelley rejects the neat resolutions of religious-sublime responses to the mountain, Shelley does not rely on science to resolve its mysteries. Indeed, he responds to three questions about the geologic origins of the mountain with a non-answer: 'None can reply – all seems eternal now' (p.179). Leighton, in trying to resolve the difficulties in the poem and reconcile the idea of Shelley as an atheist who is using the language of the religious sublime in order to 'reject' a 'divine model' but who nonetheless appears to be seeking a substitute, identifies a schizophrenic Shelley who is speaking with two voices: 'the sceptic who denies the presence of a creative God behind the landscape' and 'the poet [who] yearns for licence to imagine an alternative origin of things'.[100] The multivalence of Shelley's response complicates the engagement with religion and faith. Shelley tells us that

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[96] Sheppard, 1817, pp.209- 210.
[97] Sheppard, 1817, p.213.
[98] Geoffrey Hartman, 'Gods, Ghosts and Shelley's Atheos', *Literature and Theology,* 24, 1 (2010), 4-18, p.10.
[99] John Rieder, 'Shelley's "Mont Blanc": Landscape and the Ideology of the Sacred Text', *ELH,* 48, 4 (1981), 778-798 (pp.784-85).
[100] Leighton, p.62.

'[t]he wilderness has a mysterious tongue | Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild'. Michael Erkelenz argues that Wasserman, Leighton, and Chernaik among others have too readily accepted the reading of 'But for such faith with nature reconciled' as to mean 'Only for such faith' and have overlooked a conflict in reconciling faith in the creative power of nature exclusive of God.[101] However, Erkelenz's examination, which relies on earlier versions of the line, moves us away from asking the fundamental question: why Shelley changed the line at all? It seems counterintuitive that an insipid mild faith would be a successful means to anything. Rather, this is another moment of indeterminacy: however 'doubt' or 'faith' are interpreted, the 'or' within the line emphasises the uncertainty inherent in interpretations of the mountain. 'Mont Blanc' poses questions that are left unanswered and may be unanswerable, seeming to offer a revelatory non-revelation: what is revealed is that nothing certain *can* be revealed.

We are informed the 'great Mountain' has a 'voice' 'to repeal | Large codes of fraud and woe'. Although the voice of Mont Blanc is not 'understood by all', Shelley tells us that 'the wise, and great, and good | Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel' it (p.179). Whether intentioned of not, by incorporating an echo of the slightly pejorative phrase *the great and the good,* the tone in these lines sounds a note of cynicism. O'Neill has not read cynicism here. He has seen this as Shelley valorising the heightened power of the poetic mind that is 'wise', 'great' and 'good' to understand nature.[102] Similarly Judith Chernaik suggests Shelley is arguing that 'so long as the poet is attuned to [nature's] influences [...] the imagination is essentially active, essentially creative [... and] raises the poet above other men to the level of a god.'[103] Chernaik does not appear critical of what – were it to be true – is a grotesquely egotistical and supercilious moment for the poet. Duffy views these lines as part of the 'dismantling of the superstitious and reactionary "records" of natural grandeur produced by the "vulgar" imagination'.[104] He regards Shelley as asserting the power of 'the "wise" or "cultivated" imagination – the imagination acting in concert with an "effort of the understanding" – [that] is capable of forming alternative, politically progressive "records" [of the alpine sublime]' that 'promotes "democracy" and "philanthropy"'. [105] In this respect the economic elitism of a 'propertied aristocracy' is exchanged for the 'intellectual elitism' of a 'philosophical aristocracy – the few who possess a cultivated imagination'.[106] Duffy is probably correct to read this 'dissatisfaction' with the 'conventional discourse on the Sublime' given Shelley's quasi-belief in the heightened perceptive capabilities of certain

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[101] Michael Erkelenz, 'Shelley's Draft of "Mont Blanc" and the Conflict of Faith', *Review of English Studies,* 40, 157 (1989), 100-04.
[102] See O'Neill, *PBSP*, p.517.
[103] Chernaik, 1968, p.589.
[104] Duffy, 2005, p.86.
[105] Duffy, 2005, p.86 and p.90.
[106] Duffy, 2005, p.89 and p.118.

poets and his general attitude to denigrate Savoyard locals and fellow tourists.[107] However, given the indeterminacy expressed throughout the poem, it does not seem that Shelley is offering an assured claim to an alternative. Significantly, an individual can 'interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel' and as such the passage – through its iteration of 'or' emphasises that understanding is not fixed and a variety of choices can be made. Leighton reads this indeterminacy as the unequivocal objective. This 'voice without speech' simultaneously constitutes 'faith' and 'doubt'.[108] What is clear is that if Shelley suggests the mountain has a voice at all, the passage ends abruptly without that voice being heard.

In rejecting a Christian belief system, Shelley eschewed a social and psychological structure that could answer or at least ameliorate anxieties about unsettling existential questions. While theoretically freed, his writings suggest that it was a psychological freedom with which he found it difficult to be at ease. In *Six Weeks' Tour* he informs us: 'One would think that Mont Blanc, like the god of the Stoics, was a vast animal, and that the frozen blood forever circulated through his stony veins' (p.167). The idea of 'frozen blood' that nonetheless circulates is a willing embrace of the paradoxical that produces a living-death creature form of the mountain. Such fantasies about the landscape are more than figurative descriptions. They offer windows into an uneasy mind where the monstrous lurks at the fringes. In his letter to Byron on 22 July, Shelley had described Mont Blanc as being analogous to the 'palaces of nature' from Byron's manuscript of *Childe Harold Canto III*. Yet in the 23 July letter to Peacock (published with changes as 'Letter IV' in the *Six Weeks' Tour*) Shelley writes:

> Do you, who assert the supremacy of Ahriman, imagine him throned among these desolating snows, among these palaces of death & frost, sculptured in this their terrible magnificence by the unsparing hand of necessity, & that he casts around him as the first essays of his final usurpation avalanches, torrents, rocks, & thunders – above all, these deadly glaciers at once the proof and symbols of his reign.[109]

The transition here to 'palaces of death and frost' is on one level merely a reassertion of clichés long-associated with the glaciers of the Montagne Maudite (cursed mountains). However, the transition is part of Shelley's confrontation with his own mortality.[110] As Duffy and Leask, among others have noted, Shelley, like Wordsworth in *Descriptive Sketches,* is probably echoing the imagery of Carbonnières and Carbonnières reading of Buffon: 'how different the immense deserts of the Alps! […] it is a livery of the eternal

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[107] Duffy, 2005, p.85.
[108] Leighton, p.68.
[109] *PBSL*, p.499.
[110] For its use in the letter to Byron see *PBSL,* p.495.

winters of the pole, a winding sheet which enwraps the expiring earth.'[111] The reference to Ahriman recalls Peacock's unfinished poem *Ahrimanes*, yet it also reflects Shelley's personal interest in Zoroastrianism; it is probably Shelley's influence that led Byron to include Ahriman in *Manfred.*[112] Leask has argued that critics have tended to 'misread' this passage as meaning that Shelley is 'endorsing' Buffon's earth-cooling theory.[113] Leighton likewise warns against assuming this tells us much about Shelley and considers this passage as 'sensitised' for Peacock and 'interesting rather for the contrasting relief into which it casts ['Mont Blanc']'.[114] I am not convinced it has been misread in the way that Leask suggests, nor 'sensitised' as Leighton puts it. Rather, Shelley appears to be revelling in the idea of threat here and instead becoming one of the very 'myth-making poets' that Leask argues he is trying to 'reclaim' the mountain from.[115] Shelley seems to use the insulation of claiming to imagine what Peacock's perception might be in order to explore the potentials of apocalypse and express his anxieties about them. Indeed, despite a general disdain for the local community, Shelley nonetheless chooses to favour their anecdotal opinion about glacial increase over that of Saussure's more measured ideas about glacial accumulation and decrease. This ironically frames Saussure, the foremost glaciologist of the age, as a climate change denier. While elsewhere Shelley informs us that if the glaciers do not have the explosive destructive qualities of volcanoes, their ability to ruin is more assured: 'These glaciers [… perform] a work of desolation in ages, which a river of lava might accomplish in an hour, but far more irretrievably' (p.158). This point-of-no-return environmental catastrophe has no basis in scientific fact. The issue of ice increase was a topical one for British visitors. Lady Shelley, who visited the mountain three days after Percy Bysshe Shelley, was also informed of the augmenting ice. In contrast, she was not remotely concerned by it, but registered the concern of locals:

> This wonderful glacier imperceptibly moves immense granite blocks, year by year, towards the valley with irresistible force, little heeding the wooden crosses that the superstitious peasants and priests, with much pomp, place there to arrest its progress![116]

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[111] Carbonnières, Williams, p.335. There is no definitive evidence that Shelley read Carbonnières. However, Leask, 1998, and Duffy, 2005, pp.225-226n73, both suggest Percy is in part responding to *Observations*.

[112] See A. B. Young, ed., '"Ahrimanes." by Thomas Love Peacock', *The Modern Language Review,* 4, 2 (Jan. 1909), pp.217-230.

[113] Leask, 1998, p.195.

[114] Leighton, pp.60 and 61.

[115] Leask, 1998, p.196.

[116] Lady Shelley, p.244.

The glaciers were accumulating in this period– indeed, the peak level of the Mer de Glace at Montenvers in the last millennium was probably 1821 – but the increase was hardly rapid.[117] Despite Leask's downplaying of Shelley's 'spectacularism', Shelley seems obsessed by the nightmarish glaciers that 'flow *perpetually*', '*perpetually* move onward', perform '*perpetual* congelation' and, at their mouths, he discovers 'enormous pinnacles of ice which *perpetually* fall, are *perpetually* reproduced' (pp.158-160, my emphasis). So while Leask and Leighton are correct in recognising Shelley's momentary distancing from Buffon's 'gloomy' earth-cooling theory in the letter to Peacock, Shelley nonetheless adopts the role of prophet of human destruction when he warns of the 'deadly glaciers' that 'the consequence is obvious' (pp.161-62).

> Shelley imagines the potential 'consequence' of earth cooling in 'Mont Blanc':
>
> The glaciers creep
> Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far fountains,
> Slow rolling on; there, many a precipice
> Frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power
> Have piled: dome, pyramid, and pinnacle,
> A city of death, distinct with many a tower
> And wall impregnable of beaming ice. (pp.180-181)

As Duffy has suggested, the glaciers-as-snakes 'almost certainly derives from Wordsworth's 1793 *Descriptive Sketches.*'[118] The paradoxically non-human human space of the 'city of death' in the passage recalls the motif of architecture found in many earlier Mont Blanc and wider alpine poems of the 1780s and 1790s, and the passage reveals a heavy reliance on cliché. For Duffy, the 'dome, pyramid, and pinnacle' are intrinsic 'symbols of religious empire'.[119] Although O'Neill sees the 'city of death' as possibly relating to Milton's 'A Universe of death' in *Paradise Lost,* and considers it as Shelley suggesting this might be a sphere from which evil can emanate.[120] Nonetheless, as apocalyptic an image as the 'city of death' is, Shelley struggles to find the language to evoke the terror of a long term threat from glaciers that advance at the rate of three hundred feet a year. As such we move to a more immediate imagined threat:

> Yet not a city, but a flood of ruin
> Is there, that from the boundaries of the sky
> Rolls its perpetual stream; vast pines are strewing

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[117] S. U. Nussbaumer, H. J. Zumbühl and D. Steiner, 'Fluctuations of the "Mer de Glace" (Mont Blanc area, France) AD 1500–2050: an interdisciplinary approach using new historical data and neural network simulations' in *Zeitschrift für Gletscherkunde und Glazialgeologie Herausgegeben,* 40, Wagner University, Innsbruck, 2005/2006, p.6.

[118] Duffy, 2005, p.120.

[119] Duffy, 2005, p.120.

[120] *PBSP*, p.518-519. See also Milton, *Paradise Lost*, l.622.

> Its destined path, or in the mangled soil
>
> Branchless and shattered stand; the rocks, drawn down
>
> From yon remotest waste, have overthrown
>
> The limits of the dead and living world,
>
> Never to be reclaimed. The dwelling-place
>
> Of insects, beasts, and birds, becomes its spoil;
>
> Their food and their retreat for ever gone,
>
> So much of life and joy is lost. (p.181)

The ice 'Rolls its perpetual stream' – note again his obsession with the word 'perpetual' – blending the 'deadly glaciers' with the flood so that we find,

> So much of life and joy is lost. The race
>
> Of Man, flies far in dread; his work and dwelling
>
> Vanish, like smoke before the tempest's stream,
>
> And their place is not known. (p.181)

The 'smoke' is probably inspired by the spindrift from the avalanche that Shelley witnessed on the road to Chamonix.[121] Nonetheless, there is something magical in this destructive puff-of-smoke vanishing act coupled with the mournful uncertainty that 'their place is not known'. In these processes rocks from the mountain above are delivered to the valley below. This breach is one that has 'overthrown | The limits of the dead and living world' (p.181). What this section of the poem fundamentally expresses is the death-fear of the speaker on or near the Pont Pélissier, positioned between mountain and ocean, death and life, destruction and contribution, with thoughts rolling through the mind without settling.

Wood has read the 'flood of ruin' in terms of the meteorological consequences exerted by the eruption of Tambora. However, the case for global climatic events shaping 'Mont Blanc' and the wider writings of the Diodati circle has been overstated by Wood and others. While fields remained inundated from recent flooding as Shelley approached the mountain, it is important to move away from the notion of the 1816 summer in the Alps being, as Wood refers to it, 'the infamous lost summer of 1816'.[122] An average global temperature decrease may have meant the Alps were a degree or so cooler, but the localised effects would have negligible. Indeed, the writings of visitors to the Alps in the summer of 1816 reveal a relatively normal summer of mixed weather. Mont Blanc was almost constantly in view from Lake Geneva at a distance of sixty miles. Conditions were good and the summit of Mont Blanc was visible during Percy and Mary Shelley's excursion to the mountain on the 22, 23, 25 and 27 July. Percy Shelley even goes as far as to note in Letter IV on the 22 July: 'the day was cloudless and excessively hot, the Alps were perpetually in

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[121] For the use of 'smoke' to mean spindrift, *PBSL*, p.495, *MWSJ,* p.115 and *MWS1818,* p.71.
[122] Wood, p.45.

sight'.[123] As a result, in 'Mont Blanc' – as in *Childe Harold, Manfred,* the *Six Weeks' Tour*, *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* – we are presented with Mont Blanc as a glittering peak that sparkles in the sunlight, not a mountain that could not be seen because there was no summer.

Today the Pont Pélissier is a steel-reinforced concrete structure on secure stanchions, safely elevated above the potential floods of the Arve and housing a two-lane road. The Arve is now managed by two hydroelectric dams upstream.

Figure 51 The Pont Pélissier with warning signs for flood release from hydroelectric dams

Figure 52 View south below the Pont Pélissier toward the Mont Blanc massif from mid-stream in the Arve,

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the bridge was in more or less the same location, only closer to the water. Paintings in the Musée Alpin Chamonix suggest a wooden structure positioned precariously close to water level, with fewer trees to inhibit the view of the nearby cliffs or the massif.

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[123] *Six Weeks' Tour,* p.142.

Figure 53 Span-beam housings at the top of the buttress for the low-level Pont Pélissier seen in eighteenth-century paintings and early nineteenth-century paintings.

During field research investigating the underside of the bridge, I located span-beam housings chiselled into a small buttress on the west bank. The housings are only 2m above the lowest level of the river and are consistent with the level of the bridge shown in several eighteenth and early nineteenth-century paintings exhibited at the Musée Alpin Chamonix.

Figure 54 Detail from *Le Pont Pélissier* by Jean Dubois (pre-1849, likely c1820). The design of the bridge is consistent with the span beam housings above. The path on Pélissier rise to the right of the bridge and can still be located although today it is surrounded by trees.

It is no surprise that the bridge was routinely at the mercy of the Arve when in spate during the Romantic-era and was often damaged or washed away.[124] This closeness of the bridge to the river gives a sense of the vulnerability to the assumed narrative position of the speaker in 'Mont Blanc'. Even today, with periodic river-dredging and sophisticated management systems, the speed, noise, ferocity and colour of the Arve after a period of sustained heavy

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[124] http://www.histoire-passy-montblanc.fr/nos-dossiers/geographie-humaine/infrastructures/ponts-et-digues/le-pont-pelissier-aux-houches/ (accessed, August 2019) See also information boards about the bridges at the Musée Alpin Chamonix.

rain and snow-melt is very impressive, if not also somewhat frightening – especially if standing on a bridge above it. Indeed, even with most of the waters dammed upstream, the river beneath the bridge retains more force than might be anticipated: a barefoot traverse of its awkward boulder bed takes a couple of precarious minutes. To stand in the river at the buttress places an individual in a dangerous situation should the team at the hydroelectric plant choose that moment to release one of their daily water-surges. Although he was above the water, as the span beam housings and Dubois's painting suggest, Shelley was not much above the water. It had been raining heavily and summer melt was high. The Arve would have been particularly fast flowing, extremely noisy if not a little deafening, and its turbulent violence while in spate may well have felt like a 'flood of ruin' that mirrored the turbulent thought-patterns of his anxious and troubled mind. What I am suggesting is that at the bridge Shelley was especially close to a somewhat terrifying river. The Pont Pélissier was not a location to register the precariousness of existence in a detached way, but to confront it through the close proximity of the turbulent water and imagine the mountain that actually was the source of that mortal threat and could function as a metaphor for mortal threat more broadly.

By means of the 'flood of ruin' we have moved from the 'city of death' of the upper glaciers to the valley below. Here the Arve becomes an echo of the 'valley of the shadow of death' found in Psalms 23.4. The sense of a 'flood of ruin' recalls Thomas Whalley's ideas of the 'universal deluge' (p.55) in his *Mont Blanc* and Wordsworth's 'deluge train' (p.48) in *Descriptive Sketches*. Yet there is a development in all this of the deluge presented to us in Genesis: 'All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died' (Genesis 7.22). Shelley's 'beasts and birds and insects' seems with its syntax and subject to recall the 'fowl and beast and every creeping thing that creepeth' (Genesis 7.21) destroyed by the flood. Nonetheless, having considered the apocalypse of the 'flood', like Noah's Ark alighting on Ararat, Shelley finds a degree of solace by the end of part IV in the eternal process of a river that always meets the sea. The 'flood' becomes a 'majestic River | The breath and blood of distant lands' (p.181) that flows 'for ever' and, while yet vibrant, has lost its destructive potency as it '[r]olls its loud waters to the Ocean'. This is consistent with the flow of the Arve, which broadens and slows as it moves towards – and eventually joins – the Rhone south of Lake Geneva. For Hogle this transition is part of the poem's constant 'shifting' of landscape meaning that 'will not catch the sceptical speaker in a commitment to any final explanation, despite his acknowledgement that he is drawn towards explanatory systems'. Hogle sees a sexual fluidity in these landscape transitions. The 'masculine ejaculations' emanating from the phallic Power of Mont Blanc to the 'vaginated' ravine of Arve in part II have shifted and Mont Blanc has symbolically transmogrified, becoming a

virtual 'enormous, flowing, milk-covered mammary gland'.[125] In this way Mont Blanc becomes a 'mother god of the Earth' – as the Tibetan's refer to Everest. At the very least we do discover, as Economides suggests, that 'what appears to be destructive is equally creative' and, as Wilson writes, the glaciers are 'no longer agents of death'.[126] Duffy regards this process as 'destructive in the short-term' but having 'long-term benefits' and argues that for Shelley this was analogous to the short-term failure of the French Revolution and/or politically progressive 'codes' – going as far as to suggest the 'distant lands' might be read as that great democratic hope, America.[127] Leask has read the transition in relation to Shelley's interest in Huttonian earth science. While all these readings are plausible, the type of transition Shelley describes in 'Mont Blanc' was a contemporary cliché that in essence asserted that the waters of the mountain were ultimately benevolent for the earth. Humphry Davy deployed it in his twenty-four line poem, 'Mont Blanc' (composed Jan 4 1814). Davy's poem, which adopts a narrative position beside the Rhone at Lyon, frames Mont Blanc as a force for human good in feeding the waters of the Rhone and the surrounding countryside.[128] Davy, like Shelley, ponders the flow of human thought in relation to the flow of the waters and values the naturalness ('native purity') of those '[a]mongst the generations of mankind | To whom the stream of thought descends from heaven, | With all the force of reason and power | Of sacred genius.'[129] Yet if Davy expressed certainty about the source of the thoughts that flow to him like a river, the same flow leads Shelley to the open-ended question and apparent inconclusiveness of part V.

From the river's vapours that diffuse into the 'circling air' at the end of part IV, the speaker turns his attention once more to Mont Blanc in part V. If part III sets the hypothesis that the mountain might 'have a voice' and part VI tests that hypothesis, then part V promises a conclusion. Having raised the notion of a voice, Shelley seems intent on presenting its absence; upon the mountain's upper reaches the winds work 'silently', while lightning is 'voiceless' (p.182). As Duffy has suggested, here Shelley is borrowing from Ramond de Carbonnières: 'In the upper regions […] [e]very thing has the semblance of motion and noise; but all around is stillness and peace'.[130] Such contradictory ideas as a mountain with a 'voice', met with the 'silence' of its upper reaches and the peculiar voicelessness of the 'lightning' creates a strange dissonance. A letter by Saussure written to

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[125] Hogle, 1991, p.125.

[126] Economides, p.107 and Wilson, p.124.

[127] Duffy, 2005, p.121

[128] In a rare instance of permissioned travel, Napoleon granted Davy the right to journey through France and across the continent in October 1813 to continue various researches.

[129] Humphry Davy 'Mont Blanc' in Duffy and Peter Howell, ed. by *Cultures of the Sublime: Selected Readings, 1750-1830* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp.36-37.

[130] Carbonnières in Williams, 1798, p.333.

his wife on 18 July 1788 while camped on the Col de Geant at just over 4000m recognises that inclination to discover nature's voice in the sublimity of the mountain:

> The soul is uplifted, the powers of intelligence seem to widen and in the midst of this majestic silence, one seems to hear the voice of Nature and become the confidant of her most secret workings.[131]

Although for Saussure the encounter has an emotional force, it only 'seems' that he is made confidant of nature's 'secret workings'; he maintains the sobriety of man's separation. Shelley, despite searching the landscape for transcendence, essentially asserts the same separation between man and nature. Indeed, as the speaker assures us, the 'power is there'; it is not *here*. If a voice might be heard and 'felt' by the 'wise or great or good' it seems its language cannot be understood.

By part V the 'secret strength of things | Which governs thought' remains a mystery that allows space for interpretation and we are given that most perplexing and infuriating of final questions:

> And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
>
> If to the human mind's imaginings
>
> Silence and solitude were vacancy? (p.183)

The main focus of critical debate about the ending has been on the relationship between the meaning of the lines and the meaning of the poem as a whole. In both the Scrope Davies version which has no intervening punctuation separating the last three lines and in the *Six Weeks' Tour* version, this seems clearly a moment of reflection that refers to Mont Blanc – the main subject of Part V. Yet not only is the question difficult to answer, but it is left to the reader to define what it is that is being asked. Kapstein shows the uncertainties of this ending by offering three different interpretations – a method many subsequent critics have replicated.[132] Hogle eschews answering or even resolving what the question is, and instead uses it to reflect on the several approaches by which we might read it.[133] The question has been described variously as an 'anti-climax',[134] 'a suitable climax',[135] 'unemphatic but resonant',[136] and 're-affirm[ing] the central, sceptical point of Shelley's revision of the discourse on the sublime: only the 'wise' imagination can [… understand] the "truth|of nature"'.[137] Hitt suggests: '[t]he question is unanswered, unanswerable, ambiguous, and

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[131] Horace Benedict de Saussure, trans. by, in Freshfield, pp.257-8.

[132] Kapstein, p.174.

[133] Hogle, 1991, p.127.

[134] Kapstein, p.174.

[135] C. E. Pulos, *The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p.66.

[136] O'Neill, 1989, p 51.

[137] Duffy, 2005, p.119.

obscure – and perfectly consistent with the rest of a poem.'[138] Nonetheless, Hitt offers a clarification by focussing on the words 'silence and solitude'. He suggests that the two words in combination were so recurrent in numerous sublime writings that they 'had become a virtual cliché by 1816'.[139] As such he reads the final question as asking 'What would the mountain be if, instead of imagining it in terms of such cold, dead, language, we could experience it freely as a "vacancy"?'[140] I am not convinced that Shelley, in looking into the mountain from a position of deep anxiety, discovers such optimism, though he may discover reconciliation. Hitt suggests Shelley is 'compelled to seek that which lies beyond the circumference of the imagination [… and] he discovers that insight is generated in the gap between the mountain and the "human mind's imaginings".'[141] Likewise, Economides suggests that although the speaker discovers in 'Mont Blanc' that there is an 'irreconcilable gap' between mind and 'world and text', the 'fortuitousness of this gap' is one that 'permits an excess of meaning potential in the world'. Economides reads the positive outcome of this 'excess' as reasserted by the 'compellingly open' last line.[142] I am inclined to agree that Shelley is trying to locate meaning in the 'gap' between mind and material space. However, Shelley's expression of existential discontent is still to be registered and although many critics have found a philosophical methodology in the poem, 'Mont Blanc' always seems to draw us back to ambiguities and vacancies. Vacancy, secrecy, the unknowable, unaswerable and inaccessible are recurrent themes that populate the poem. These seem to be simultaneously products of inserting gaps into the response to the mountain and death-voids that express Shelley's death-anxiety at confronting the landscape of the Alps. The assertion that a voice or omnipotent secret power in nature *may* exist is the key here, rather than trying to unravel whether there *is* a voice or what it might tell us, because the voice reaffirms Shelley's ongoing desire to locate emotional stability. In essence, the potential of a secret power rooted in eternal process becomes a substitute for the ameliorating potential of religious faith. Faced with the destructive qualities of the mountain – metaphors for the destructive or turbulent qualities of his fears, anxieties and negative thoughts – Shelley is reassured that, whether observed by man or not, the 'snows descend' and the 'winds contend' just as the river flows 'for ever' to the ocean. In essence, life goes on. The question that concludes the poem is rhetorical, not just addressing the mountain in an abstract sense, but reflexive in addressing the self. Shelley asks, whether it really matters if such questions can ever be answered? The inconclusiveness of 'Mont Blanc' is therefore the point. From a position of existential crisis in the face of the death-anxiety brought about by his

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[138] Hitt, 2005, p.154.
[139] Hitt, 2005, p.155.
[140] Hitt, 2005, p.157.
[141] Hitt, p.143.
[142] Economides, p.108.

confrontation with the landscape of the Alps that summer, he has, like the party of three climbers I witnessed on the Mer de Glace that were facing the collapse of the Aiguille de Charmoz, reached a point of resignation and is – momentarily at least – content to assert that it is enough, simply, to be.

Chapter Five
A Gothic Mont Blanc in *The Romance of the Forest,* 'The Hermit of Mont Blanc', *Manfred, Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*

The elevation and sparsely populated nature of many mountain ranges has historically contributed to their forbidding character. For many cultures, mountains have constituted places of potential transgression and deviance. The sinister powers of avalanches, toppling rocks, and advancing glaciers – those grotesque rivers of ice that appeared to have supernaturally 'congealed' mid-flow and harboured crevasses capable of swallowing unsuspecting travellers into their deadly abysses only for their bodies to occasionally reappear years later – have hinted at supernatural agency. The aim of this chapter is to deploy a cultural historicist mode of geocriticism in order to explore the idea that Mont Blanc was a place of 'potential transgression and deviance' – both of which are essential elements in gothic writings.

Despite the monstrous and supernatural associations of the Alps, the significance of Mont Blanc in gothic narratives has received limited critical attention. In analyses of Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* little has been made of an excursion in the novel to the Mer de Glace. This is surprising given that Mary Shelley would repeat the exercise in the most well-known of all the gothic novels (and indeed any piece of writing to feature Mont Blanc). Jacqueline Labbe is one of very few critics to give serious attention to Mary Robinson's 'The Hermit of Mont Blanc'. However, Labbe's concern is with the actions of the characters and her analysis of the poem does not engage with the symbolic power of the mountain. Erin Shelley emphasises the means by which Byron expresses a rejection of a Wordsworthian reading of sublime nature in *Manfred*.[1] However, like many works in this area, including those of William D. Melaney and later Eric Wilson's somewhat fantastical reading, the presence of Mont Blanc as a spirit in *Manfred* is not considered.[2] Mont Blanc fundamentally changes the nature of *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*. However, an extensive study that deals solely with the landscapes of either *Frankenstein* or *The Last Man*

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[1] Erin Sheley, '"Demolished World": *Manfred* and the Sublime (Un)burial', *Byron Jounral,* 40, 1 (2012), 51-58.
[2] William D. Melaney, 'Difference: Ethical Concern in Byron's "Manfred"', *New Literary History,* 36, 3 (2005), 461-475.

and dedicates significant attention to the role of mountains in those novels is yet to be written.[3] *Frankenstein* has, however, been widely mapped. In particular, mapping by both academics and enthusiasts has focussed on the wide-ranging character movements in the novel. These exercises have included an infographic map of the 1831 edition in *The Guardian,* with Frost, Gallardo and Fuentes drawing the conclusion that 'even by gothic [novel] standards, [Shelley's] characters travel a long way'.[4] The opportunity to undertake a more detailed geocritical mapping-based study of *Frankenstein* remains, although it is beyond the scope of this thesis. A more substantive and detailed mapping of *The Last Man* has been undertaken by David Sandner, who has produced a series of maps for the novel.[5] His corresponding paper, 'Rambles in the Fantastic: Digital Mapping Mary Shelley's Last Man,' is to be published by Routledge.[6] A wide range of critics, including Hogle, Wright and Levine, have offered interpretations of *Frankenstein* identifying the sequences in the Alps as important. However, they rarely focus on the significance of the mountains themselves. The allure of offering psychoanalytic or feminist theoretical approaches to *Frankenstein* may explain the limited number of geo-critical readings of the text. Vijay Mishra's chapter '*Frankenstein*: Sublime as Desecration/Decreation' manages in its 27 pages to consider the role of the sublime in the novel without a single allusion to Mont Blanc or the Alps and only one very limited mention of the mountain sublime in general.[7] Likewise, Fred Randel sets out to contextualise Shelley's presentation of mountains in *Frankenstein* in relation to inherited classical, Miltonic, Coleridgean and Wordsworthian representations of mountains and compare it to the presentation of mountains in Byron's 1816 poetry, but moves towards a psychoanalytic reading of the text in which the role of mountains in *Frankenstein* falters before being entirely absent from the conclusion.[8] Critics have long regarded Frankenstein's Creature as a response to the inherent potential of scientific discovery, but have tended to centre on the novel's didacticism – specifically as a parable about the dangers of man's overreach. Critical material considering Mary Shelley's engagement with scientific developments suggests a lopsided focus on her interests in electricity and evolution rather than the processes of landscape.[9] Recent studies to have

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[3] It is beyond the scope of this study to undertake such an exercise here.

[4] https://www.theguardian.com/books/gallery/2018/jan/13/mary-shelleys-frankenstein-in-charts [Accessed April 2019]

[5] I have not read or heard this paper, so its finding cannot be responded to here. https://frankensteinmeme.com/maps-and-links/mapping-mary-shelleys-last-man/ [Accessed April 2019]

[6] It will appear in *Spaces of the Fantastic*, ed. by David Punter and C. Bruna Mancini (Routledge).

[7] Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime* (New York: Albany State University, 1994), pp.187-223.

[8] Fred Randel, 'Frankenstein, Feminism, and the Intertextuality of Mountains', *Studies in Romanticism,* 23, 4 (1985), 515 -532.

[9] Examples of essays discussing the relationship between science and *Frankenstein* that have ignored the influence of the geologists of the Alps include: Kathryn Harkup's *Making the Monster: The Science behind Frankenstein* (2018), Stuart Curran's 'The Scientific Grounding of *Frankenstein*'

redressed the balance and looked at the relationship to landscape processes, although usually within the context of the wider Diodati circle, have come from Wilson (2012), Hansen (2013), Duffy (2013), Wood (2015) and Higgins (2017).[10] While in recent years *The Last Man* has received increased attention from critics, its critical history is not as extensive as *Frankenstein* and engagement with its landscapes has been limited. Melissa Bailes's 'The Psychologization of Geological Catastrophe in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man'* (2015) and Patricia Cove's 'The Earth's Deep Entrails': Gothic Landscapes and Grotesque Bodies in Mary Shelley's The Last Man' (2013) are exceptions. Bailes' work is useful in revealing the extent to which Shelley negotiated geological theories and biblical ideas of apocalypse. However, both studies give only limited attention to the role of Mont Blanc in the novel.

The rounded dome of Mont Blanc's summit appears billowed with snow and is, as Hogle has suggested, breast-like.[11] Yet the summit belies the wider physical characteristics of a massif that lends itself to gothic imagery; sharp fractured granite needles suggest gothic architecture, while glaciated valleys, snow-filled couloirs and the irregular forms of glaciers and seracs suggest ghostly presences. In 1788, Thomas Whalley acknowledged the architectural association: 'From whence unnumber'd spires arise | With Gothic grandeur to the skies' (p.27). Nature's cathedrals and castles raised skywards were accompanied almost daily by those great phenomena of terror – the storm's lightning flash, the roll of thunder, the crash of the avalanche. Such violent animation might be contrasted by the ethereal silvery whiteness of the 'eternal' high snows that offered a supernatural seclusion and otherness: an uninhabited, silent and elevated world that promised psychological dislocation suited to the exile of marginal or unsettling literary characters – the chamois hunter, the disturbed rejected lover or, as we see in Mary Robinson's 'The Hermit of Mont Blanc', the Hermit, the Maid and the crazed rapist/murderer, to be followed in 1818 by another murderer in the form of Victor Frankenstein's Creature running across the Mer de Glace.

High mountains such as Mont Blanc have tended to connote three forms of innate terror: that posed by the absence of life, that posed by the potential loss of life among them, and that posed by the idea of unnatural or supernatural agency. In both Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) the first of these terrors is emphasised through action that takes place on Mont Blanc by characters who consider the mountain as symbolic of a world devoid of human presence. This first order terror can be registered in other British writings, such as those by Thomas Whalley or Percy Bysshe Shelley, that have considered the mountain's apocalyptic potentials. In 'The Hermit

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(2001), Irving Buchan's '*Frankenstein* and the Alchemy of Creation and Evolution' (1977), Jay Clayton's 'Concealed Circuits' (1996) and Laura Crouch's 'Davy's *A Discourse* […] A Possible Scientific Source of *Frankenstein*' (1978).

[10] See Chapter Four.

[11] See Hogle, 1991, p.125.

of Mont Blanc' (1800)*, Manfred* (1817) and *Frankenstein* (1818) first and second order terrors were melded with or complemented by types of third order terror. The peculiarity and psychological power of the third order terror in mountains demands a degree of attention here so that its deployment in the gothic writings to feature Mont Blanc can be better understood.

In folkloric traditions, mountains have been viewed as spaces beyond the fringe that might harbour strange inhabitants. Phenomena and physiological responses associated with mountains such as cloud inversions, white-outs, snow-blindness, altitude-induced hallucination, and Brocken Spectres have undoubtedly added to such notions:

Figure 55 Brocken Spectre on the Snowdon Horseshoe (2015).

Figure 56 The unsettling vastness as a white-out lifts from the ice cap at 2000m on Hvannadalshnúkur, Iceland (2007).

Today, as mountains are increasingly tamed by multiple technologies and infrastructures, it is easy to forget the powerful mysteries they have at times exerted. As recently as July 1986,

Rheinhold Messner – a German mountaineer well-known as the first person to have scaled all of the world's 8000m peaks and the first to have ascended Everest without bottled oxygen – claimed to have witnessed a yeti while crossing a river in the Himalayas. Indeed, according to Messner, up until his confrontation with the purported yeti he had always believed accounts of the creature were complete nonsense. Two years after his confrontation, Messner set out on a serious expedition to find a yeti. In doing so, he followed other apparent no-nonsense sober mountaineers such as Sir Edmund Hillary, who had similarly searched for a yeti in 1960, and Hamish MacInnes and Joe Brown who had done so in 1977. Messner eventually concluded that, weary from crossing a river, what he had seen in 1986 must have been a bear. Messner's experience, however fanciful, reflects the power of mountains to unsettle the reassuring equilibrium exerted by societal and, particularly urban, settings. Preordained with a yeti myth derived from a long oral tradition of tales about such a creature, a surprise encounter – perhaps with a bear or a primate – caused Messner to give form to a psychological disturbance. Even when the idea of mythical beasts and supernatural ghosts is anathema, writings about mountains have long-revealed a proclivity to exhibit a lexicon that is supernatural in tone in order to communicate the other-worldliness of the terrain.

If eighteenth and early-nineteenth century gothic writings can be viewed in part as a reaction to a world increasingly explained by rational science, then the Alps seemed to offer a familiar and yet not wholly known place where both the vestiges of dissolving mysteries about the physical world and the possibilities offered by scientific discoveries could be brought to life. To an extent some of this was nostalgia for an earlier time when a savant like Albert Scheuchzer could imagine dragons to be lurking among the mountains. After visiting a museum in Lucerne that exhibited a 'dragon stone' in 1706, Scheuzcher became interested in the possibility of dragons inhabiting the Swiss Alps. Beer describes Scheuchzer's interview with Hans Tinner of Zurich who, according to Scheuchzer, was 'an honest and trustworthy man' that claimed to have seen 'a dragon with the body of snake and a head like a cat'.[12]

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[12] Gavin De Beer, *Early Travellers in the Alps* (New York: October House, 1967), p.89.

Figure 57 Plate from Scheuchzer's *Itinera per Helvetiae* (1702–11).[13]

Scheuchzer recognised the close association between superstition and the way in which mountain landscapes were being defined:

> At last I must mention, that furious rivers from the mountains are called by the locals of the Alps also dragons. If a river flows down from the mountains, and carries large stones, trees and other things with it, so they say: The dragon became unchained. […]. Many false stories about the dragons have their source in this fact.[14]

The legacy of superstitions being imprinted into the toponymy of the Alps in this way can still be traced – such as the names given on the Mont Blanc massif to the vertiginous Dent du Geant (Giant's Tooth), Mont Maudite (cursed mountain) or Aiguilles du Diable (Devil's Needles).

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[13] Johann Jakob Scheuchzer, *Ouresiphoítes helveticus, sive Itinera per Helvetiæ alpinas regions* (Leyden, 1723), p. 395.
[14] Scheuchzer, 1723. I have relied on David Bressan for the translation:
<http://historyofgeology.fieldofscience.com/2010/10/dragons-and-geology.html>

Figure 58 Bivouac on the Col Du Geant with the sinister Dent du Geant beyond (2008).[15]

Despite Scheuchzer's inherent scepticism, he gave credence to the dragon phenomenon. Not all were as keen to believe such tales. In *An Account* (1744) Windham was dismissive of local Mont Blanc myths: '[T]hey told us many strange stories of Witches, &c. who came to play their Pranks upon the *Glaciers*, and dance to the sound of instruments'.[16] Nonetheless, Scheuchzer's dragon studies give us a window into one specific area of Alpine folklore and superstition that, as Andrew Beattie has noted is awash with '[s]tories and legends concerning witches, devils, giants, and wild beasts'.[17]

While many eighteenth and nineteenth-century gothic writers appear to have been superstitious, at times almost willing their creations into existence, what mattered was less the veracity of sightings or the idea that folklore and myths might have a basis in reality, and more the potential of mountain associations to be harnessed in order to explore

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[15] Twice when driven from the upper face of the Dent de Geant by storms, my climbing partner and I have noted 'we've angered the giant'. Superstitious associations can become part of the psychological sphere – whether consciously or subconsciously – that give mountains a degree of nefarious agency.
[16] Windham, p.10.
[17] Andrew Beattie, *The Alps: A Cultural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.109.

psychological disturbance.[18] Ann Radcliffe, whose gothic novels are littered with supernatural sightings and phenomena that by the end of their narratives have been given rational explanations, was an important influence on the genre. The success of Radcliffe's writings revealed that whether the feared entity was real – as in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) and John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) – or whether supernatural entities proved to be figments of imagination as in most of Radcliffe's tales, what mattered was the exploration of fear and psychological disturbance through the experiences of central characters.[19] Mountain landscapes were advantageous to this end because their unfamiliar and sometimes other-worldly nature were suited to writers fostering a sense of the uncanny.

Philippa Perry has argued that the popularity of spiritualism in the nineteenth century, with advocates that included Charles Dickens, Abraham Lincoln and Marie and Pierre Curie, was as much a result of the possibilities that scientific and technological advances seemed to offer as much as it was of humans seeking a reassurance that death is not absolute.[20] Scientific discoveries about landscape processes in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries similarly often facilitated ideas about supernatural agency and proved a rich ore that could be mined by writers for potential terrors or insights into hidden worlds. Indeed, writers could imagine landscape processes in forms such as Shelley's 'earthquake Daemon' (p.179) or Wordsworth's 'two enormous serpents' (p.47) despite all the pressure readings and spot-heights taken by savants such as Saussure, Deluc and Shuckborough. And while fewer writers were inclined to follow Scheutzer and give serious consideration to superstitions in their published work, they may like Mary and Percy Shelley, have allowed them to rise during late night chats beside the fire or, at the very least, they may have imagined that the environment possessed supernatural agency. Today alpine myths offer quaint and amusing opportunities for tourism, such as the annual week-long festival commemorating witches in Belalp in the Valais every year. Yet such traditions should be seen as vestiges of the sinister entities that were once melded with the real destructive forces of landscapes.

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[18] Mary Shelley genuinely believed in ghosts (see below).
[19] Radcliffe included a conventional ghost only in her final novel, *Gaston de Blondeville* (1826).
[20] See Philippa Perry in Helen Nixon, *Victorian Sensations*, Ep 1/3 (London: BBC, 2019)

Ann Radcliffe

Ann Radcliffe deployed Mont Blanc as a setting in *The Romance of the Forest* (1791). She had not visited the Alps before writing the novel and was undoubtedly heavily reliant upon travelogue accounts for her descriptions of the range. Indeed, as Chloe Chard has suggested, the character of Arnaud La Luc in the novel was probably based on the ever-present savant Jean Andre de Luc whose descriptions of the mountain were retold in Marc Theodore Bourrit's popular travelogue account of 1773 and were regularly re-printed in periodicals.[22] The civilised sphere of Lake Geneva is used in order to juxtapose the wildness and other-worldly nature of Mont Blanc. Here Radcliffe writes that, 'looking on the lake, [Adeline] perceived at some distance a pleasure boat […] she concluded that the boat contained a party of foreigners come to view the wonderful scenery of the country'.[23] Radcliffe's subsequent presentation of Mont Blanc is littered with the clichés that by 1791 frequently appeared in Alpine sublime writings and especially those of Mont Blanc: 'the deep silence of solitude reigned'; 'the astonishing objects around [Adeline] surpassed all expression'; and 'the profound stillness of solitude inspired awe, and heightened the sublimity of the scenery'.[24] However, Radcliffe appears nonetheless to have recognised Mont Blanc not only as a place beyond the fringe of the civilised sphere to experience the sublime, but one that might possess supernatural potential apt for connoting the type of psychological unease central to gothic narratives.

As part of her PhD, Kimberly B. Majeske mapped Adeline's journey in *The Romance of the Forest*.[25] Majeske discusses how Radcliffe uses three categories of place, '1) the real place, 2) the fictional place, and 3) the vaguely identified place', and how 'what's

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[21] Photo: Harold Cunningham, Getty Images, 2012

[22] Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest,* ed. by Chloe Chard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.386n.

[23] Radcliffe, 1791, p.262.

[24] Radcliffe, 1791, pp.264-265.

[25] Kimberly B. Majeske http://adelinesjourney.weebly.com/index.html [Accessed, April 2019]

interesting about Radcliffe's use of place names in [these] three different ways […] is that she is both extremely detailed in her geographical accounts in some places, and extremely vague in others.' Majeske's analysis of Savoy in the novel, however, is limited to cities and towns. For Majeske, these 'real' locations are grouped with a set of places that contrast a set of imaginary locations of 'romance':

> Radcliffe's cities […] reinforce […] traditional ideas of family (Savoy, Paris), marriage (St. Maur), duty (Paris), kinship (Savoy), and tranquility (Nice, Montpellier). Had […readers] tried to find those cities that harbored extreme emotion (Vaceau), sinister events or gothic buildings (Auboine, Fontainville Forest, Marquis' chateau), they would have been unsuccessful. By this simple dichotomization, Radcliffe departs from the romantic notions generally ascribed to her, and subtly sends a didactic message: romance is nothing but fiction, and a life of happiness and stability is not found there.[26]

The role of Mont Blanc in *The Romance of the Forest* fits with Majeske's dichotomy between 'real places' and imaginary ones. The excursion to 'the real place' of Mont Blanc is primarily framed through the lens of the religious sublime. The novel's heroine, Adeline, informs us that, '"The view of these objects […] lifts the soul to their Great Author, and we contemplate with a feeling almost too vast for humanity – the sublimity of his nature in the grandeur of his works."'[27] Nonetheless, geological perspectives were important and Radcliffe, as Thomas Whalley had done in 1788, transformed them into sublime visions of apocalypse that melded the biblical deluge narrative with neptunist theories. This is seen as Adeline appraises the Mer de Glace: '"It seems," said Adeline, "as if we were walking over the ruins of the world, and were the only persons who had survived the wreck. I can scarcely persuade myself that we are not left alone on the globe."'[28] Adeline's remarks here uncannily anticipate the fate of the plague survivors who visit Mont Blanc in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) when the eminence of high mountains being above the flood is once more recalled. Yet there is an element of playing out a last man or at least last group fantasy in *The Romance of the Forest* that makes absolute the immersion in nature – that evocative sense of an isolating vastness where there is no one else on earth. It is a form of subtle terror, but one that works to consolidate the unity of the party by drawing them closer.

McMillan has recognised that the apparent authenticity of the pictorial mode of Radcliffe's novels was celebrated in contemporary reviews. The vividness of Radcliffe's scenery led many reviewers to assume she must have visited the locations she had described. Yet McMillan has argued that, '[t]he natural scenery in the novels is, however, unnatural,

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[26] Majeske, http://adelinesjourney.weebly.com/conclusions.html [Accessed, April 2019]
[27] Radcliffe, 2009, p.265.
[28] Radcliffe, 2009, p.265.

wholly a cultural construct.'[29] Radcliffe's writing raises the question as to what extent first-hand experiences mattered and whether we can truly discern *natural* responses to landscape from *unnatural* ones. Despite Radcliffe's reliance on secondary source material, whether in the form of travelogues or paintings, the popularity of her writing meant her imaginative evocations of the Alps – and scenery elsewhere – likely shaped how those landscapes were subsequently perceived, both by remote readers and by those who actually did venture to the Alps.

The juxtaposition of the alpine sublime as a means of spiritual elevation and the contemplation of death pervading high alpine landscapes was repeated by Radcliffe in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. During a transit of the Alps in the novel, she describes the feelings of her heroine, Emily St Aubert: 'with her fears were mingled such various emotions of delight, such admiration, astonishment and awe, as she had never experienced before'.[30] The convergence of these emotions leads to spiritual elevation:

> She seemed to have arisen into another world, and to have left every trifling thought, every trifling sentiment, in that below; those only of grandeur and sublimity now dilated her mind, and elevated the affections of her heart.[31]

Shortly after such 'grandeur and sublimity', she witnesses the 'vestige of man' in the form of huts and 'perilous bridges' among the upper reaches of the precipitous mountains.[32] These prompt her to imagine the nature of the chamois hunter's life that inspires a poem:

> 'The Storied Sonnet': In dreadful silence, on the brink, forlorn, | He stands, and views in the faint rays […] | Still eyes the depth, still shudders on the verge, | Fears to return, nor dares to venture o'er. | Desperate at length the tottering plank he tries, | His weak steps slide, he shrieks, he sinks – he dies![33]

Undoubtedly, the nature of the chamois hunter's work added drama to any writings that presented it. The precariousness of human existence had a macabre fascination for gothic writers. For Radcliffe, while the chamois hunter was a means of exploring the psychological vulnerability among a deadly landscape that was not too removed from the lone vulnerable maiden descending the dark castle steps or abbey corridor to an uncertain fate, the process could be used as a prompt for characters – and readers – to value their familial and social relationships. In this sense, visiting Mont Blanc or the Alps might be terrifying, but could inspire outsiders to reflect positively on their own lives when compared to the fates of those who inhabited the region. In contrast to Radcliffe, the gothic writings of Robinson, Byron

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[29] MacMillan in Gilroy, p.53.
[30] Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* ed. by Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.166.
[31] Radcliffe, 1991, p.163.
[32] Radcliffe, 1991, p.164.
[33] Radcliffe, 1991, p.165.

and Mary Shelley that responded to Mont Blanc and the Alps, did so by recognising the psychological unease such landscapes could exert, but by suggesting this unease might ultimately prove detrimental. As such, these writers questioned the fundamental tenets of the mountain sublime in a way that Radcliffe's presentation of Mont Blanc did not.

Mary Robinson

In good weather, Mont Blanc presents a world of spectral beauty that can elevate the spirit; at other times, darker outcomes are realised. In a conversation about crossing Mont Blanc's Grand Couloir, a Macedonian mountaineer told me, 'I know of this place, last year a friend of mine was hit by a boulder and killed there; Mont Blanc can be hell on earth.' Robinson never visited Mont Blanc, but in 'The Hermit of Mont Blanc' she enters into a dialogue with the type of religious sublime that had become associated with it during the eighteenth century. In doing so, she subverts a number of associated clichés. She deploys a lone figure on the mountain that is analogous to the lone chamois hunter. However, for Robinson, the juxtaposition of spiritual elevation followed by human demise creates a fascinating space in which to consider psychological trauma that in essence embraces an image such as Casper Freidrich's *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog* (1818) but in contrast to Radcliffe seems to ask, how would we feel if the Wanderer lost his footing or was pushed? As such, her approach fulfils a need for gothic terror in which the landscape is either a corrupting influence upon character actions and emotions or analogous to them. She presents Mont Blanc as the site of a rape-murder that starkly contrasts more familiar associations with the touristic sublime or the hitherto predominantly masculine activities of scientific researches and mountaineering. This re-contextualises Mont Blanc in a way that properly shows the mountain can be a 'hell on earth' in which the solitude of the pure-white mountain defined as a work of God, becomes a defiling sinister dark mountain that does not work towards the sublime but expresses a space fundamentally devoid of hope.

Robinson had previously been drawn to Mont Blanc in her writing; the mountain appears in three novels which she authored or co-authored: *The Shrine of Bertha* (1794), *Walsingham* (1797) and *The False Friend* (1799). In *The Shrine of Bertha,* a gothic epistolary novel written with Robinson's daughter Maria Elizabeth Robinson, the eponymous heroine admits:

> [I] threw myself into my carriage […] equally indifferent whether I was travelling to the gay regions of melodious Italy, or hastening to destruction, amidst the eternal snows of Mont Blanc![34]

The permanence of Mont Blanc's 'eternal snows' in the passage is conjoined in the novel with high mountain terrain and a secluded alpine convent. Mont Blanc is framed as a

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[34] Maria Elizabeth Robinson, *The Shrine of Bertha* (London, W. Lane at Minerva-Press, 1794), p.83.

marginalised space akin to the dark forest of fairy tales, where magic and sinister supernatural elements pervade the atmosphere and Bertha confesses: 'I began to think that there was witchcraft in the very climate!'[35]

This presentation of Mont Blanc as a marginalised – potentially supernatural space – in *The Shrine of Bertha* anticipates the mountain's function in 'The Hermit', which was first published in the *Monthly Magazine* for February 1800, before being included in *Lyrical Tales* (1800).[36] 'The Hermit of Mont Blanc' speaks to the sensibilities of a post-*Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) Radcliffean readership. However, the poem's heightened gothic sensationalism ultimately proves secondary to a complex consideration of faith that exemplifies the difficulties of male-female relationships within social hierarchies that often forbade them.

The poem commences with an escape into an elevated world:

High, on the solitude of Alpine Hills,

O'er-topping the grand imag'ry of Nature,

Where one eternal winter seem'd to reign;

[…] The lonely ANCHORET consum'd his days.[37]

The hermit's abode, that is perched on a summit, is not one of unremitting terror. It is rather one of extremes; the meteorological violence of the storm is contrasted by the solace and silence of its aftermath. Nonetheless, the landscape of desolation is a first order terror used to reflect inner turmoil rather than elevate spirits and Robinson informs us that the Hermit's hours '[w]ere wasted in oblivion' among a 'white waste of wonders' (pp.86-87). Although it is not altogether clear what has caused the Maid and the Hermit to be separated, it is apparent the separation was not of their choosing. The isolation of the Hermit and the Maid (whose convent is described as a 'prison' (p.88)) from society suggests they are victims of social hierarchies that could for any number of reasons prevent the natural union of males and females. This theme was often returned to in Robinson's poetry. In 'Anselmo, The Hermit of the Alps' (1794) she invokes the isolation of mountain and convent and considers the destructive social forces that separate the 'genuine fires' of two lovers. [38] As in Parsons' 'Vallombrosa', the convent and the mountain top constitute public marginalisation and exile.

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[35] Maria Robinson, 1794, p.83.

[36] The poem saw some changes between its periodical version and the one included in *Lyrical Tales.* See Shelley AJ Jones, 'Revising for Genre: Mary Robinson's Poetry from Newspaper Verse to Lyrical Tales' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of South Carolina – Columbia, 2014), pp.151-154.

[37] Mary Robinson, *Lyrical Tales* (London: T.N. Longman and O. Rees, 1800), p.86. [Further references are given in the text.]

[38] Mary Robinson, *Works of Mary Robinson,* vol 2 (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009), p.269 (l. 109). Despite describing it as a pastiche of Radcliffe, Coleridge appears to have been responding to 'Anselmo, the Hermit of the Alps' with his 'The Voice from the Side of Etna; or The Mad Monk: an ode in Ratcliff's [sic] style' (*Morning Post,* 1800). The two poems share similar themes and both present a beloved 'Rosa' who is dead.

Yet the mountain top functions as a paradoxical inclusive isolation: the lone figure or isolated couple can be seen from the valley and although too high or remote to be considered physically part of the collective society, they cannot psychologically be considered separate. This is the case for the troubled mother on the mountain top in Wordsworth's 'The Thorn' (*Lyrical Ballads,* 1798) who can be seen suffering by the villagers in the valley below. Robinson also deploys this idea in 'Edmund's Wedding' – another one of the many lyrical tales with a problematic male-female relationship. The ominous sense of an accessible isolation – for the mountain can always be climbed – creates a troubling boundary that, if crossed, threatens entry into a physically and/or psychologically dangerous sphere. The boundary is symbolic of the danger of unsanctioned male-female relationships and the vulnerability of women who, like Robinson in her private life, succumb to them. True to the gothic genre, the crossing of such a boundary allowed suppressed frustrations to be expressed.

Through a prolonged deferral of the poem's tragic climax, Robinson exploits the properties of Mont Blanc to forward the idea that the mountain is a psychologically disturbing volatile space:

> Oft would he start from visionary rest
>
> When roaming wolves their midnight chorus howl'd,
>
> Or blasts infuriate shatter'd the white cliffs,
>
> While the huge fragments, rifted by the storm,
>
> Plung'd to the dell below. Oft would he sit
>
> In silent sadness on the jutting block
>
> Of snow-encrusted ice, and, shudd'ring mark
>
> (Amid the wonders of the frozen world)
>
> Dissolving pyramids, and threatening peaks,
>
> Hang o'er his hovel, terribly Sublime. (pp.89-90)

The Hermit's position on the icy cliff leaves him at the mercy of the mountain's 'threatening peaks'. It is a position of extreme precarity that imparts a desperate emotional turmoil: for although the Hermit has a noble 'silent sadness', the 'shudd'ring' response to the scene and his 'start' at the cry of wolves reveal him to be a tormented soul. Robinson does not intend readers to sympathise with the Hermit, but rather to question the value of his existence in a landscape removed from society. He is the antithesis of the fairy tale hero whose maiden has been locked in a tower; he has failed to act and has succumbed to the hopelessness of the separation. Robinson emphasises this failure through the Hermit's religious dedication, both to God and to the Maid. She subverts the idea of finding God in grand alpine nature. Although the Hermit can look upon the mountain and 'mark | In each grand lineament, the

work of God!' (p.91), religious sublimity is exploded by the tragic demise of the Maid and the failure of the Hermit's prayers to alter her fate.

During a storm in the middle of a long winter's night the Hermit descends from his mountain top abode, commencing a 'slipp'ry and perilous' (p.93) night climb in order to investigate a noise that has awoken him. He discovers only a distant stream of light and suspects the sound may have been issued from the 'busy hum' (p.93) in the valley rather than someone on the mountain. The 'busy hum' recalls Milton's *L'Allegro,* but had by now become a much used phrase to distinguish the silence and isolation of the Alps from wider social circles. Later we discover the light and hum are from an army that is passing through the Alps. Shelley Jones has read this as Robinson engaging with the movement of troops during the Napoleonic Wars.[39] Although it is tempting to read the army in this way, 'The Hermit' has an uncanny timelessness that seems to work against such analogies. Robinson instead fosters the sense of Mont Blanc as a space outside of history. The Hermit is left perched in the dark for '[f]our freezing hours' (p.94) on an uneasy boundary between the high mountain and the world below, but also between life and death, present and future, anticipation and realisation. Here the Hermit prays until, at first light, he continues his descent. He soon discovers the futility of his prayers when he is confronted with the sight of snow '[d]appled with ruby drops' and finds the Maid:

> Where, lifeless, ghastly, paler than the snow
>
> On which her cheek repos'd, his darling Maid
>
> Slept in the dream of Death! Frantic and wild
>
> He clasp'd her stiff'ning form, and bath'd with tears
>
> The lilies of her bosom,--icy cold--
>
> Yet beautiful and spotless.

The 'lilies' and 'spotless' symbolise her purity and contrast the corruption of the 'ruby drops'. This pure form is not only how the Hermit initially sees her in death, but also how he has imagined her in life. Robinson makes the Hermit's perception clear fourteen lines later when she addresses him directly and refers to the Maid as 'Thy VESTAL Saint'. It is an address loaded with bitter irony. For what appeared a tragic and romantic accident, is overtaken by the revelation that a soldier has raped and murdered the Maid:

> A Ruffian met the HERMIT'S startled Eyes
>
> Like Hell's worst Demon! For his murd'rous hands
>
> Were smear'd with gore; and on his daring breast
>
> A golden cross, suspended, bore the name
>
> Of his ill-fated Victim !--ANCHORET !

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[39] Jones, 2014, p.156.

Thy VESTAL Saint, by his unhallow'd hands

Torn from RELIGION'S Altar, had been made

The sport of a dark Fiend, whose recreant Soul

Had sham'd the cause of Valour! (pp.96-97)

This extreme violence is contrasted by the poem's denouement of painful inaction:

    To his cell

The Soul-struck Exile turn'd his trembling feet,

And after three lone weeks, of pain and pray'r,

Shrunk from the scene of Solitude--and DIED ! (p.97)

The Maid's faith is represented by the cross. Robinson emphasises the futility of faith when the cross ends up on the neck of 'Hell's worst Demon'. The re-characterisation of the soldier from 'ruffian' to 'demon' enters him into the sphere of the mountain's supernatural associations and third order terror. It would, however, be going too far to suggest that the mountain is responsible for his corruption. Nonetheless, it is possible to draw parallels between Robinson's murderer on the eternal snows and the murderer-Creature on the glacier that Mary Shelley would present us with in *Frankenstein*. Indeed, the Hermit's inaction in the face of the murderer enters into a similar psychological realm as that exerted by Victor Frankenstein's predicament after he has met with the Creature on the Mer de Glace and heard his narrative. For Jacqueline Labbe, the Hermit's inaction is a sign of weakness that makes him 'more of a villain than the soldier'.[40] I disagree with Labbe's reading. Rather than proving villainous, the Hermit's inaction is one of failure personified, not only of individual action, but the failure of faith. In Labbe's analysis, the four hours of prayer in the dark on the cliff are 'convenient' and act as a plot 'delay' that promotes the 'timidity' of the Hermit.[41] While I agree with Labbe that the four hours do all these things, this is not the primary reason why Robinson deploys them. Throughout the poem's narrative Robinson projects the futility of prayer and a life dedicated to God. The four hours, like the preceding five years of prayers for the Maid, do not ultimately benefit the Hermit or the Maid. The revelation of her raped and murdered body reveals the futility of praying and, by degrees, faith. This futility is emphasised by the three weeks the Hermit spends in 'pain and pray'r' before his death at the end of the poem. A sense of hollowness and futility pervade the poem's ending – but Labbe's notion of the Hermit's villainy is to go too far. The deism that Robinson expressed elsewhere in her poetry is exposed as a falsity here. The Hermit's

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[40] Jacqueline Labbe, 'Romance and Violence in Mary Robinson' in C. C. Barfoot, ed., *"A Natural Delineation of Human Passions": The Historical Moment of Lyrical Ballads* (New York: Rodopi, 2004), p.151.

[41] Labbe in Barfoot, p.149.

response to the murderer before him is in essence Christian – he turns the other cheek and walks away. Yet this is the antithesis of the heroic or noble act. Fundamentally, 'The Hermit' questions the value of faith in God when that faith intervenes in social relationships. The gothic nature of the poem necessitates a subversion of associated religious sublime clichés about the landscape of Mont Blanc that recasts the mountain as a place of terror that does not lead to spiritual elevation or hope, but instead suggests oblivion and despondency.

Byron – *Manfred*

Manfred is not just a fantasy set amid the Alps, but a fantasy version of Byron's time in the Alps. The poem reflects little of the true physical geography of Mont Blanc or the Alps. As with Radcliffe and Robinson, in order to fulfil a gothic narrative, Mont Blanc and the Alps are imaginary spaces that owe little to their material realities. In essence, the mountain settings in the poem are spaces that exist simply because they are beyond the fringe of more familiar social orders: canvasses onto which Byron can project his 'witch drama' and inner psychosis.[42] The eponymous troubled hero seems at once to be both Byron and not Byron; at some moments a reflection of the self and at others an invention of the self. When the Chamois Hunter first sees Manfred alone on the cliffs of the Jungfrau, he remarks:

What is here?

Who seems not of my trade, and yet hath reach'd

A height which none even of our mountaineers,

Save our best hunters, may attain (p.64, ll.59-64)

Manfred climbing on the ledge is a modified version of Byron crossing the Glacier de Bossons or ascending the Dent de Jaman. In this version, however, the guides and fellow tourists are absent; Byron is fantasising about his physicality and the Alps as a space away from the crowd that his time there failed to realise. The fantasy is played out through a chaotic assortment of supernatural elements that include a witch, spirits, gods and a ghost, and as such *Manfred* asserts its place within the stories of ghosts and supernatural entities with which the Diodati circle had become fixated in the summer of 1816.

Manfred is consistent with Byron's evolving disenchantment with Mont Blanc and the Alps that – as I have shown in Chapter One – can be charted in his letters and journals. McGann has given a sustained analysis of possible dates for the composition of *Manfred's* various passages.[43] While parts might date from as early as 1809, the majority of the poem was written amid the Alps or shortly after leaving them for Italy in the late summer and autumn of 1816. McGann believes the first scene, which includes the Mont Blanc passage,

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[42] *LBLJ,* 25 March 1817.

[43] McGann in Byron, *LBP,* IV*,* pp.461-75.

'must have been begun and finished between 14 and 25 August [1816]'.[44] His evidence is based on the earliest extant manuscript, held by the Pierpoint Morgan Library and Museum in New York (*MS - ML*) and the last date (25 August 1816) that Claire Clairmont could have done her copy of 'The Incantation'. I follow McGann's lead here in regarding the song of the Second Spirit passage as completed after Byron had read Shelley's 'Mont Blanc', but before he had visited the mountain.

In terms of *Manfred* as a whole, the Mont Blanc passage is short and merely one of seven 'Spirit' songs. Certainly Byron's trip to the Bernese Alps and the Jungfrau, which was wilder and less touristic than Mont Blanc, appealed to him and influenced the settings in *Manfred* after Act 1 sc. I (Act 1 sc. II is set on the Jungfrau, for example). The passage, with minor adjustments from *ML,* reads as follows:

> *Voice of the SECOND SPIRIT.*
>
> Mont Blanc is the monarch of mountains,
>
> They crowned him long ago
>
> On a throne of rocks, in a robe of clouds,
>
> With a diadem of snow.[45]
>
> Around his waist are forests braced,
>
> The Avalanche in his hand;
>
> But ere it fall, that thundering ball
>
> Must pause for my command.
>
> The Glacier's cold and restless mass
>
> Moves onward day by day;
>
> But I am he who bids it pass,
>
> Or with its ice delay.
>
> I am the spirit of the place,
>
> Could make the mountain bow
>
> And quiver to his cavern'd base–
>
> And what with me wouldst Thou?[46]

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[44] McGann in *LBP,* IV, p.463.

[45] Assessing these opening four lines, Peter Hansen has identified an almost identical poetic description of Mont Blanc by Charles-Jullien Chênedollé. Hansen claims that it uses 'language that Byron later borrowed word for word in *Manfred'*. This has been repeated elsewhere. Hansen, however, has made an error here: it was Chênedollé who plagiarised Byron. Chênedollé did so in 'Ode V: Le Mont Blanc', a poem that appeared three years after *Manfred* in 1820. Hansen's source was Claire Engel. However, Engel is very clear that Chênedollé is borrowing from Byron - see *La Littérature Alpestre en France et en Angleterre aux XVIIIe et XIXe Siècles* (Vieux- Mont Melian: La Fontaine, 2009), p.231. Chênedollé did write about Mont Blanc before Byron in 'Le génie de l'homme, poème' (1807), although none of Byron's descriptions of Mont Blanc resemble the 1807 work.

[46] *LBP*, IV, p.55, ll.60-75. [Further references to *Manfred* in the text]

The opening line was adjusted from *ML*: 'Mont Blanc is the king of the mountains'. Both it and the version above reveal Byron using the stock monarchical motif prevalent in countless depictions of Mont Blanc throughout the preceding seventy-five years of its literary history. The Spirit informs us that the monarch status was bestowed on Mont Blanc 'long ago'. It is not clear who is meant by the '[t]hey' responsible for the crowning. It may be a reference to the countless tourists and writers who have repeated this cliché. If so, this would be consistent with a republican poet ironically lambasting the herd that had bestowed the monarchical motif on the mountain. Byron does, after all, subvert the mountain's kingly status. A transition begins at the end of the second quatrain. It is the culmination of a slight shift in melody in the second quatrain governed by the internal rhymes of 'braced' / 'waist' and 'fall' / 'ball'. In the third and fourth quatrains Byron employs an alternating rhyme scheme, without internal rhymes, to give a slightly different tone to the second spirit expressing his/or her power. It is a technically impressive passage. The third and fourth quatrains reveal that for all the power of the mountain, it is the power of the Second Spirit – 'the spirit of the place' – that has total 'command' over it. The Second Spirit decides whether glaciers advance or avalanches fall. Indeed, by the end of the passage the 'monarch of mountains' we were introduced to in the opening quatrain has been reduced to something that the 'spirit of place' can 'make bow | And quiver to his cavern'd base'. Byron's distinguishing between the mountain and a spirit that has command over it recalls Shelley's letter to Peacock that imagines Ahriman having power over Mont Blanc's geographical processes.[47] It seems reasonable to suppose that Byron and Shelley, and possibly Mary Shelley, had some form of discussion about Mont Blanc and the idea of supernatural or secret agencies of power. While separating the mountain from the 'unseen power' in 'Mont Blanc' is difficult, in *Manfred* this separation is clearly delineated by the subtle transition in the passage between object (mountain) and speaker (spirit). If by the end of the passage the material Mont Blanc is not dethroned, its status is somewhat diminished by the idea that the spirit is something independent of the mountain with a power balance that reflects slave and master.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the breakdown of Byron's marriage, his apparent affair with Augusta and particularly his separation from Ada disturbed him to a point of genuine depression. Indeed, Augusta wrote to Lady Byron in September and reported that Scrope Davies, like John Hobhouse, 'found him very gloomy'.[48] Whether depressed or not, Byron's hopes of the early summer were not satisfied in the Alps. The epigraph for *Manfred* is derived from Shakespeare's troubled Dane and Byron perhaps

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[47] Ahriman appears later as a character in *Manfred.*

[48] T. A. J. Burnett, *The Rise and Fall of a Regency Dandy: The Life and Times of Scrope Bedmore Davies* (London: John Murray, 1981), p.132.

regarded himself as performing Hamlet in the Alps. Manfred's 'to be or not to be' balancing on the cliff edge is just one moment among many that summer when Byron alluded to death and oblivion as a means of escape. In the closing lines of 'Epistle to Augusta', he is reconciled to the idea of death through his love for Augusta as it allows him to transcend the 'crowd' he has failed to 'shun': 'We are entwined – let death come slow or fast | The tie which bound the first endures the last'. Death is also a theme of 'Darkness', 'The Dream', 'The Prisoner of Chillon', 'A Fragment' and 'Prometheus'; yet there is little doubt that the poetic confrontations with death that summer reach their climax with *Manfred*. In the poem, Byron seems to have found space to answer a rhetorical question he asked in *Childe Harold Canto III*: 'Are not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part | Of me and of my soul, as I of them?' (75. ll.707-708). This possibility is rejected in *Manfred* when the eponymous hero – the thinly-veiled version of the self – voices Byron's confession that the Wordsworthian clothing he had adopted as a resolution to his problems did not fit nor suit him: 'ye Mountains, | Why are ye beautiful? I cannot love ye' (Act 1. II. ll.7-8, p.62). In *Manfred* Mont Blanc forms part of a crucible into which Byron pours his inner concerns, very much as Shelley does in 'Mont Blanc'. The Spirit of Mont Blanc and the other spirits of nature are not benevolent entities. They do not free Manfred from the past that imprisons his waking hours. Rather, they function as demons that, like the landscape from which they arise, torture him.

Mary Shelley – *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*

At Lake Geneva before her excursion to the mountain, Mary Shelley described 'the snowy Alps [and] the majestic Mont Blanc, highest and queen of all'. This is a pointed feminist reclamation of the mountain from the clichéd 'kingly' motif deployed by countless – predominantly male – writers. Yet this apparent valorisation belies the mountain's role in *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man.* Unlike Robinson and Radcliffe, Shelley visited the mountain before publishing writings about it. A change in her attitude to the mountain from that expressed in Six Weeks' Tour is seamed into both novels. It is suggestive of both disillusionment with Mont Blanc and her doubts about how the mountain had been valorised. The transition to disillusionment mirrors Byron, whose excursion to the mountain was similarly transformative. Shelley had a keen interest in reading travel literature, especially accounts by explorers, and between 1815 and 1818 these included works by Mungo Park, Daniel Clarke, Lady Elizabeth Craven and John Davis. Yet when playing the explorer on an excursion to the Mer de Glace she admits that, 'we set out at nine for

Montanvert with Beaucoup de Monde go also'.[49] There is a sense in this peculiarly phrased observation that Shelley recognised she was simply one more member of the British tourist invasion of the Alps.

Nonetheless, other forces were undoubtedly at play in shaping her disillusionment. A number of critics, including Charles Robinson and, more recently, Anna Mercer, have considered the collaborative and at times competitive working relationship of Mary and Percy Shelley. Mercer writes:

> [T]he strength of the Shelleys' individual works must be, in part, a testament to the stimulating environment created by a relationship shaped by literary pursuits. We cannot disregard the intensity of PBS and MWS's life together, during which they were frequently in conversation about their compositions and about literature in general – something that is evident from MWS's journals as well as the echoes of these discussions in the works themselves.[50]

Indeed, as Mercer reveals, the collaborative relationship was one that was often productive through its challenges. Likewise, for all the collaborative working relationships of the Diodati circle in the summer of 1816 – what Higgins has called a 'creative community' – creative rivalry and a striving for originality were underlying factors that fostered key differences in each writer's presentations of Mont Blanc.[51] Indeed, as Paul Sherwin has written, 'there is general agreement that Mary Shelley is either deeply divided in her response to Shelley and the entire Romantic enterprise or else downright hostile, using [*Frankenstein*] as an instrument of revenge against her (supposedly over-idealistic, uncourageous, and insensitive) husband.'[52] An assertion made in the preface to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* emphasises the degree of her rivalry with Percy Shelley – who was by then dead: 'I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling to my husband' (p.180). This defence expresses any author's need to lay claim to their work. However, it also needs to be read in the context of an age when the capabilities of female writers were often compared unfavourably with those of their male contemporaries. The influence of Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, may have been significant in politicising elements of Shelley's landscapes. In her *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796), Wollstonecraft uses mountain landscapes and the sublime to interrogate the complexities of motherhood and maternal separation within dominant patriarchal societies and reveals underlying central concerns about postnatal depression and the separation from her child. Shelley recalls *Letters* in her presentation of

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[49] *MWSJ*, p.118.
[50] Mercer, 2019, p.2.
[51] Higgins, introduction to O'Neill's keynote address at The Summer of 1816 Conference, Sheffield, 2016.
[52] Paul Sherwin 'Frankenstein: Creation as Catastrophe' *PMLA* 96, 5 (1981), 883-903 (p.900).

Mont Blanc in *The Last Man.* At the very least, Shelley's queenly Mont Blanc is, like Robinson's 'The Hermit', part of a process of interrogating the received wisdom and norms concerned with the Alps and symbolic of an attempt to reclaim the way the landscape had been interpreted – particularly by men – and assert her own response.

It is likely that Mary is actually writing about Percy when she suggests that Victor misreads Mont Blanc as a symbol of hope and reverence. In Letters III and IV of *Six Weeks' Tour* Percy Shelley speaks on Mary Shelley's behalf by constantly using 'we'. The assumption that Mary unequivocally viewed Mont Blanc in the same way as Percy during the excursion is almost certainly wrong. Wilson has rightly argued that '[w]hile Percy stood awed under the ice in 1816, Mary was beside him registering her own impressions' and that in *Frankenstein* she offers 'her own version of "Mont Blanc"'.[53] The inference that Mary viewed Percy's investment in Mont Blanc as misguided appears reasonable when Victor Frankenstein's relationship to the mountain is considered. As a child Percy was known as 'Victor'.[54] Percy's opening entry in Mary's journal recalls a trip to Matlock Bath and compares it with the Chamonix Valley. In *Frankenstein*, Victor, having left Switzerland for Britain, makes an excursion north and notes that in Matlock there are 'little cabinets of natural history, where curiosities are disposed in the same manner as in the collections at Servox and Chamounix' (p.124).[55] Mary appears to be reimagining Percy's experiences of Matlock, Servoz and Chamonix through the eyes of Victor.

Robert M. Ryan has argued that Mary's religious position, as espoused in *Frankenstein*, rejects the atheism of her father and Percy.[56] On her approach to Chamonix, described in the 22 July Journal entry, Mary witnessed the higher Alps, including Mont Blanc, and related:

> As we continued our route to Cerveaux [Servoz] the mountains encreased in height & beauty – the summits of the highest were hid in clouds but they sometimes peeped out into the blue sky higher one would think than the safety of God would permit since it is well known that the tower of Babel did not equal them in immensity.

The idea of high mountains enabling a closer connection to God is implicit in her appraisal. However, the reference to the Tower of Babel shows that the theme of Man's overreach so central to *Frankenstein* – which Mary was almost certainly continuing to write during the

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[53] Wilson, p.129.

[54] Percy Bysshe Shelley used the nickname as a pseudonym for his first collection of poetry; it was co-authored with his sister Elizabeth. See *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire* (London: Phillips, 1810).

[55] *MWS1818,* p.124.

[56] See Robert M. Ryan, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 19:3 (Summer 1988), 150-55.

excursion – was preoccupying her. Barbara Freeman has likewise registered a separation from Percy Shelley and has argued that *Frankenstein* is a rejection of the Kantian sublime:

> [W]hereas in Kant "the irresistibility of [nature's] might […] discloses to us a faculty of judging independently of and a superiority over nature", in *Frankenstein* an identical geography produces neither peace of mind nor aesthetic pleasure, but rather a vision of and an encounter with monstrosity. Each time a sublime landscape is depicted, it is linked to the Monster's appearance. […] The landscape is the same as Kant's – that of Nature in all her might and majesty, but the effect (and affect) produced is not.[57]

Although Freeman does not specify Mont Blanc as a catalyst, the role of the mountain in the novel fits with her argument. Bainbridge has drawn a similar conclusion to Freeman. He has considered the influence of Rousseau on the Diodati circle's presentations of the Alps and has argued that 'the failure of Victor Frankenstein's attempt to enact Rousseau's mountain programme becomes part of the wider critique of both his and Rousseau's Promethean agenda to remake mankind'.[58] Both *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* appear, however, to move beyond 'critique' to outright rejection and both novels suggest that Mary Shelley was in essence dispensing with the Rousseauian-inspired philosophies Percy Shelley had espoused. Through her presentations of the mountain she rejects the notion that Nature can act as an external force with the power to absolve the spiritual or moral failings of the individual. The landscapes of *Frankenstein* contribute to a cautionary fable about the false power of the sublime. If Mary Shelley could be said to have a philosophy in regard to Mont Blanc, it would be one of anti-sublime in which readers are warned against idolisation and investing material geography with god-like agency. Similarly, in *The Last Man,* the hope invested in Mont Blanc and the Alps that they might offer a sanctuary from the ravages of the plague is shown to be misplaced – the mountains prove only a space of disillusion and sorrow.

Frances Ferguson has argued that 'the capacity to respond to the sublime aspects of nature is a trait […] Walton esteems in Victor' and suggests that he is right to do so.[59] In contrast to Ferguson, I believe the opposite is true. Shelley reveals Victor's 'capacity' is one that misreads the sublime. In *Frankenstein*, the juxtaposition of Lake Geneva and Mont Blanc is exploited to subvert the idealisation of the mountain from the lake. Mont Blanc is first referred to during Victor's return home to Geneva from Ingolstadt. He has been made aware of the murder of his younger brother William. He has been gone six years and worries

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[57] Barbara Freeman, 'Frankenstein with Kant: A Theory of Monstrosity, or the Monstrosity of Theory', *Substance*, 52, 21-31 (p.24).
[58] Bainbridge in Goulbourne and Higgins, 2017, p.67.
[59] Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.105.

whether home will bring peace and restoration. On reaching Lausanne he finds in both the lake and 'snowy mountains' a sense of hope and healing. The Rousseauian idea that nature is good for the body and soul is now tested. Quoting from *Childe Harold* Canto III, as Percy Shelley had done in his letter to Byron when first reaching Mont Blanc, Victor attests: '*the palaces of nature*, were not changed. By degrees the calm and heavenly scene restored me' (p.53). As Victor moves onward, his emotions develop:

> I approached my native town. I discovered more distinctly the black sides of the Jura, and the bright summit of Mont Blanc; I wept like a child: Dear mountains! my own beautiful lake! how do you welcome your wanderer? Your summits are clear; the sky and lake are blue and placid. Is this to prognosticate peace, or to mock at my unhappiness? (p.53)

Mont Blanc and its 'bright summit' appear analogous with hope. He weeps 'like a child' because home predates the catastrophe of the Creature and he is overwhelmed by nostalgia for it as a place that he believes might return him to his an inner child. As Victor crosses Lake Geneva by boat at night he witnesses 'lightnings playing on the summit of Mont Blanc in the most beautiful figures' (p.5'4). This celebration of beauty and the apparent initiation of the alpine sublime are soon undone. Just as Victor begins to find hope in the lightning, it is cruelly disappointed:

> This noble war in the sky elevated my spirits; I clasped my hands and exclaimed aloud, 'William, dear angel! this is thy funeral, this thy dirge!' As I said these words, I perceived in the gloom a figure. (p.54)

The figure in the gloom is the Creature. His appearance undermines the power of the alpine sublime and quells Victor's potential spiritual elevation through mountain sublimity.

As the novel progresses, Shelley continues this pattern by establishing potential restorative or ameliorating functions for mountains – particularly Mont Blanc – before exposing such notions as misguided. When Victor visits the source of the Arveyron with his father and Elizabeth he attests: 'These sublime and magnificent scenes […] elevated me from all littleness of feeling; and although they did not remove my grief, they subdued and tranquilized it' (p.71). Spiritual elevation once more is asserted. Yet within two pages Victor stands on the Mer de Glace surrounded by the vast panorama of Mont Blanc and its 'awful majesty' only to be brought face to face with his creation:

> The sea […] of ice wound among its dependent mountains, whose aerial summits hung over its recesses. There icy and glittering peaks shone in the sunlight over the clouds. My heart [...] now swelled with something like joy; I exclaimed – "Wandering spirits, if indeed ye wander, and do not rest in your narrow beds, allow me this faint happiness, or take me, as your companion, away from the joys of life."

> As I said this, I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing
> towards me with superhuman speed. (p.73)

By emphasising deep psychological disturbance, the '[w]andering spirits' function like the witch and ghosts of the cave in 'Mont Blanc' and the manifestations of Astarte in *Manfred*.[60] Victor's request to the '[w]andering spirits' on the Mer de Glace that he be allowed 'faint happiness' or 'death' is an ultimatum through which Shelley tests the sublime as a philosophical means to emotional and spiritual restoration. She uses the 'sunlight' on the peaks of Mont Blanc as a metonym for a hope that, with the appearance of the Creature, is bitterly reversed.

The idea of wandering spirits upon glaciers was something that had interested Mary Shelley during the tour in the summer of 1814. While near Lucerne, she had observed the 'eternal glaciers' and noted that one of these opposite Brunen was the place where a Priest and his Mistress had fled:

> One winter night an avelanche overwhelmed them, but their plaintive voices are still
> heard in stormy nights calling for succour from the peasants.[61]

The extent to which Shelley reflects the social and cultural geographies of the Alps or rather nostalgically plays out a version of the Alps that was being lost to tourist popularity and scientific exploration, is difficult to measure. After all, like Percy Shelley, she did not discount the possibility of ghosts. She later gave an account of seeing a ghost – almost certainly that of her late husband – while in Italy. In her essay 'On Ghosts' (1824), she wrote:

> But do none of us believe in ghosts? If this question be read at noon-day, when -
> *Every little corner, nook, and hole, Is penetrated with the insolent light -* at such a
> time derision is seated on the features of my reader. But let it be twelve at night in a
> lone house; take up, I beseech you, the story of the Bleeding Nun, […] or of the
> Grandsire, who with shadowy form and breathless lips stood over the couch and
> kissed the foreheads of his sleeping grandchildren, and thus doomed them to their
> fated death; and let all these details be assisted by solitude, flapping curtains,
> rushing wind, a long and dusky passage, an half open door - O, then truly, another
> answer may be given.[62]

At the beginning of the novel when the Creature is first spotted upon the vast arctic ice, Walton describes him as an 'apparition' (p.16). The Creature's haunting pursuit of Victor

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[60] The connections and potential influence of *Frankenstein* on *Manfred* or *Manfred* on *Frankenstein* are discussed at great length by Robinson. Robinson believes it more likely that *Frankenstein* influenced *Manfred,* rather than the other way around. See Robinson, 2009.

[61] *Six Weeks' Tour,* p.49.

[62] Mary Shelley, 'On Ghosts', *The London Magazine* (London: March, 1824)

connects him to the 'world of shadows'.[63] Here, the appearance of the Creature follows so readily upon Victor's invocation to the '[w]andering spirits' as to allow it to be read as their response – giving them a degree of agency that perhaps recalls the spirits in *Manfred*. Certainly, the Creature's habitation on the Mer de Glace reinvests the high Alps with its folkloric mystery, as Victor suggests:

> [I]t was augmented and rendered sublime by the mighty Alps, whose white and shining pyramids and domes towered above all, as belonging to another earth, the habitations of another race of beings. (pp.70-71)

Pamela Clemit rightly argues that Victor's 'elevated intuition that the mountains are "the habitations of another race of beings" suggests his desire to find a benevolent controlling power in nature is parodied and drained of meaning when his invocation of the "Wandering spirits" [leads to the appearance of the Creature]'.[64]

The hostile environment of the ice allows Shelley to emphasise the Creature's otherness when he advances towards Victor with 'superhuman speed' and 'bound[s] over the crevices in the ice, among which [Victor] had walked with caution' (p.73). However, when he leaves the ice and enters a human structure, the 'hut' at Montenvers, the Creature reveals qualities that are clearly human. After the conversation in the 'hut', the Creature is able to 'descend the mountain with greater speed than the flight of an eagle' (p.110) and is once again afforded supernatural qualities. The Creature is therefore reflective of the environment that surrounds him; human space and interaction makes him more human – although not necessarily good; and wild uninhabited space makes him more supernatural – although not necessarily bad. This affinity between nature and the naturalness inherent in the Creature draws into question the moral judgements of humanity. The Creature informs Victor:

> The caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me, and the only one which man does not grudge. These are bleak skies I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow beings. (p.75)

This is the first instance in which we are given a sympathetic impression of the Creature. By suggesting the naturalness of the Creature we are left to question whether we any more blame him for his actions than we might blame the avalanche to which he is compared: 'I, like the arch fiend, bore hell within me; and finding myself unsympathised with, wished to tear up the trees, spread havoc and destruction around me, and then to have sat down and enjoyed the ruin' (pp.103-104). Consequently we begin to reappraise his narrative. The Creature has been disowned by his mother/father figure Victor and been ostracised by society in the cruellest of circumstances. When he is shunned by the De Laceys, he hears a

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[63] *MWSJ,* p.126

[64] Pamela Clemit, *The Godwinian Novel: The Rational Fictions of Godwin, Brockden Brown, Mary Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.159.

fierce wind arise and the Creature's affinity with the natural world is once more invoked: 'the blast tore along like a mighty avalanche, and produced a kind of insanity in my spirits, that burst all bounds of reason and reflection' (p.107). If Shelley deploys the Creature in order to reflect upon what it means to be human, she also appears to be reflecting upon what it means to have an affinity with nature in all its savage violence. Mont Blanc is intrinsic to Shelley's reflection insofar as the mountain was symbolic of both nature's potential violent upheavals and a space where an affinity with the natural world through the sublime might be sought.

Certainly, it is not difficult to read into the character of the Genevan-born Victor Frankenstein a potential altered version of the Genevan-born Saussure, who was so closely associated with Mont Blanc and of whom Shelley was cognisant. If this was part of the inspiration, which seems likely, Shelley is following Ann Radcliffe in considering the association between Mont Blanc and savants such as Deluc, Buffon, Bourrit, Carbonnieres and Saussure. After the appearance of the Creature on the Mer de Glace, Victor is led to the 'hut' at Montenvers. This could be modelled on the Temple of Nature built in 1795 that Shelley visited in 1816. However, she may have imagined the pair in an older wooden hut built by Charles Blair in 1779 that was also there. Both buildings can be seen in the sketch below:

Figure 60 The Temple of Nature at Montenvers with older 'Blair's hut' beyond. (Bourrit, *Descriptions,* 1803).

Figure 61 Temple of Nature in 2019, with the Aiguille de Charmoz beyond.

Figure 62 Temple of Nature in 2019 with the Aiguille du Dru beyond.

If Shelley imagined the pair sitting in the Temple of Nature, then this would have been a deeply ironic moment in which the scientist who has over-reached the possibilities of science should sit within a temple dedicated to the pursuit of scientific knowledge and advancement. However, by referring only to a 'hut' this meaning is elided. As such, my

instinct is that Shelley had in mind Blair's Hospice, which was more conventionally hut-like.[65]

Figure 63 Detail from *Vue de la Mer de Glace et de l'Hospital de Blair* (Marc-Theodore Borrit, 1781) Musée Alpin Chamonix.

If Blair's Hospice and the Temple of Nature at Montenvers represented place as reached and overcome by humans and societies from beyond the Alps, the use of 'hut' re-establishes a rustic isolation in which the upper mountains were hardly visited other than by shepherds and chamois hunters. While Shelley does not present the mountain as a place of vacancy, there are nonetheless no tourists at Montenvers or upon the Mer de Glace to spoil the uncanny nature and vulnerability of Victor's position when the Creature appears. Shelley thus denies or manipulates the realities of Mont Blanc and promotes the fiction of the mountain as a pure unsullied space away from 'Beaucoup de monde'.

Inside the hut, the Creature's sympathetic narrative deepens Victor's existential crisis. William has died at the hands of his creation and he has been powerless to prevent the hanging of Justine for the crime. His despondency is compounded by promising to manufacture a female companion for his Creation. After this, Victor is left alone on Mont Blanc. He partly descends as darkness is falling, but then stops and spends a night upon the slopes. Here all nature seems to torture him:

> The stars shone at intervals […]; the dark pines rose before me, and every here and there a broken tree lay on the ground: it was a scene of wonderful solemnity, and stirred strange thoughts within me. I wept bitterly; and, clasping my hands in agony, I exclaimed, "Oh! stars, and clouds, and winds, ye are all about to mock me: if ye really pity me, crush sensation and memory; let me become as nought; but if not, depart, depart and leave me in darkness."

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[65] Blair's Hospice is no longer there; it disappeared between 1820-1843. Its former position is obvious and remains clear levelled ground.

These were wild and miserable thoughts; but I cannot describe to you how the eternal twinkling of the stars weighed upon me, and how I listened to every blast of wind, as if it were a dull ugly siroc on its way to consume me. (p.111)

Higgins has suggested that the 'threat to human dwelling is represented metonymically through the destruction of the trees'.[66] Here Victor looking upon broken trees – presumably uprooted by avalanches – triggers a contemplation of his destruction. However, like Coleridge in 'Dejection. An Ode', what is torturing Victor here is not the material properties of the natural world, whether the destructive potential of the Creature or the mountain, but his inability to find in Mont Blanc's beauty and sublimity ('the eternal twinkling stars', 'the wonderful solemnity', the clouds and the wind) relief from the problems of his despondent soul.

After the novel's British scenes, we return to Geneva. The pattern of the landscape being misread is then played out during Victor and Elizabeth's wedding day. Having married, Elizabeth looks upon 'the beautiful Mont Blanc, and assemblage of snowy mountains that in vain endeavour to emulate her' (p.148). By this time we suspect the hopefulness about the future represented by Mont Blanc for Elizabeth on her wedding day is a prophetic fallacy: 'Observe […] how the clouds, which sometimes obscure and sometimes rise above the dome of Mont Blanc, render this scene of beauty still more interesting […]. What a divine day! how happy and serene all nature appears!' (p.148). There is bitter irony then as Victor returns to the lake the next day after she has been murdered: 'If I looked up, I saw the scenes […] I had contemplated but the day before in the company of her who was now but a shadow of a recollection. Tears streamed from my eyes' (p.151). In this moment, Victor finally and somewhat belatedly understands the beauty and sublimity of Mont Blanc will never afford spiritual and emotional salvation.

Victor's loss of hope in the face of Mont Blanc reflects the centrality of loss in the novel. At the end of *Frankenstein,* after seeing the demise of Victor and the Creature, Walton confesses to his sister, Margaret: 'I have lost my hopes of utility and glory' (p.164). The wild nature of the Arctic is a space of spiritual desolation akin to Mont Blanc's icy mass. There the hope that wild nature can bring something fulfilling for Walton is disappointed by what he discovers: death, futility and hopelessness. Only the thought of returning to the ideas of home (England) and family (Margaret) offer Walton any hope at the end of the novel and prevent him from succumbing to complete despondency. In *Frankenstein,* Mont Blanc is likewise stripped of 'utility and glory' and Shelley rejects the idea that the mountain can offer spiritual advancement for the individual. Lady Shelley, who visited the Mer de Glace only one week before Mary Shelley, felt 'the presence of God' and

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[66] See Higgins, 2017, pp.69.

realised 'that state of chaos from which this lovely world has been formed'.[67] If Mary Shelley ever had any such thoughts during her visit, by the time she wrote *Frankenstein* she was keen to show that such notions of religious sublimity were acts of illusory faith.

In *The Last Man* Mont Blanc functions as a deceiving emblem of hope, just as it does in *Frankenstein*. As the events in the novel unfold, the hope connoted by the mountain and the wider Alps is shown to be misplaced. Shelley uses the mountain to once more confront the nature of loss and despondency. In this respect, the novel follows *Frankenstein* in casting doubt upon Rousseauian or Wordsworthian philosophies that had advocated man's communion with nature as a means to spiritual elevation. Patricia Cove has rightly argued in her analysis of *The Last Man* that '[t]he freezing grotesque horror of disease conflicts with the landscapes of elevating sublimity', adding that for Shelley these landscapes 'articulate the materiality of her characters' traumatic experiences'.[68] In a novel with layers of thinly-veiled autobiographical elements, those 'traumatic experiences' are almost certainly manifestations of Shelley's well-documented personal tragedies. Indeed, as Graham Allen has noted, critics have tended to read the novel 'as a *roman a clef,* a deep outpouring of grief over the deaths of P. B. Shelley, Byron, and all the other losses Shelley experienced in her still relatively short life.'[69] Yet the plague-apocalypse of *The Last Man* is also an activation of the catastrophe Victor envisaged would result in making a bride for the Creature in *Frankenstein*. It is an apocalypse equivalent to the envisaged procreation of the Creatures and the 'race of devils' that would jeopardise the 'very existence of our species' (p.128). The usurpation of humanity by the plague is likely a nihilistic cry of inner turmoil, powerlessness and a writer exploring the pain of her losses in which she takes personal despondency and magnifies it. The process is somewhat wearing and does not make for easy reading. Indeed, the novel lacks the consolation that Walton's turning homeward offers *Frankenstein,* for there is little satisfaction or solace in Verney's intention to sail the earth and try to live on. Instead we are left with only a sense of the unremitting hopelessness of his imminent journey and situation.

Before Shelley introduces Mont Blanc in *The Last Man*, there is prophetic fallacy in comparing the plague and Noachian deluge and alluding to Mount Ararat as the resting place of Noah's Ark. In the Bible, Mount Ararat is entwined with the olive branch-carrying dove to symbolise hope. In *The Last Man,* Shelley questions the symbolic nature of such hope and in essence interrogates the *codes* of biblical doctrine. In the novel, Ararat is the 'primal mountain source' from which Noah's family's procreation 'spread over' the world 'like a

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[67] Lady Shelley, p.244.
[68] Patricia Cove, 'The Earth's Deep Entrails': Gothic Landscapes and Grotesque Bodies in Mary Shelley's The Last Man' in *Gothic Studies*, 15, 2 (2013).
[69] Graham Allen, *Mary Shelley,* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), p.90.

flood' the 'race of man' 'and possessed the earth'.[70] If man constitutes a second flood, then the plague constitutes a third flood. Shelley thus promotes the idea of apocalypse as cycle, for despite the novel's title and the apparent hopelessness of its ending, the opening frame confirms humanity has continued beyond the plague-apocalypse. In *The Last Man,* Mont Blanc therefore constitutes a symbolic false Ararat. It offers no rejuvenation for mankind – no safe ground above or beyond the flood.

In *The Last Man,* the Alps present the possibility of a last stronghold that could be plague-free because of their vertiginous defences. The Alps are thus established as a beacon of hope to which Adrian – a thinly veiled Percy Shelley doppelganger – leads a rapidly depleting party from the plague-ravaged scenes of Britain. The idea of the Alps as a physical barrier that offers protection is reminiscent of how many British writers including Thomas Whalley and William Parsons, had considered the Alps as a natural defence for Switzerland's democracy. This presentation also engages with a longer tradition about whether the Alps were inherently a space of health and vitality or goitres, idiocy and degeneracy – there was rarely a middle ground. The party pass through France and find it as equally decimated as Britain while nonetheless continuing to anticipate a plague-free Alps. The journey partially mirrors that which Mary Shelley undertook in the summers of 1814 and 1816, with the decimation of France by the plague recalling the ravages of the Napoleonic Wars Shelley had witnessed on those actual tours. On reaching an unspecified mountain top – likely in the Jura – Adrian beholds 'something unexpected and wonderful' (p.324). At this point the narrative has been particularly bleak. Verney joins Adrian on the mountain top. Before them is a panoramic view of the Savoyard Alps, Lake Geneva and the Jura. The shift from despondency to hope inspired by this event is profound and Verney informs us that, 'Nature, or nature's favourite, this lovely earth, presented her most unrivalled beauties in resplendent and sudden exhibition' (p.324). The party '[d]rink in the beauty' of 'the glorious Alps, clothed in dazzling robes of light by the setting sun' and are overcome by their 'divine magnificence' (pp.324-325). This recalls the scene in which Victor returns home after the death of William and, on seeing these same mountains, is filled with hope. As with *Frankenstein,* the sunlight on mountains is a metonym for spiritual hope and the possibility of the alpine sublime as a means to spiritual elevation or emotional oblivion is once more raised. Indeed, the analogy is taken up by Verney who proclaims that '[c]arried away with wonder, I forgot the death of man' and '[a]n enthusiastic transport, akin to happiness, burst like a sudden ray of the sun, on our darkened life' (p.325). The biblical meaning of light and darkness here is implicit. Indeed, the idea that such sublimity is the

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[70] Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* in *Novels and Selected Works,* vol 4, ed. by Jane Blumberg and Nora Crook (London: Pickering, 1996), p.319. [Further references are given in the text.]

work of God is raised by an unnamed member of the group, who proclaims, 'God reveals his heaven to us; we may die blessed' (p.325). However, the party come to understand that the Alps have been no defence against the plague as 'beneath the ice caves […] another and yet another remnant of the race of Man [perished]' (p.327). The 'race of Man' here recalls the apocalyptic scene in 'Mont Blanc' when the 'race | Of man, flies far in dread', only in this instance man does not escape and Mary realises the destruction that Percy merely ponders.

Shelley appears keen to resist the idea of the Alps as host to nature's genies; the 'wandering spirits' considered in *Frankenstein* are nowhere to be seen. Instead, she describes the 'mute mountains, senseless lake [Lake Geneva], and unconscious trees' (p.326). Verney marvels at how strange it is that they seek shelter in so desolate a place. Writing about the same glaciers in *Frankenstein,* Higgins has suggested that 'Romantic texts are often […] concerned with the difficulty or impossibility of dwelling within a strange or hostile environment'.[71] For Verney it is that very hostility that makes them so appropriate for a history of loss and a state of personal despondency. He recognises at last that the mountains could offer only a sense of resigned fatalistic peace:

> Yet we were not quite wrong in seeking a scene like this, whereon to close the drama. Nature, true to the last, consoled us in the very heart of misery. Sublime grandeur of outward objects soothed our hapless hearts, and were in harmony with our desolation. (p.328)

The Verney party remained in the vicinity of Chamonix until the end of the plague. The cave at the source of the Arveyron is the location for the burial of the last plague victim.

Figure 64 Detail from IGN 3630 OT 1998.

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[71] See Higgins, 2017, pp.66-67.

Figure 65 Detail from *Vue Vallée de Chamouny* (1820) by A. Bachmann, Musée Alpin Chamonix.

The painting above reveals the Mer de Glace reached the valley floor when Shelley visited in 1816. At that time from the centre of Chamonix to the source of the Arveyron it was 3.5km and involved no significant climbing. The burial site is not geographically impractical. However, there is little doubt Shelley chose it for its symbolic potency. The ice cave burial has its roots in a genuine experience. In her journal of 1816, Shelley recalled a visit to the site:

> We came to the sourse [sic] which lies like a stage surrounded on three sides by mountains and glaciers […] an immense Glacier was on our left which continually rolled stones to its foot – it is very dangerous to go directly under this – Our Guide told us a story of two Hollanders who went without any guide in to a cavern of the Glacier & fired a pistol there which drew down a large piece on them.[72]

Percy Shelley referred to this story in his letters to Peacock. Byron was told a version of it by his guides on a later excursion.

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[72] *MWSJ,* p.116.

Figure 66 Samuel Birmann *Source de l Arveron* (c.1820s).

The painting suggests the – probably exaggerated – fragility of the cave's structure and the danger that would be involved by passage beneath it. The terror exerted by the potential that the cave might collapse and bury or entomb visitors was part of the attraction. During Byron's excursion, Scrope Davies enthusiastically braved the dangers and led the party into its recess.[73] The theatrical appearance of the Source of the Arveyron with its 'stage' is reimagined in *The Last Man*:

> Near the sources of the Aveiron we performed the rites for, four only excepted, the last of the species. Adrian and I […] carried the body to this desolate spot and placed it in those caves of ice beneath the glacier, which rive and split with the slightest sound, and bring destruction on those within the clefts […] So, with hushed steps and in silence, we placed the dead on a bier of ice, and then departing, stood on a rocky platform beside the river springs. (p.329)

Verney informs us that as a result of 'striking the air with our persons' 'vast blocks of ice' covered 'the human image we had deposited within' (p.329). The collapse recalls the much reiterated threat that any sudden sound might trigger an avalanche and draws from the notional second order terror associated with the sublime.

Like the closing of a coffin lid and lowering a body into the ground, there is a moment of catharsis to this ending of the plague narrative and a sense of absolute finality in

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[73] See *JCHD,* 30 August 1816.

the collapse of this icy sarcophagus after the body is deposited there. However, Shelley tells us the ice covers a 'human image'. It is an odd phrase following on from 'body', although 'human form' is used to describe the body later. Likewise, there is something peculiar – technically deficient even – in how Shelley reveals to us that this scene has taken place in the dark only after the ice has buried the body. This is a key moment in the narrative, and yet it has been surprisingly overlooked in critical analyses of the novel. For example, Patricia Cove has placed great importance on the role of the human body in the novel, but the burial of the last plague body in the ice cave is not referred to in her analysis. Similarly, Graham Allen mentions the burial only in passing and offers no analysis of it.[74] The critical oversight is perhaps more surprising when we consider that considerable critical attention has been afforded the 'rationally absurd' moment in the 'Author's Introduction' that establishes a cave as the location for the discovery of the Sybilline leaves in 1818, and as such the location from which the narrative is born.[75] Critical consensus has long regarded this cave-discovery as the novel's biggest fundamental difficulty: what do we make of a novel that paradoxically purports to present a reality that has supposedly already happened, but has also not yet taken place? In response to this difficulty, Vijay Mishra, who has likewise paid no attention to the cave-burial, has turned his attention to the meaning of the cave where the leaves are discovered. His psychoanalytical reading borrows from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to 'interpret the cave as a womb' and a 'woman's place where the initiate comes or a tomb in which she is sacrificed'.[76] It is tempting to similarly psychoanalytically read the ice cave burial as a window into Shelley's inner psychoses. As Mishra points out, between 1815-1822 Shelley 'had become pregnant five times in seven years, given birth five times, seen a baby die in her arms a few days after giving birth, and suffered as two other children […] died in her arms,' in addition to experiencing a 'near-fatal miscarriage'.[77] What does it mean to return a body to the womb, only for that womb to then close with the finality of a collapse? This seems a moment of reflecting on her role as a mother and as a child whose birth led to the death of her own mother. Indeed, when Verney's party arrive in the Chamonix Valley, Shelley offers a quotation from her mother's *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796): '"the bones of the world, waiting to be clothed with every thing necessary to give life and beauty"' (p.328). The notion of a blank landscape awaiting the source of life brings to mind the role of a mother bringing life into the world. It is a moment that suggests the legacy of Wollstonecraft was very much part of Shelley's complex self-examination of her psychological condition as she returned in her writing to the Alps. As Verney appraises the Chamonix valley he informs us, 'in those countries where earth was

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[74] Graham Allen, pp.115-116.
[75] Graham Allen, p.91.
[76] Mishra, p.164.
[77] Mishra, p.158.

wont, like a tender mother, to nourish her children, we had found her a destroyer' (p.328) before concluding that at Mont Blanc too the earth was a destroyer and 'Pestilence reigned paramount' (p.328) – the deployment of the monarchical motif perhaps appropriated from its association with Mont Blanc. The ice cave burial appears then to be an attempt to undo time, to reverse history, to bury pain – although no stable conclusions present themselves beyond an unnerving sense that in returning to Mont Blanc, Shelley is mining the depths of her traumatic life.

The ice burial sparks a rhapsodic consideration of Mont Blanc as a mountain that gives light even in the darkness, and the phantom of hope is raised once more:

> Yellow lightnings played around the vast dome of Mont Blanc, silent as the snow-clad rock they illuminated; all was bare, wild, and sublime, while the singing of the pines in melodious murmurings added a gentle interest to the rough magnificence. Now the riving and fall of icy rocks clave the air; now the thunder of the avalanche burst on our ears. (p.329)

The 'unconscious trees' described on the approach to the Alps now have a 'melodious' voice, while the mute mountains are brought momentarily to life as the 'fall of icy rocks clave the air' (p.329). Yet this proves to be more requiem than hymn. On realising that so little life has been left by the plague, Verney once more acknowledges the 'lifeless mountains' and Adrian aligns the destructive force of glaciers and avalanches with their predicament by means of ruined pines that, as we have seen, Higgins has identified as a metonym for human precarity: 'Thus we are left […] two melancholy blasted trees […] to mourn and pine and die' (p.329).[78]

The vast dome of Mont Blanc has acted as a beacon of hope and although the plague is over, the hope has not been realised. After the ice cave there is a wavering between happiness and despondency. Shelley's returning to the Alps as a setting for her fiction is certainly an act of sentimentality that forms part of that biographical matrix. However, it is only when the alpine sublime is set at a distance that a sense of reconciliation and happiness is expressed. After once more crossing the 'ravine of Arve' probably by the Pont Pélissier that 'commands a prospect of its pine-clothed depths, and the snowy mountains that wall it in' the alpine sublime gives way to a depiction of alpine landscape rooted in beauty. The party find themselves 'tottering on the dizzy brink' while sitting 'beneath the toppling rocks, beside the waterfalls' (p.331). Shelley softens such quasi-sublime scenes by quoting from 'Kubla Khan', celebrating '[f]orests, ancient as the hills, | And folding sunny spots of greenery' where chamois graze and a 'tamed squirrel lays up her hoard' (p.331). This interlude of happiness is transitory. Following the burial of the body on Mont Blanc and

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[78] Higgins, 2017, p.83.

these scenes in its shadow, the narrative plays out the destruction of all but Verney. The novel does not end on a particularly optimistic note. Instead, we are left with Verney envisaging a disappearance into the distance akin to that enacted by the Creature in *Frankenstein.*

Shelley's apparent sentimentality for the Alps was not a means to celebrate the drama or sublimity inherent in its storms, avalanches and menacing glaciers, but instead proved to be a process of self-flagellation; once more confronting the associations of death in landscapes that others had deemed to be life-affirming. Indeed, in *The Last Man* the beauty and happiness that is momentarily experienced in the pine forests of the valleys is set in contrast to the devastation of the mountains. This is entirely consistent with Shelley's attitude to the Alps in *Frankenstein* where high mountains prove a space of existential confrontation. The return to the Alps and her oscillation between – if not hope – then consolation, suggests she struggled to express how she ultimately felt about Mont Blanc and the Alps. Indeed, her voice is perhaps heard as Verney relates: 'we regarded the Alps as boundaries between our former and our future state of existence, and so clung fondly to what of old we had loved' (p.331). The novel hints that it was a boundary Shelley was uncertain about crossing. At the very least, *The Last Man* casts doubt upon Mont Blanc and the Alps as potential means to spiritual elevation. Indeed, both *The Last Man* and *Frankenstein* suggest that a path to a Rousseauian mode of existence where humanity could be rejuvenated by wild nature was unlikely and Mont Blanc – if it reflects anything, it is the closeness of death, not the glittering brilliance of living.

Conclusion

This chapter has suggested that gothic writers deployed Mont Blanc because it had a number of desired qualities and associations upon which to draw. These included not only the well-known and well-documented destructive potential of its hostile environment, its sinister folkloric associations, but importantly its proximity to civilised social spheres in the heart of Europe – particularly that of Geneva and its lake. The accessibility of Mont Blanc is exploited in *The Romance of the Forest*, 'The Hermit of Mont Blanc', *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* in a way that gives a fundamentally different effect than would have been achieved by using a mountain further afield in a location such as the Peruvian Alps, the Himalayas or even on the edges of Europe as in *Dracula* (1897) with its use of the Transylvanian Alps. A location to which readers have visited or at least can imagine visiting exerts a very different psychological impression compared with a distant location. This is why there is a significant difference between the presence of the Creature on the Mer de Glace and his presence in the Arctic. Nonetheless, the effects achieved by Mont Blanc as a setting ahead of any other well-known mountain in the Alps should not be overstated.

Byron's *Manfred* shows that the Jungfrau could be equally suitable to the needs of British gothic writings – perhaps even more so insofar as it was slightly less known, yet still potentially close. Likewise, while mountain wildernesses have continued to be a mainstay of horror and gothic writings, Mont Blanc has not been a location routinely returned to by British authors seeking settings for supernatural narratives. This has almost certainly been because even by the mid-nineteenth century mass tourism to Mont Blanc facilitated by Thomas Cook and others made the mountain too well-known and, by association, appear too busy.[79] This chapter gives a sense of how certain writers appropriated and manipulated the cultural meanings of Mont Blanc and the Aps to facilitate gothic narratives in a way that broadened the literary and cultural scope of the mountain's identity. Indeed, both Mary Shelley and Lord Byron contributed to the complex identity of Mont Blanc by challenging predominant values and, to an extent, subverting underlying assumptions about the peak. Likewise, Mary Robinson's gothic narrative can hardly be seen as a reiteration of the dominant British literary fashion to celebrate the mountain's sublimity as something pure and unadulterated.

Each writer in this chapter deployed Mont Blanc in their gothic-infused writings as a landscape beyond the fringe of the social sphere, but also as a boundary that could easily be crossed. In this way, Mont Blanc constituted a metaphor for the nearness of death and sinister forces over which humanity has little or no control: in *Frankenstein*, Victor has no power over the Creature on the Mer de Glace; in *The Last Man,* Verney can do nothing to halt the plague despite the beauty of the mountains*;* the Hermit can do nothing to prevent the death of his beloved; in *The Romance of the Forest,* Adeline walks upon the Mer de Glace and recognises the potential apocalypse over which humanity has no control; and in *Manfred* the powerlessness of the Byronic hero is a central theme that is contrasted by the seismic power of the supernatural Spirit of Mont Blanc and the other forces of nature. If a fundamental concern of enlightenment rationality was to acquire knowledge that would empower humanity, the supernatural manifestations imagined by gothic writers in the Alps emphasise humanity's powerlessness. Indeed, *Frankenstein* is so compelling because Shelley represents the potential of human knowledge through Victor having the power to create life from death, yet she simultaneously reveals Victor's (or allegorically humanity's) inability to control that which is created. This underlying powerlessness is replicated in the gothic confrontations with Alpine landscapes in this chapter. It is a powerlessness that, despite technological innovations, Mont Blanc has continued to exert. While humanity seeks to overcome its powerlessness, there remains an inability to eradicate, mediate and accurately predict the risk of avalanches, rock fall or huge collapses such as that of the

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[79] See Jim Ring, p.93.

Aiguille de Chamoz that I witnessed while standing on the Mer de Glace. That powerlessness in the face of terror is now central to a new way of perceiving Mont Blanc. If today we do not venture to the Mer de Glace and imagine Frankenstein's Creature, dragons or witches to be lurking in the recesses, the massif and its glaciers have come to symbolise a new terror for the 21st century – the dawning realities of a global climate catastrophe. The language used to express the horror of climate change once more invests Mont Blanc with supernatural agency. Funerals are held by climate activists for lost Alpine glaciers, including those on Mont Blanc, while the faint snows that linger in their place are referred to by climate scientists as 'ghost glaciers'. Indeed, Mont Blanc is increasingly seen through a morality lens that has been fashioned by *Frankenstein* and, as the geophysicist Michael Wysession suggests, '[g]lobal climate change is a monster of our own making. We are Victor Frankenstein.'[80]
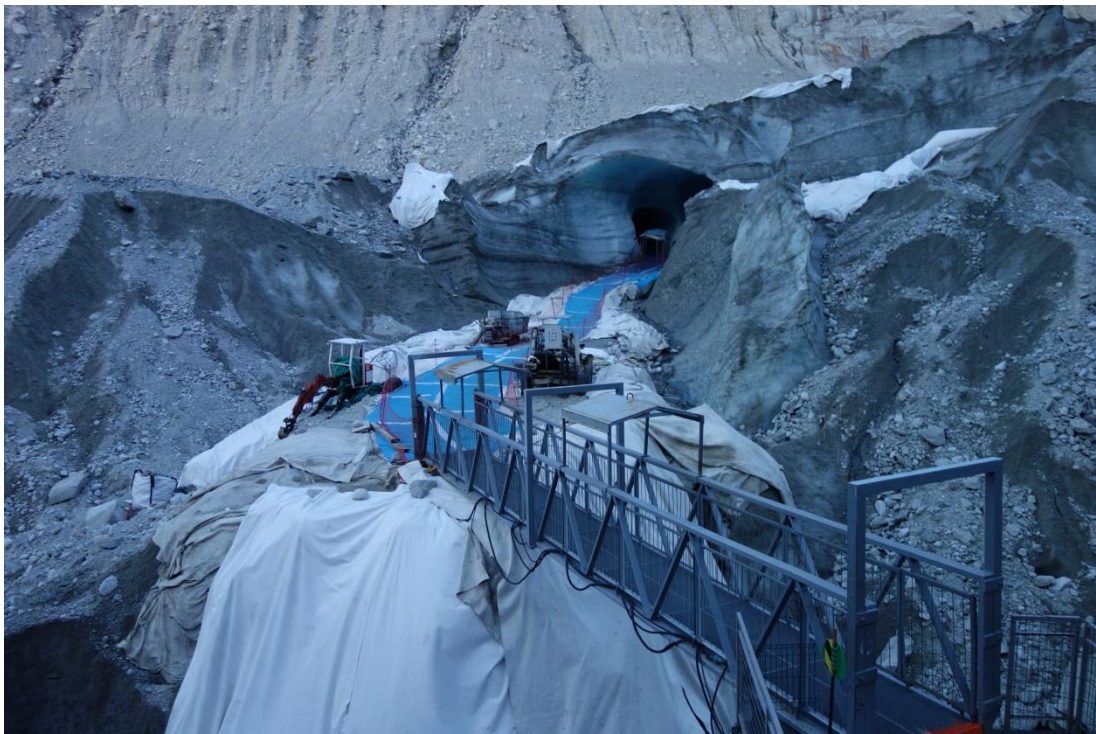

Figure 67 The ice grotto on the Mer de Glace; a manmade successor (in terms of exploiting the mountain's tourist potential) to the ice cave at the source of the Arveyron. Collapse of this manmade cave, which has to be dug at a lower level each summer, is extremely unlikely. Terror, for those visitors who wish to recognise it, is exerted by global climate change in the form of the moraine-strewn environment of this once ice kingdom and the need to deploy sheets and carpets in order to reduce the extremely high melt-rate of the glacier.

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[80] Michael Wysession, 'Frankenstein Meets Climate Change: Monsters of Our Own Making', *Journal of the Common Reader* (St Louis: Washington University Press, 2018)

Afterword: The Disappearing Infinite

This thesis has shown the way in which Mont Blanc has been understood in the context of a geoscape that is both material and semantic. The various strains of geocritical analysis in this thesis have been deployed alongside more conventional modes of literary criticism to focus on place and offer insight into both texts and their authors. It is not my intention in this afterword to reiterate those findings and the conclusions of each chapter. Rather, I will distil some of the key themes to which the thesis has brought insight and suggest their contemporary implications and legacies. In Chapter One I have suggested how Lake Geneva offered a means of understanding the mountain through juxtaposition and gendered geography. I have shown how this relationship continued to be important throughout the Romantic era and may have been a fundamental component in Wordsworth's reimagined response to Mont Blanc on the Col de Balme and also been important to Percy Shelley's 'Mont Blanc'. Through geosemantic mapping I have suggested how Mont Blanc's semantic associations are perhaps broader and more complex than might have been considered. Such mapping of place-association in texts and the related connections made in the mind is necessarily an inexact science. Nonetheless, it is a process that at the very least allows us to understand the texts from a perspective that is not without interest. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Mont Blanc retained the fame it had acquired in the eighteenth-century and the Romantic period. The mountain's contextual associations necessarily broadened as attitudes to it were increasingly filtered through successive lenses of thinking about place within an increasingly globalised cognisance. The name 'Mont Blanc' began to be used as a brand of luxury pens from 1909 – further commodifying the mountain's semantic associations and Chamonix hosted the inaugural Winter Olympics in 1924. Despite such harmless associations, the relationship between the mountain and the nearness of death suggested by the Shelleys and others in the Romantic period has continued to affect how the mountain is interpreted and represented. In the twenty-first century, the massif averages fifty deaths a year. Many of the responses to these deaths continue to perpetuate the grim fascination with mountain tragedy that had its roots in the eighteenth century. Indeed, in the parallel mountain narratives that arose during the nineteenth century and somewhat diminished the pre-eminence of Mont Blanc as the most written about high mountain, death was a key factor: in short, other mountains were at times far more deadly, and as such, far more fascinating. The Matterhorn was first climbed by Edward Whymper's party in 1865 – a feat that would have drawn considerable attention of itself but attracted far more after four members of the party died when a rope snapped during the descent and rumours of foul play and misadventure surfaced that – for a time – scandalised Victorian

society.[1] A steady flow of death has continued on such famous mountains ever since. The risk of death underpinned the narrative of Hilary and Tenzing's ascent of Everest in 1953, but death and the world's highest mountain had already become an intractable association. Indeed, while Hilary was hydrated enough to urinate on the summit he simultaneously scanned the scene for traces of Mallory and Irving who had died on the upper reaches of the mountain in 1924 – leaving a mystery about their ascent that has yet to be resolved.

Writing about eighteenth and nineteenth-century ascents, Bainbridge has suggested that '[m]ountaineering on Mont Blanc had always been a spectator sport' and that 'while the possibility of death called into question' the pursuit of 'scientific mountaineering' it also 'served to emphasise the bravery of the heroic mountaineer' in a way that was driven by ego.[2] During the 1930s the North Face of the Eiger attracted both Nazi pseudo-supermen and an increased public fascination with the risks of climbing alpine peaks. From the 1930s and throughout the rest of the mid-twentieth century, climbers falling and dying evolved into a grim spectator sport. On the Eiger this could be observed through the many telescopes set out for the purpose at Grindelwald. Bonatti's ascent of his eponymous pillar on the Aiguille du Dru on Mont Blanc was similarly viewed with the anticipation that he might fall. In many ways this was an evolution of the Romantic era ascents of Mont Blanc in which although death was less likely, it was a possibility that added to the drama. Today websites display the mummified remains of climbers in the Himalayas as if they are art installations. While we may recoil at such presentations, this thesis has shown that whether it was William Parsons' vein-slitting chamois hunter in 'Ode to Lake Geneva', Percy Shelley's 'hunter's bone' in 'Mont Blanc' or Mary Shelley's description of the body in the collapsing ice cave of *The Last Man*, the fascination with the macabre aspects inherent in mountain activity was always an important influence upon the story of Mont Blanc.

While during the Romantic period British literary responses to mountains varied, there was for many British writers a tendency towards what John Ruskin would later refer to in the title of an essay as 'The Mountain Glory'.[3] This notion and its development through the long-eighteenth century have been considered by Nicholson (1959). The misleading impression of overwhelming mountain glory, however, owed a great deal to those who followed in the footsteps of the Romantic poets. Benjamin Disraeli visited the Alps in 1826 and rowed on Lake Geneva nightly with Lord Byron's boatman, Maurice.[4] From the heights of the Jura, Disraeli witnessed 'the most magnificent sight in the world – the whole range of the high Alps with Mont Blanc in the centre without a cloud'. From the waters of Lake

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[1] See Fleming, 2000, pp.274-301.
[2] Bainbridge in Esterhammer, 2015, p.159 and p.161.
[3] John Ruskin, *Little Masterpieces* (New York: Doubleday and McClure, 1898)
[4] Benjamin Disraeli, 'August 21, 1826', *Benjamin Disraeli Letters: 1815-1834* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

Geneva he saw 'Mt. Blanc by all lights – twice by sunset when the whole mighty mountain is quite rosy' adding that the 'effect is beyond all description'.[5] These 'mountain glory' impressions were reworked for *Contarini Fleming*, a novel of 1832. Yet perhaps no other figure did as much during the Victorian period as Ruskin to further the appreciation of wild mountain scenery in British art and culture and propagate the notion that the legacy of the Romantics in mountain landscapes was all pantheism or spiritual communion with nature. Nourished on the poetry of the Romantics, as a youth Ruskin was taken to Mont Blanc and the wider Alps by his parents. The mountains cast a spell on him, just as they had on Disraeli, and he continued to return to them as an adult. From his youth onwards Ruskin wrote several poems to feature Mont Blanc, including one describing its first ascent.[6] These poems tended to perpetuate the clichés associated with the mountain: his 'Mont Blanc' (1836) proves a perfunctory loco-descriptive offering in rhyming couplets, while his 'Mont Blanc Revisited' (1846) is little more than a prosaic piece of the religious sublime. Dickens visited in 1846 and recorded the tourist experience, deploying century-old clichés that glorified the mountain: 'Mont Blanc and the Vale of Chamonix, and the Mer de Glace and all the wonders of that most wonderful place are above and beyond one's wildest expectations', to which he added, 'I cannot imagine anything in nature more stupendous or sublime.'[7] Such clichéd celebrations disguise the complex nature of responses to mountains, and in particular Mont Blanc. As Duffy has written:

> Romantic-period disappointments with the Alpine sublime were not restricted to the Wordsworth's failure to be impressed by Mont Blanc. The increasing remediation of the Alps as 'classic ground' and the concomitant range of expectations created in would-be travellers, perhaps inevitably created the occasional disappointment.[8]

Likewise, in addressing Radcliffe's travel to mountainous places in Britain in the 1790s and its potential relationship to a cessation in Radcliffe's heavily pictorial literary output, Dorothy McMillan has proposed that, '[w]hile then Radcliffe's contemporaries anxiously wanted to believe that the special characteristics of her novels were born out of her experience of real places, what I am suggesting is that her experience of real places is what may well have put an end to her fiction.'[9] McMillan has cautiously recognised in Radcliffe a sense of disillusion, or at least a difficulty for her to overcome the realities of place once it had expunged the imaginary. Following Duffy and McMillan, disillusion is a trope that this thesis has likewise highlighted. Certainly, there was a more nuanced response to Mont Blanc

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[5] Disraeli, 'August 21, 1826'.

[6] See Duffy (2013), p.43.

[7] Charles Dickens, 'Letter to John Forster, 2 August 1846' in John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens,* vol 1 (Philadelphia: 1873), p.253.

[8] Duffy, 2013, p.54.

[9] Dorothy McMillan, 'Ann Radcliffe's English Travels' in Gilroy, p.63.

than might have been expected. If for some writers, such as Whalley, the effect of a visit to Mont Blanc could influence the construction of a stately home and inspire him to publish a first long poem, for other writers the experience appears to have worked negatively. Indeed, even Whalley conceded that although Mont Blanc exceeded expectations, its glaciers were a disappointment.[10] While Wordsworth's apparent repositioning of his attitude to Mont Blanc has long been recognised and subjected to critical attention, elements of disillusionment more assuredly related to the experience of Mont Blanc can be discerned in the writings of Cooksey, Percy Shelley, Byron and Mary Shelley.

Recognising the process of disillusionment with subject landscapes and considering its effect on shaping texts is important. For example, Byron's apparent disillusionment with Mont Blanc might not have led him to reduce his poetic output in the way McMillan has argued it did Radcliffe's literary productiveness, however it may have influenced his decision to ignore the Alps in future poems. Much of the disillusionment with Mont Blanc manifested by British writers was undoubtedly rooted in the shifting identities and associations conferred by the term 'tourist'. Striving to be *atourist* not *a tourist* was important for writers to assert their independence from the busy hum of mass visitors. Pamela Buck, taking a lead from James Buzard, has written that Romantic era '[t]ravellers considered themselves to be more original than vulgar tourists who followed the crowd to see conventional sites'.[11] Such snobbism has since become a familiar trope of travel generally. In Tibet, a supercilious individual once defined himself to me as a 'traveller' not a 'tourist' before regurgitating Paul Theroux's adage that, 'tourists don't know where they've been, travellers don't know where they're going'.[12] The reductive elitism and attempts at separation from the herd seen by many writers in this thesis have continued to be forces influencing responses to Mont Blanc and travel more broadly.

This thesis has considered the role of vicarious and imagined travel in the writings of Mont Blanc. The legacy of processes that might broadly be defined as forming the Mont Blancs of the mind can be seen in how the mountain has been consumed and commodified since 1826. As Ring and Hansen have both suggested, the success in Britain in the 1850s of *Albert Smith's Ascent of Mont Blanc* – a staggeringly popular theatre show based on its author's climb that involved elaborate sets, props and devices, including Saint Bernard dogs – encouraged audiences into a state of vicarious ascent and provoked a columnist in *The Times* to write in 1856: 'At present a perfect Mont Blanc mania pervades the minds of our fellow countrymen. Its majesty is stale, its "diadem of snow" a mere theatrical gimcrack.'[13] (The irony that Byron may have meant the diadem of snow ironically in the first instance

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[10] See Chapter Four.
[11] Buck in Esterhammer, p.124.
[12] Paul Theroux, *The Happy Isles of Oceania: Paddling the Pacific* (London: Penguin, 1992), p.5
[13] 'Another Ascent of Mont Blanc', *The Times,* 6 October 1856 (London: 1856), p.9.

reiterates that the nuances in the writings of the Romantic poets with their disillusionment and their questioning tended to be overlooked in the two centuries that followed their writings.) Despite such negative reviews, Smith's show, and others like it, functioned not only as adverts for the mountain, but for what it was possible to achieve. They became engines of social change that allowed members of the lower-middle classes to visit a peak that had – mostly – previously been the preserve of far wealthier Britons. From the mid-nineteenth century the character of Mont Blanc tourism changed considerably. Jim Ring has described the rise of the travel agent Thomas Cook and the degree to which travels to the Alps were commercialised and made more accessible to a broader section of the British public, which in turn perpetuated tourist infrastructure development. While Ring underplays the prevalence of early nineteenth-century visits, there is little doubt that Mont Blanc tourism accelerated exponentially during the latter half of the nineteenth century.[14] Mark Twain, who visited the mountain in 1878, captured in *A Tramp Abroad* such inclinations with an astute parody of both the tourist circus and the endeavours of mountaineers who strived for the summit but that also exposed the pretentiousness of the imagined or vicarious travel that many Romantic writers had depended upon: 'I wanted to stand with a party on the summit of Mont Blanc, merely to say I had done it' Twain writes, of his 'superb idea' to ascend Mont Blanc by telescope. He continues, writing of the 'telescoper' that 'I first inquired if there was any danger? He said no – not by telescope'.[15] Despite the humour of Twain's satirical Mont Blanc in *A Tramp Abroad,* the mountain also elicited awe in the American and his bathetic parody is contrasted in the same chapter by the pathos and macabre undertones with which he describes the tragic descent of the Britons, Sir George Young and his brothers Albert and James. Albert Smith's show and others like it anticipated the technologies through which Mont Blanc is often reduced and experienced today – the drama of a mountaineering film, the vicarious ascent of the GoPro Youtube video or the virtual god vantage of Google Earth. Indeed, even for those who do ascend the mountain today, there is a sense that it might not become real for them until they have posted a photo on Facebook or other internet social networks. It is a realisation of Baudrillard's view of postmodern travel in *America* (1989) and the need to 'live it all again on the video at home in real time, not simply for the pleasure of remembering but because the fascination of senseless repetition is already present in the abstraction of the journey'.[16]

This thesis has examined the interactions between the politics of landscape and the specificities of material place. Mont Blanc's situation in Savoy fostered a complex set of associations. As many critics have acknowledged, the influence of Rousseau in both

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[14] Jim Ring, *How the English Made the Alps* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), pp.83-99.
[15] Mark Twain, *A Tramp Abroad* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1880), p.515.
[16] Baudrillard, 1989, p.1.

recognising and challenging associations of place through political delineation was considerable. Likewise, the wars with France, Napoleon's Empire, the fall of that empire and the reinstatement of an old order, have each acted as forces that have shaped the responses of British writers and visitors to the mountain in the years 1786-1826. Chamonix became part of France in 1860. After the unification of Italy in 1861 and the dissolution of the Kingdom of Savoy and Sardinia, it was decreed in the Treaty of Turin that the summit of Mont Blanc/Monte Bianco was to be shared and the border between France and Italy to be drawn across it. The European political battle for Mont Blanc did not end there, however. In the cultural field of the 1930s Mont Blanc – with its pure whiteness – attracted a mythical symbolic power for fascist artists, a trend best captured in the prototype Nazi propaganda film *Stürme über dem Mont Blanc* (1930) that starred and was partially directed by Leni Riefenstahl. The film's sentimental presentation of German heroism and the wider association of the Alps as a testing ground for an Aryan super-race were to be played out for real when in 1944 the mountain's upper reaches witnessed the highest battleground of World War II as French Resistance fighters prevented Nazi attempts to conquer its iconic snows and reclaim Chamonix.[17] The political complexity of Mont Blanc and its symbolic importance to European identities has continued to be a feature of the mountain into the twenty-first century. This is seen if the official 1:25,000 French IGN map is compared to the equivalent official 1:25,000 Italian IGC map:

Figure 68 Italian IGC map (107, 2012, 1:25,000) showing the state border at the 4810m summit

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[17] Sue Clarke, '1945 – The Battle of the Vallée Blanche', *High Mountain Sports Magazine,* January 1995, 146, pp.15-20.

Figure 69 French IGN map (3531 ET, 1998, 1:25,000). The Franco-Italian border is marked with crosses. The 4808m summit is entirely in France (summit altitude differs from Italian map because it is ice-clad, and changes year on year).

The Treaty of Turin places the border on the summit and this should clearly be the default delineation, but maps are powerful things. GoogleEarth has relied on French IGN mapping and designated the border according to the French system. In my co-authored book *Europe's High Points: Reaching the Summit of Every Country in Europe* – the only guide book to the state high points of Europe – the border issue for Mont Blanc warranted several dedicated sections. Misconceptions and ongoing disputes over the mapping and dominion of Mont Blanc continue to this day. In 2015 even the Italian Prime Minister weighed into the dispute.[18]

In many ways the story of Mont Blanc, its discovery and its early representation and subsequent fame, has been a story of impact and therefore a story of inevitable loss. The Vallot Observatory was constructed in 1890 at 4365m, at the foot of the summit approach from the Gouter and Grand Mulets routes. Joseph Vallot was an orientalist and had added a Chinese Salon full of Chinese ornaments and furniture to the hut by 1892. The Janssen Observatory was constructed on the summit of the mountain in 1893. These structures symbolised man's power over nature: mountains were increasingly seen as an obstacle to be overcome and were associated with conquest and progress. While Janssen's observatory had succumbed to the power of that ever-shifting ice by 1909 and has not been replaced, the Vallot Hut has remained (I took shelter from a storm there in 2005). In the century or so since, the French, Italians and Swiss have had few qualms about ribboning Mont Blanc with cable cars, ski lifts, funiculars, the Mont Blanc Tunnel bored through its heart and modernised road and rail networks – all largely in support of exploiting the mountain's economic potential or disregarding the mountain's environment in favour of wider economic

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[18] See Michael Day, *Independent,* 28 June 2015
<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/mont-blanc-controversy-french-suffer-a-fit-of-pique-as-italys-prime-minister-reclaims-europes-10351349.html>

growth. Neither have these countries resisted punctuating Mont Blanc with summit crosses, Madonna statues, plaques, fixed ropes, bolts, museums and increasingly grotesque mountain refuges and hotels – though for now the summit is unadorned. The glass box at the Aiguille du Midi cable car station has been installed so visitors can feel they are standing above a void. It represents the mountain as garish theme park. Decisions elsewhere have had little better concern for the aesthetics of nature. In 2012, the Frebouze Glacier below the east face of the Grand Jorasses on the Mont Blanc Massif saw the installation of a space-age monstrosity that had been helicoptered in to replace a little-known mountain shelter – the Gervasutti Hut.

Figure 70 The hard to discern original Gervasutti Hut in 2007: the primary approach required a precarious traditional-style climb across the snow covered shelves in the image.
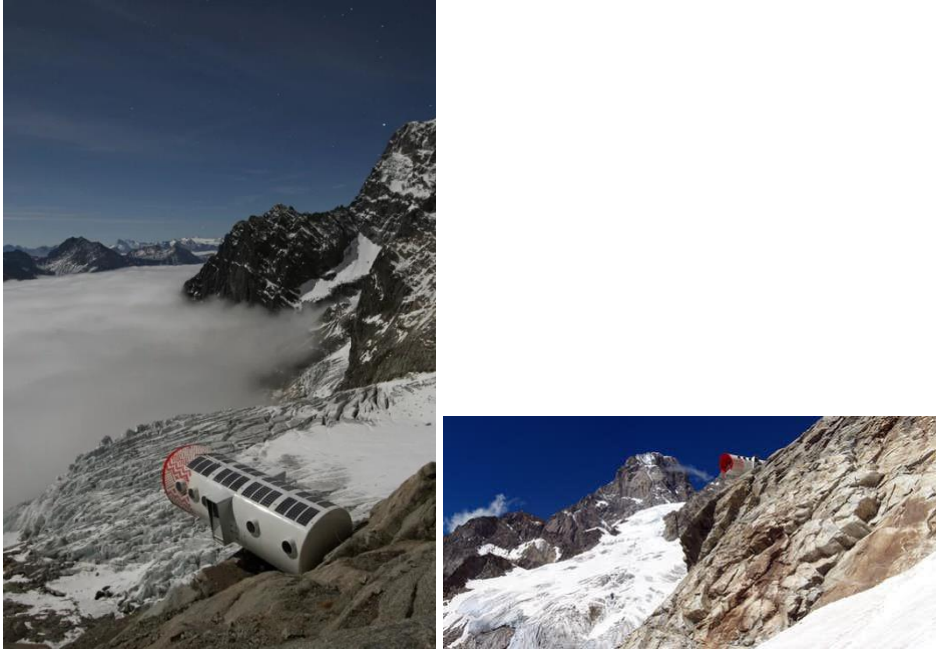
Figure 71 Two images of the new Gervasutti Hut, 2012.[19]

I stayed at the former Gervasutti hut on two occasions. Hardly anyone ever did so. The visitors' book had fewer than ten entries or so a year, and the hut's primary function was to serve low environmental impact traditional mountaineers. The original hut blended in with the surroundings so much that when, with great difficulty, it was discerned, it added a romantic picturesque quality to the scene. The contrast with the new installation is stark. Its design has attracted visitors as if it were a Disney attraction and fixed ropes have been added to the approach shelves to facilitate their access. Similarly, the latest incarnation of the Gouter Hut was installed in 2013. If the former hut had been fairly obtrusive, the new hut resembles the compound of a James Bond film villain.

Figure 72 The new Gouter Hut in 2013.[20]

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[19] https://www.thebmc.co.uk/controversial-new-bivouac-hut-in-mont-blanc-massif [Accessed Feb, 2019]

Mont Blanc is a mountain vandalised by human activity. Even its adoption as a symbol for climate catastrophe – in no small part because of its accessibility in the heart of Europe – has seen the mountain packaged and commodified, with further related infrastructure to mar its natural grandeur.

This thesis has shown that British representations of Mont Blanc in the years 1786-1826 were often reflective of writers' anxieties about mortality and the fragility of human existence. Mont Blanc offered a means by which death-fantasies and ideas of human catastrophe could be explored by imagining the mountain's destructive forces in visions of the deluge or geological cycles, ice advance, avalanches, rock fall, monstrous acts by monstrous beings, crevasse falls, and images of lastness brought about by a global pandemic. Mont Blanc in this period should be more clearly recognised as not only a symbol of the grandeur of nature, but of the deep anxiety inherent in the human condition. Today the anxieties subtly manifested by the Romantic poets and authors are more easily discernible. Indeed, despite disputes and confusions over the political delineation of Mont Blanc, especially between the French and Italians, Mont Blanc is once more asserting its symbolic power outside of European state delineations and functioning as a prime global case study for the devastating effects of global climate change and the impact of human activity on a once-celebrated natural space. Climate change has allowed Mont Blanc a new touristic niche rooted in scientific readings that resemble the scientific investigations of savants and travellers to Mont Blanc in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, in essence, the modern attraction is a refined version of that age-old macabre fascination with death in mountains – only here we can watch the slow death of the natural world as we have formerly understood it. No longer are visitors expected to stand on the cliff edge and marvel at the sublimity of nature; rather, the Mer de Glace today functions as a beacon of eco-catastrophe. The French have installed markers on the steps from Montenvers to the glacier. Visitors are encouraged to compare them in order to comprehend the alarmingly rapid decline of the ice and the frightening pace of climate change.

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[20] Unknown photographer
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Go%C3%BBter_Refuge#/media/File:Gouter_solar_20130823.jpg>

Figure 73 View of the Mer De Glace ice cave from the 1985 level of the glacier. All of the white patches on the photo are not snow, but are giant sheets deployed to slow down melting.

Figure 74 The disappearing Mer de Glace in 2019. The plaque on the right marks the level of the glacier in 2015, twenty metres or so above that of 2019.

Before the Paris Agreement of 2015, French Prime Minister Maneul Valls used the Mer de Glace to focus attention on the effects of global warming ahead of the climate talks. Overlooking the Mer de Glace, Valls gave a speech: 'Visitors are now coming here to witness climate change. It's sad, but it's necessary.'[21] These visitors can now stand in view of the retreating Mer de Glace and perceive the mountain in the context of fleeting climate change anxieties that invert Percy Bysshe Shelley's anxieties of perpetual ice advance. They are awed, but primarily by the power of human destructiveness rather than by the landscape. The retreat of the Mer de Glace is climate change as spectacle. It is the diminishing polar ice caps conveniently packaged for tourists in the heart of Europe, a new horror to marvel at and fear, a new quasi-religious cult of eco-catastrophe, a new sublime in which the power of

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[21] Helene Fouquet, 'Want to See Climate Change? Come With Me to the Mont Blanc Glacier' *Bloomberg News,* 25 Spetember, 2015 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2015-09-25/climate-change-on-mont-blanc-the-vanishing-mer-de-glace> Accessed July 2018.

nature is mirrored by our ability to create and destroy, a new lens through which to look upon the towering edifices of rock and once eternal snows and ask again, 'And what were thou…?'

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