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## World and Voice: Alpine Experiences and the Romantic Resistance to Subjectivism

"Power", writes Shelley in his famous poem on Mont Blanc, "Power dwells apart in its tranquillity, / Remote, serene and inaccessible: / And *this*, the naked countenance of earth, / On which I gaze, even these primaevial mountains / Teach the adverting mind" (ll. 96-99).<sup>1</sup> These lines imply a number of questions: First, where exactly does power dwell? "Apart" is not a specific location, so what does it refer to? "Apart" from what? Secondly, if power is "inaccessible", why bother? Thirdly, what is it about "the naked countenance of earth" and "these primaevial mountains" that justifies the striking combination of an emphasis on "*this*" on the one hand and a qualifying "even" on the other? And finally, with regard to the speaker: to what extent is the passive process of being taught by the stark scenery affected by the active motivation of the gaze by an "*adverting* mind" turning its attention to particular aspects of the 'outside' world and thus drawing attention to them?<sup>2</sup> Obviously, all these questions lead us right to the heart of the ongoing debate as to what, exactly, Romanticism is (or was?) all about, and in my paper I will turn to two of the well-known instances of Alpine experiences in British Romanticism (viz., Coleridge's "Hymn before Sun-rise" and Shelley's "Mont Blanc") in order to provide a temporary answer to this broad question, an answer which draws upon the most recent developments in Romantic studies.

In spite of the fact that, according to the latest handbooks on the subject, Romanticism is a "notoriously slippery concept of modern history" (cf. McCalman 1), there is a fairly stable consensus as to what can be counted as characteristics of Romanticism. Nobody would seriously doubt that M.H. Abrams had a point when he described Romanticism in terms of a replacement of a poetry of mimesis by a poetry of self-expression (cf. *Mirror and Lamp and Natural Supernaturalism*). It is just that closer scrutiny of the *process* of replacement has revealed astonishing continuities (cf., e.g., Easthope; Griffin; Burwick, *Mimesis*; and "Reflection") and that, consequently, the notion of self-expression has lost much of its autonomy and revolutionary impetus. Thus, what Clifford Siskin has termed the "Lyric Turn" (*Historicity*), i.e. "the turn by which the self is established at the centre of the text" (Cronin 9), has come to be seen as an instance of a long-term paradigm shift in literary (and cultural) history.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the notion of self-expression has been thoroughly historicized and contextualized in recent

1 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Mont Blanc. Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni" [1816]. *British Literature 1780-1830*. Ed. Anne K. Mellor and Richard E. Mattak. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1996. 1063-1064.

2 In the sense of the Latin 'advertere': 'to turn one's attention to', 'to turn toward' that shifts in English towards 'to draw attention to'.

3 Cf. Furst, who defines such paradigm shifts as "the emergence of the new from the familiar via a gradual change of emphasis that ultimately leads to the modification of the entire structure" (3).

emancipation of subjectivity will not find much in a poem that is at first glance exclusively concerned with praising God in fairly conventional ways, and closer attention to 'Romantic' parameters reveals a lack of subtlety: "[M]odern critics," observes Angela Esterhammer in a recent revisionary reading of the text, "tend to read (or avoid reading) [the "Hymn before Sun-rise"] because they see it as a pompous show of confidence in poetic voice" (225). In this sense, the "Hymn" seems to be not quite up to the standards of reflexive subjectivity that are commonly expected of Romantic texts, i.e., metaphorically speaking, the poem seems to be somehow caught before the sunrise of an 'enlightened', reflexive Romanticism. However, the thesis that the functional counterpart of a Romantic emancipation of subjectivity is a Romantic resistance to subjectivism opens up new possibilities of reading the poem as an exemplary case of Romantic ambiguity.

A first hint at a resistance to subjectivism can be found in Coleridge's account of the poem's genesis. Announcing his poem's imminent publication and commenting on its origins in a letter to William Sotheby on 10<sup>th</sup> September, 1802, Coleridge describes how, while climbing Scafell in the Lake District in the first week of August in that year,

I involuntarily poured forth a Hymn in the manner of the *Psalms*, tho' afterwards I thought the Ideas & disproportionate to our humble mountains – & accidentally fighting on a short Note in some swiss Poems, concerning the Vale of Chamouny, & it's Mountain, I transferred myself thither, in the Spirit, & adapted my former feelings to these grander external objects. (*Poetical Works* I.2: 717-18)

In spite of the fact that Coleridge's alleged 'involuntary outpourings' on Scafell were already canalized into the culturally accepted "manner of the *Psalms*", this did not seem to be enough: In view of a perceived 'disproportion' between personal experience and external world the poem was transferred to a fictional realm opened up by earlier texts and in this fictional realm a paradigmatic case was modelled out of Coleridge's individual experience.<sup>8</sup> For this, only the highest mountain and the grandest external objects would suffice, and Coleridge's "Hymn before Sun-rise" constructs an encounter of subject and landscape, of voice and world in these terms.

From the very beginning of the poem, Mont Blanc appears as the only fixture in a world of movement, albeit a strangely insubstantial one which can only be described in terms of the effects it seems to have on its surroundings, seems to have, that is, in the eye of the beholder as enacted by the poetic voice of the poem. The opening question "Hast thou a charm to stay the Morning-Star / In his steep course? So long he seems to pause / On thy bald awful head" (ll. 1-3)<sup>9</sup> sets the scene for the first and most important of many apostrophes:

"O sovran B L A N C!" (l. 3)

8 To Wordsworth's consternation, Coleridge never laid eyes on Mont Blanc in person and thus usurped a territory which Wordsworth had earlier claimed on the basis of actual experience. On this competitive aspect cf. Thomas.

9 Line references are to *Poetical Works* I.2. See also *Poetical Works* II.2.

scholarship: subjectivity, individuality, authenticity, and originality have all been deconstructed as 'naturalized' constructs of a Romantic ideology (cf. McGann), which emerged under specifically modern conditions of mediality centred around writing and printing and created a new institution of literature (cf., e.g., Richardson; Siskin, *Work of Writing*).

Under the new dispensation grounded in the anti-common-sensical stance of late-20<sup>th</sup>-century literary theory, Romanticism joins a number of critical terms such as, for example, representation, culture, writing, authorship, or gender, which have been described as enacting a dialectics of containment and subversion, of restricting and enabling functions.<sup>4</sup> In the light of these ideas Romanticism is as much the product of the cultural emergence of modern subjectivity as its shaping and determining force,<sup>5</sup> and a reading of Romantic texts will have to take this ambiguity of restricting and enabling functions into account. Against this background, the cultural emancipation of subjectivity commonly associated with the 'Romantic Revolution' can also be read as a cultural domestication of subjectivity, as the symptom of a cultural resistance to culturally non-assimilable effects of the modern foregrounding of subjective experience.<sup>6</sup> In what follows I will try to outline the consequences of such an approach for a reading of literary texts.

## 1 Before Sunrise?

Coleridge's "Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouny", first published in the *Morning Post* in 1802 and famously denounced by De Quincey as a case of plagiarism<sup>7</sup> and by Wordsworth as "a specimen of the mock sublime" (cf. Curran 60), has also been called "a black hole" in Coleridge scholarship, "a black hole [...] capable of absorbing considerable scholarly energy without returning any discernible light of its own" (Ruoff 191). Paradoxically, one reason for the poem's defiance of critical efforts might be its assertive stance. A criticism attuned to the basic assumption of a Romantic

4 See the respective entries in Lentricchia and McLaughlin.

5 Cf. Siskin: "[...] I have turned from the concept of periods, for it has come to carry an assumption of abrupt beginnings and endings that has led almost all critics to write Romanticism off as of the second or third decade of the nineteenth century. However, that was precisely the time at which the constructs and strategies of Romantic texts became normal for the entire culture, not only constituting the new formal and thematic criteria for literariness but also – as the newly charged literary institution took up the cultural work of defining 'real language' and the 'common man' – transforming the prosaic self into what we now think of as the modern subject" (*Historicity* 9-10). For a theoretically grounded historical overview of the emergence and persistence of Romanticism in this sense cf. Reinhardt.

6 The innovative thrust of such a change of perspective has recently been demonstrated by a revisionist philosophical study of German idealism in terms of its struggle against subjectivism as opposed to the commonly held view that German idealism brought subjectivism to full philosophical fruition (cf. Beiser).

7 Cf. on this topic Shaffer's balanced assessment.

Beginning with the 1809 printing of the poem in *The Friend*, the name 'Blanc' is in this prominent position rendered quite strikingly in double-spaced capital letters (cf. *Poetical Works* II.2: 931; Esterhammer, 237-38), suggesting that the mountain is, literally, a blank, an absence in the clearly discernible surrounding motion of the heavens as represented by the Morning-Star on the one hand and the rivers Arve and Arveiron on the other. It is, however, an absence whose presence can be inferred from its slight contrast with the "Deep [...] air" (l. 8) "Around [...] and above" (l. 7). The air is described as "dark, substantial, black, / An ebon mass" (ll. 8-9), and the 'sovereignty' of the 'blank' enforces mental activity on the part of the speaker: "*methinks* thou piercest it, / As with a wedge!" (ll. 9-10, emphasis added). A conscious return to the act of looking, however, does not confirm this projection of the mountain's agency but insists on its stillness and inaccessibility beneath its perceptible exterior, i.e. the ice-cap that separates the mountain from the rest of the universe: "*But* when I look *again*, / It is thine own calm home, thy crystal shrine, / Thy habitation from eternity!" (ll. 10-12, emphases added). It is interesting to note that what the speaker's eye 'sees' at this point, i.e. the ice-cap demarcating the outline of the mountain's peak, is described in terms of the preceding mental activity which anticipates the imminent sunrise as brought about by the mountain piercing the surrounding darkness. On this basis, visual perception is taken in by an optical illusion which suggests that the glittering ice surrounding the peak of the mountain is generating light while it is actually reflecting it.<sup>10</sup> Before sunrise, it seems, the largely invisible scenery is animated by the speaker's consciousness of meaningful motion revolving around the mountain as the inaccessible still-point of the turning world, and after a second apostrophe and a shift into past tense this projection is retrospectively reundered in highly abstract terms:

O dread and silent Mount! I gaz'd upon thee,  
Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,  
Did'st vanish from my thought: entranc'd in prayer  
I worshipp'd the Invisible alone. (ll. 13-16)

At the end of the introductory section of the poem (ll. 1-16), thought is presented as a process that has a tendency to cut itself off from perception and to tip over into worship of thought-generated structures without any reference to the world beyond, in short: into subjectivism.

The poem's resistance to this tendency is marked by a resounding "Yet" at the beginning of its second section (ll. 17-35), but in the course of the poem's publishing history this resistance takes two distinct forms. The first published version insists on the mountain's presence in the soul, which, as it were, bypasses thought and induces an active engagement with the world:

Yet thou, meantime, wast working on my soul  
[...]  
But I awake, and with a busier mind,  
And active will self-conscious, offer now

10 On the Romantic interrogation of the claims of mimesis in tropes of 'imitation' and 'the mirror' cf. Burwick *Mimesis*; and "Reflecton".

Not, as before, involuntary pray'r  
And passive adoration! –

Hand and voice,  
Awake, awake! and thou, my heart, awake!  
Awake, ye rocks! Ye forest pines, awake!  
Green fields, and icy cliffs! All join my hymn!

(l.2: 719-20, ll. 17, 20-28)<sup>11</sup>

From 1812 onwards, however, the turn towards an active engagement with the world suggests that the mountain is, despite earlier protestations of its vanishing (cf. l. 15), still present in thought, which in turn affects the soul:

Yet [...] [...]  
Thou, the meanwhile, wast blending with my Thought,  
[...] [...]  
Till the dilating Soul, enrapt, transfus'd,  
Into the mighty Vision passing – there  
As in her natural form, swell'd vast to Heaven!

Awake, my soul! not only passive praise  
Thou owest! not alone these swelling tears,  
Mute thanks and secret extacy! Awake,  
Voice of sweet song! Awake, my Heart, awake!  
Green Vales and icy Cliffs, all join my Hymn. (ll. 17, 19, 21-28)

Here, the whole process remains thought-centred, and all immediate reactions ("swelling tears / [...] and secret ecstasy") as well as earlier implications of actual contact with the world ("*Hand* and voice") are sublimated into song, in which the taking-part of nature is actually taken for granted, as the laconic full stop that finally replaces the preceding exclamation marks indicates. Now, it is no longer the speaker as a complete human being but only his spiritual dimension that is called upon to awaken from a merely passive response to the world, and this revision substitutes a "mighty Vision" of a transcendent God up in "Heaven" for the pantheistic outlook of the earlier version. While in 1802 the mountain affects the soul because it is something external to thought, the soul *becomes* the mountain reaching up to heaven *in thought* in 1812 (cf. Esterhammer 234).

At this point, the two versions of the poem part company in a very fundamental way: If the mountain remains external, as in the 1802 version, then the speaker will be faced with a static being marked by inaccessibility and otherness:

And thou, O silent mountain, sole and bare  
O blacker, than the darkness, all the night [...]

(ll. 29-30; ll.2: 927),

11 An early transcript of the poem in a letter to Sir George and Lady Beaumont (22 Sep 1803) has "Now" in line 20 for the more sudden and unlinear "But" (cf. *Poetical Works* II.2: 927).

run the opening lines of the third and final section of the second part of the poem in 1802 (ll. 29-35), a section which returns to the direct mode of address between speaker and mountain as established at the beginning of the poem and which recapitulates many of the introductory motifs such as the contrast between the mountain and the surrounding darkness on the one hand and the movement of the stars on the other. If, however, the soul of the speaker merges with the mountain, as is suggested in the 1812 version, then the speaker of a poem apostrophizing the mountain throughout will be left talking to himself (cf. Esterhammer 235), consequently incurring a greater danger of subjectivism. Accordingly, the mountain's role as a projection of the speaker's role in the world creeps into the opening lines of the third section of the second part of the poem in 1812:

Thou first and chief, sole Sovran of the Vale!  
O *struggling* with the Darkness all the night  
(ll. 29-30, emphasis added)

And while the second part ends with an appeal to the mountain to "wake, O wake, and utter praise!" (l. 35) in both versions, the ensuing praise will have to be subtly altered in order to avoid the subjectivist implications of this empowerment of poetic voice.

The third part of the poem (ll. 36-57), however, evades this problem for some time by merely posing questions about the mountain and its surroundings. The sequence of these questions, running upwards from the mountain's foundational (and invisible) "pillars deep in Earth" (l. 36) to its topmost appearance as "glorious as the Gates of Heaven" (l. 54) and upwards from the perpetual motion of the mountain's "five wild torrents" streaming downward to the frozen and eternal stillness of their "higher" mode of being, this vertical sequence points to one answer, which is finally and emphatically given in the last part of the poem (ll. 58-85): "GOD!" (l. 58). In 1802 this answer is unequivocally provided by nature:

GOD! GOD! The torrents, like a shout of nations,  
Utter! The ice-plain bursts, and answers GOD!  
GOD, sing the meadow-streams with gladsome voice,  
And pine groves with their soft, and soul-like sound,  
[...]  
The silent snow-mass, loos'ning, thunders GOD!  
(ll.2: 929, ll. 58-63)<sup>12</sup>

This affirmative stance was, however, modified at an early stage of the rewriting process, evolving into the following lines that appear in the reading text of the most recent Coleridge edition:

GOD! *let* the Torrents, like a Shout of Nations  
*Answer!* and *let* the Ice-plains *echo*, GOD!  
GOD! sing *ye* meadow-streams with gladsome voice!  
*Ye* Pine-groves, with *your* soft and soul-like sounds!  
And they too have a voice, yon piles of Snow,  
And in their perilous fall *shall* thunder, GOD!  
(ll. 58-63, emphases added)

<sup>12</sup> The line count of the variorum text refers to the reading text. 1802 does not have line 62.

Nature's response is, by then, no longer a matter of fact but rather something that has to be *willed* by the speaker, as the apostrophic structure of the poem suggests along with its new alignment of mountain and poetic voice.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the final apostrophe of the mountain takes on a different character. In the 1802 version, we read:

And thou, O silent Form, alone and bare,  
Whom, as I lift again my head bow'd low  
In adoration, I again behold,  
And to thy summit upward from thy base  
Sweep slowly with dim eyes suffus'd by tears,  
A wake, thou mountain form! rise, like a cloud!  
Rise, like a cloud of incense from the earth!  
(ll.2: 930, ll. 74-80; cf. l.2: 720)

The final reading text, on the other hand, incorporates a variety of revisions from the 1812 printing in *The Friend* onwards and reads:

Thou too, hoar Mount! with thy sky-pointing Peaks,  
Oft from whose feet the Avalanche, unheard,  
Shoots downward, glittering thro' the pure Serene,  
Into the depth of Clouds that veil thy breast –  
Thou too again, stupendous Mountain! thou  
That as I raise my head awhile bow'd low  
In adoration, upward from thy Base  
Slow-travelling with dim eyes suffus'd with tears,  
Solemnly seemest, like a vapoury cloud,  
To rise before me – Rise, O ever rise,  
Rise like a cloud of incense, from the Earth!  
(ll. 70-80)

Again, the mountain has turned from a "silent Form" that simply exists as an external object that can be beheld in adoration and addressed in exultation to a mentally appropriated representation, a representation all the more emphatically embedded between heaven and earth and enriched with attributes of sublimity and power, but nevertheless a representation whose existential counterpart is more doubtful: the rising of the mountain, which is merely an apostrophic postulate in 1802, becomes a mental process triggered by appearances from 1812 onwards (cf. "seemest"; l. 78).

All in all, then, Coleridge's reworking of his "Hymn before Sun-rise" suggests a process of mental appropriation which extends the universalizing impulse already discernible in Coleridge's change of the poem's setting from Scafell to Mont Blanc. This process incurs the danger of cutting off subjective experience from the world, a danger that the poem itself illustrates in its opening section and engages with throughout in its handling of poetic voice. Based on the figure of apostrophe, the "Hymn before Sun-rise" combines the figure's traditional rhetorical function as an affective intensifier with the new, specifically modern epistemological function of bringing forth a (he?)

<sup>13</sup> The next, structurally unchanged verse paragraph anticipates this shift even in 1802: "Ye dreadless flowers [...] / Ye [...] / Ye signs and wonders of the element! / Utter forth, GOD! and fill the hills with praise!" (ll.2: 929, ll. 64-69)

world in and on subjective terms.<sup>14</sup> In 1802, however, Coleridge's apostrophic mode seems to fall programmatically short of the staging of an encounter with the world as a relation between subjects that Jonathan Culler describes in his insightful essay "Apostrophe" (141). Instead, the object-ness of the world is left intact, and the speaker longs to join it in a pantheistic vision.<sup>15</sup> This is one mode of a Romantic resistance to subjectivism. In later versions of the poem, on the other hand, the mountain is increasingly endowed with a potential for subjective agency until its role in the world of the poem mirrors the role of the speaker in the world. Here, subjectivity fashions the world in its own image, and as this mode of address turns the speaker's linguistic engagement with the world into a soliloquy it does not come as a surprise that this world appears to be a fairly homogeneous one. In both cases (and in spite of the earlier 'conquest' of Mont Blanc in 1786/87), the mountain itself remains inaccessible, but it is just this inaccessibility that allows for an external representation of a position of immanent transcendence comparable to that occupied by the subject (cf. Keller). The images concluding the poem underline this precarious positioning between omnipotence and insecurity: finally apostrophizing the mountain as "Thou kingly Spirit throned among the hills, / Thou dread Ambassador from Earth to Heaven, / Great Hierarch!" (ll. 81-83), the poem remains within the bounds of a traditional but, as it were, pantheistically "immanentized" religiousness in 1802. Later, however, this view of the world is appropriated by subjectivity for its own elevation into immanent transcendence, and this step eventually turns the rhetorical strategy of apostrophe into what Culler terms a "sign of a fiction which knows its own fictive nature" (146). And this is the second mode of a Romantic resistance to subjectivism: a reflexive turn which is only vaguely present in later versions of the "Hymn" but which becomes a dominant feature in the "post-Romantic" evolution of modern literature.

## 2 The Still Cave of Poesy

"Who would be, who could be, an Atheist, in this valley of wonders," enthuses Coleridge in his prefatory note to the first printing of his "Hymn before Sun-rise" in *The Morning Post* in 1802 (*Poetical Works* II.2: 925), and we cannot be quite sure whether he does so from conviction or in order to cover up the fact that he never actually experienced the valley of wonders. At any rate, the note is dropped from subsequent editions and in the process of textual revision his poem shifts from a pantheistic outlook to an elevation of subjectivity to a position of immanent transcendence that is presented as identical with the inaccessible otherness of the summit of Mont Blanc. Shelley, on the other hand, writing on his 'Six Weeks' Tour' through France, Germany and Switzerland in 1816 during which he described himself as "Democrat, Philanthropist, and Atheist" in hotel registers and visitor's books (qtd. in Bode, "Shelley's 'Mont Blanc'" 287), addresses the problems that were only implied by Coleridge's revisions

14 Cf. Culler, who points out that the figure has long been a "genuine embarrassment" (137) to critics because it manages to be hopelessly outdated and mysteriously modern at the same time.

15 On the general background cf. McFarland.

of his "Hymn before Sun-rise" head-on: 1) Where does the power that generates meaning in the world reside after the disappearance of God? And 2) If meaning becomes inseparable from subjective experience, as the overall evolution of modern culture with its late eighteenth-century excesses of sentiment and sensibility persuasively suggests (cf. McGann, *Poetics*), how can subjective experience be related to the external world and to the means and media of its expression in order to maintain a cultural consensus against the relativistic and pluralistic consequences of subjectivism?

In spite of the fact that, unlike Coleridge's "Hymn", Shelley's poem was supposedly composed "under the immediate impression of the deep and powerful feelings excited by the objects it describes," as Shelley puts it in his note on the poem (qtd. in Mellor and Matlak 1063),<sup>16</sup> it is a less situated and more abstract attempt at coming to terms with Mont Blanc. As with Coleridge, however, Shelley's remarks on the poem's origins give us a first hint at its (or his) resistance to subjectivism. While on the one hand Shelley in his note concedes that the poem is "an undisciplined overflowing of the soul", he on the other hand "resists its claim to approbation on [its] attempt to imitate the untamable wildness and inaccessible solemnity" of the mountain (Mellor and Matlak 1063). Subjectivity, he suggests, is just a transparent medium of imitation and representation, and if the poem happens to be wild and inaccessible, then this is an effect of its imitative intention and its referential dimension. The poem itself, however, rejects this naive strategy of a resistance to subjectivism in both form and content:

Formally, "Mont Blanc" is only at first glance written in the seemingly natural and 'undisciplined' mode of Romantic meditation also used in Coleridge's encounter with the mountain, i.e. blank verse (cf. Easthope 122-33). Closer scrutiny reveals it to be a "rhymed decasyllabic poem" instead, a poem that merely "create[s] the impression of blank verse through [its] rhythm and syntax", as William Keach puts it in his detailed analysis of Shelley's style (165). In fact, all but three lines in "Mont Blanc" are rhymed somewhere in the poem,<sup>18</sup> and Simon Haines suggests that "[o]ne might say that the underlying strength and consistency of the metre suggests the fundamental unity of the 'universe of things', whilst from the rhymes gleam unexpected but persistent flashes of meaning and connection" (121). As a result, seeming naturalness and transparency are implicitly confronted with the "arbitrariness of language",<sup>19</sup> or, to put

16 The full title is actually "Mont Blanc. Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni".

17 Cf. Haines's observation that the poem is above all interested in "Being" as "unqualified existence" while Wordsworth is interested in "human being" and Coleridge is interested in metaphysics (120).

18 Cf. Keach, who gives 'forms' (l. 62), 'spread' (l. 65), and 'sun' (l. 133) as the only unrhymed words of the poem and discusses earlier comments on rhyme in "Mont Blanc" and the poem's similarity in this respect to Milton's "Lycidas" (257, n18). Haines contends that "all the lines save two are rhymed" (121), but he does not give any details.

19 Cf. Keach, 184-200 ("Rhyme and the Arbitrariness of Language"), the chapter which contains his analysis of rhyme and metre in "Mont Blanc" (194-200).

it the other way round: in "Mont Blanc" the arbitrariness of language as indicated by a post-neoclassical and post-Lockean attitude towards rhyme is tempered by the seeming naturalness and transparency of the long-standing poetic convention of iambic pentameter/blank verse, and this double-edged strategy is well-suited to the double-edged Romantic purposes of simultaneously emancipating and domesticating subjectivity.

Contentwise, on the other hand, the poem opens with a very general metaphorical acknowledgement of the contribution of subjectivity to the world (ll. 1-11):

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, [...]

[...]

where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters [...]

(ll. 1-6)

While there is no doubt that the external universe of things is the all-encompassing primary sphere of being, the mind is from the very beginning presented as a kind of cave in which human thought adds something to the "rapid waves" (l. 2) of perception which fill the cave, waves which appear either "dark" or "glittering", "reflecting doom" or "lending splendour" (l. 3-4). However, the syntax at this point is already ambiguous enough to open up the possibility that these appearances are actually effects of the mind, and the "tribute" of "human thought" to the world accordingly assumes "a sound but half its own" (l. 6), which is then compared to the sound of a "feeble brook" (l. 7) in wild surroundings with a vast river nearby at the end of the first part of the poem.

Only in part II of the poem (ll. 12-48) is this general and metaphorical description of the relationship between mind and thought on the one hand and the universe of things on the other transposed to the actual setting of the Ravine of the river Arve. Those external "Caverns" (l. 30) echo with the "ceaseless motion" and "unresting sound" (ll. 32-33) of "Power in likeness of the [river]" (l. 14) as the internal cavern of the mind echoed with the waves of the everlasting universe of things rolling through it in part I. The speaker of the poem, who positions himself for the first time more than half way through part II, gazes on the spectacle of this externalized version of the relationship between mind and world, and "in a trance sublime and strange" (l. 35) he experiences the mixture of passivity and subordination on the one hand and (modest) activity and contribution on the other:

I seem [...]

To muse on my own separate fantasy,  
My own, my human mind, which passively  
Now renders and receives fast influences,  
Holding an unremitting interchange  
With the clear universe of things around;

(ll. 35-40)

This transitory experience of simultaneous difference and identity is then put to rest, as it were, "[i]n the still cave of the witch Poesy" (l. 44) at the end of part II.

At this point it is worth pointing out that there are, after all, three kinds of caves: there are the 'objective' caverns of the ravine of the River Arve, which serve as an

'objective correlative' for the subjective caves of the mind as generally introduced in part I and individualized and situated in part II, and finally there is the "the still cave of [...] Poesy" (l. 44) which mediates between the everlasting universe of things and the evanescence of subjective experience. In this third cave, both dimensions of being are "no unbidden guest" (l. 43), and the "wild thoughts" (l. 41) that float above the darkness of reality (cf. l. 42) can be arrested.<sup>20</sup> Poesy is a witch, however, because it is – in unmistakably Platonic terms – twice removed from the world, "Seeking among the shadows that pass by [in the cave of the mind; C.R.] / Ghosts of all things that are" (ll. 45-46). Accordingly, the poetic representation of the Ravine of Arve is a "shade", a "phantom", a "faint image" (ll. 46-47); it is only in recall that the image asserts its reality, as the enigmatic and ambiguous final lines of part II suggest: "[...]; till the breast / From which they fled recalls them, thou art there!" (ll. 47-48). The speaker's attitude to reality, it seems, is caught between two possible meanings of the word 'recall', i.e. images stored in memory on the one hand and the possibility of a retraction of these intervening images on the other, a retraction which seems to open up a seemingly unmediated access to reality ("thou art there!")<sup>21</sup>

Part III of the poem (ll. 49-83) finally turns to Mont Blanc as an immanent and perceivable, but nevertheless inaccessible representative of a "remoter world", a world whose truth is beyond "the busy thoughts [...] / Of those who wake and live" and yet assigned to the inferiority of "the soul in sleep" (ll. 49-52). Lifting his eyes from the immediate impression of the Ravine of Arve, the speaker "look[s] on high" (l. 52) and there, "Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky, / Mont Blanc appears, – still, snowy, and serene" (ll. 60-61). Still (pun intended!), the mountain subjects (!) its surroundings, and the result is a wild landscape full of "unearthly forms", "unfathomable depths", a "desert peopled by the storms alone", "rude, bare, and high, / Ghastly, and scarred, and riven" (cf. ll. 62-71), a landscape whose poetic representation contains two of the three unrhymed lines of the poem (cf. note 18). And still (pun intended again!),

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue  
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,  
So solemn, so serene, that man may be,  
But for such faith, with nature reconciled;

(ll. 76-79)

20 Cf. "One legion of wild thoughts [> subjectivity], whose wandering wings / Now float above thy darkness [> objectivity], and now rest / Where that [= the 'wild thoughts' of 'my own separate fantasy'] or thou [= the 'Dizzy Ravine' and, by implication, the 'everlasting universe of things'] art no unbidden guest, / In the still cave of the witch Poesy" (ll. 41-44).

21 Cf. Keach 197, who points out that 'there' finds its distant rhyming partner "in the insubstantial 'air' at the end of part IV" (l. 126) which, however, is immediately followed by an affirmation of the reality principle at the beginning of part V "Mont Blanc yet gleams on high: – the power is there" (l. 127).

22 Cf. the hint at its surrounding "subject mountains" (l. 62).

This positive faith, it seems, can only emerge at a distance, and only from this perspective can the powerful voice of the mountain (cf. l. 80) be inferred from the mysterious tongue of the wilderness:

Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal  
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good  
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.

(ll. 80-83)

"Mont Blanc", it turns out, is after all a poem about experience, interpretation, and communication that acknowledges the embeddedness of these processes in a primary universe of things.

Part IV (ll. 84-126) spells out the implications of the distance marked in part III: In a way similar to Coleridge's poetic description of Mont Blanc the mountain is perceived as an inaccessible still point in a turning world, but even its immediate surroundings only "seem [...] eternal now" (l. 75) because even the "glaciers creep / Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far fountains, / Slow rolling on" (ll. 100-02). The farther one gets away from the mountain, the clearer it becomes that "[a]ll things" including the "works and ways of men" "[a]re born and die; revolve, subside, and swell" (cf. ll. 92-95), and the initial hostility of the "Power [that] dwells apart in its tranquillity" (l. 97) is gradually transformed into "one majestic River, / The breath and blood of distant lands" (ll. 123-24). At this point the poem returns to the positive aspects of the cave imagery at its beginning:<sup>23</sup> "vast caves / [that] Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam" (ll. 120-21) precede the emergence of the majestic River, and in view of the poem's initial unfolding of three kinds of cave it seems fair to state that this metaphorical emphasis on the aspect of mediation between inaccessible power on the one hand and its gradually unfolding purpose and meaning on the other is clearly at the heart of the poem.

The brief fifth and final part of the poem (ll. 127-44) returns to the sight of Mont Blanc with another resounding "yet", which resembles the "yet" marking the transition from the first to the second part of Coleridge's "Flynn before Sunrise". In Shelley's poem, however, this turn against subjectivism occurs later in the argument:

Mont Blanc yet gleams on high: — the power is there,  
The still and solemn power of many sights,  
And many sounds, and much of life and death.

(ll. 127-29, emphasis added)

While it is clear by now that meaning unfolds only after mediation, and mediation as represented by the various caves is primarily conceived of in terms of experience, interpretation, and communication (as the end of part III indicates), the poem's resistance to subjectivism manifests itself in this final affirmation of the primary importance of the all-encompassing universe of things as symbolized by the mountain, which is presented as the origin of all meaning:

23 I.e. "glittering" and "tending splendour" rather than "dark" and "reflecting gloom" (cf. ll. 3-4).

The secret strength of things  
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome  
Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!  
(ll. 139-41)

In the poem, however, the mind, metaphorically represented as the cave where the vast river of the perceived world and the feeble brook of human thought meet and intermingle (cf. part I), has the last word, if only in the form of a question posed to the mountain:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind's imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy?  
(ll. 142-44)

The last word is, of course, 'vacancy', and so the question cuts both ways: meaning emerges from the interaction of thought and world in the human mind, and this process of constant interaction in itself should be a guarantee and protection against the chaotic and potentially destructive complexity of the objective universe on the one hand and the extremes of pure subjectivism cut loose from the world on the other. This process can only be arrested without incurring danger in the aesthetic sphere which the poem itself introduces as the "still cave of [...] Poesy".<sup>24</sup> Here, the "deep and powerful feelings" and the "untamable wildness and inaccessible solemnity from which these feelings sprang" congeal in poetic form, which in turn "rests its claim to approbation" on a dynamic combination of poetic convention and originality (qtd. in Mellor and Matlak 1063).

In conclusion we can now return to my opening questions: First, where exactly does power dwell? At first glance, the poems seem to agree that power, understood as the prime mover of being and ultimate origin of meaning, dwells apart from the accessible, mundane world, and both poems reject older notions of religious transcendence by choosing Mont Blanc, the highest peak of Europe, as an immanent emblem of inaccessibility. Even after its conquest in 1786/87, Mont Blanc retained its symbolic status as a perceivable link between this world and the heavens, and both poems allude to this in their respective re-enactments of the sublime experiences occasioned by the mountain.<sup>25</sup> Second, it is this sublimity which makes it worthwhile to bother with the inaccessible, as it transfers, one could say, the inaccessible into the realm of subjective experience. Third: If *this* is the case, then Shelley's striking combination of '*this*' and 'even' marks the emerging consciousness of the insurmountable difference between the "naked countenance of earth" and "these primeval mountains" on the one hand and what goes on in "the adverting mind" on the other, a difference which ultimately amounts to a primacy of the realm of subjective experience *within* the "everlasting

24 Cf. Bode ("Shelley's 'Mont Blanc'") who reads the poem as an aesthetic 'Aufhebung' (in the Hegelian sense of a) to raise, b) to preserve, and c) to cancel) of the philosophical antinomy of materialism and idealism.

25 For an extended treatment of Mont Blanc and the sublime cf. Bode, "And what were thou...?".

universe of things", even if the poem itself posits the primacy of the world at large. In the end, it is "the still cave of [...] Poesy" which maintains and arrests this precarious balance by complementing the subversive implications of the emerging primacy of subjectivity with signposts of cultural continuity: Looking back, on the one hand, both poems draw upon some 250 years of iambic pentameter, the ideological function of which in the English tradition has been described by Antony Easthope as follows:

Iambic pentameter works to deny the position of subject of enunciation in favour of that of the subject of the enounced; it would *disclaim the voice speaking in the poem in favour of the voice represented in the poem, speaking what it says*. Accordingly pentameter is able to promote representation of someone 'really' speaking. [...] By eliding metricality in favour of 'the prosody of natural speech' the pentameter would render poetic discourse transparent, aiming to identify the speaking of a poem with the speaking of a represented speaker or narrator; it invites the reader into a position of imaginary *identification* with this single voice, this represented presence (74-75).<sup>26</sup>

This clinging to the cultural norm of iambic pentameter with its represented presence of a single but shareable voice in the world is one instance of a Romantic resistance to subjectivism. Looking forward, on the other hand, both poems open up the space of culturally acceptable poetic practice by abandoning rhyme altogether in a poetic re-valuation of the tradition of blank verse<sup>27</sup> or, in Shelley's case, by using rhyme in an unconventional, irregular way. These symptoms of an emerging cultural sphere predicated on originality, innovation and defamiliarization clearly point to the future. In its insistence on a cultural accommodation of idiosyncratic expressions of subjective experience, however, this emerging cultural sphere should not simply be read as an effect of the Romantic emancipation of subjective expression. It is also an instance of a Romantic resistance to subjectivism. Power, one could say, dwells in the written voices of an emergent Romanticist poetics, and it is the power of modern culture.

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- 26 For Easthope's general argument on the relationship between iambic pentameter and the emergence of a transcendental subject position cf. 69-77. For a contemporary Romantic assessment of the 'purifying' effects of metre cf. Wordsworth's "Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*" (1800/1802).
- 27 Cf. Easthope's singling out of blank verse as the quintessentially Romantic poetic medium (122-33).

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### Plays on the Essential Passions of Men: Adam Smith, Joanna Baillie and the Textual Theatre of the *Lyrical Ballads*

When Wordsworth in his "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1802 rails against those "sticky and stupid German tragedies" (65), what he has in mind are not only dramatic texts but also a whole culture of theatre. Theatrical mass entertainment frustrates Wordsworth, the "thirst after outrageous stimulation" (65), consequence of the process of modernization, exemplified by "the great national events", "[the increasing accumulation of men in the cities]", "the uniformity of their occupations", and "[the rapid communication of intelligence]" (64). Against this modern visual culture, Wordsworth sets his own poems as "feeble effort with which [he endeavours] to counteract it" (65). The sheer size of the theatrical productions and the resulting extensivity of artistic communication make it impossible to bring across the more subtle, withdrawn and mundane aspects of human life, which his art is dedicated to. Book Seven of *The Prelude* of 1805 describes the poet's encounter with various forms of theatrical entertainment in contemporary London. In Sadler's Wells he attends the production of a drama based on "some domestic incident" (VII, 314), based on "a story drawn / From [his] own ground, *The Maid of Buttermere*" (VII, 320-21). Whereas the theatre performance treats this "holy theme [...] with irreverence" (VII, 309-10), Wordsworth's own "mortal verse", the very poetry on the page, "is her due" (VII, 339-40). This section of *The Prelude*, then, not only describes but also performs the transposition of a literary subject from contemporary drama to Wordsworth's own poetry, a transition he suggests to be momentous for the history of British literature. This poetry, I want to argue, is meant not so much as an alternative to contemporary drama and its performance culture but as an altogether new conception of drama, a counter-theatre. In the following, I would like to trace this counter-theatre in what is at the same time one of its earliest and most significant instances, Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, against the background of two previous conceptions of theatre, one by the social philosopher and political economist Adam Smith, and the other by the theatre theorist and playwright Joanna Baillie.

There is hardly any dispute among scholars nowadays that Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* was influenced by a well-known drama theory of his day, the "Introductory Discourse" to Joanna Baillie's *Plays on the Human Passions* from 1798 (cf. Yudin; McMillan). The publication met with great critical interest, and Baillie was a well-known and regularly performed dramatist well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The book was among Wordsworth's reading, as Duncan Wu has found out, who suggests that Wordsworth had read the book by October 1798 (*Wordsworth's Reading 1770-1799* 8). What has been discussed as Baillie's influence on Wordsworth is first of all the notion that "natural language" can be localized socially, "in the middling and lower classes" (Baillie 79) according to Baillie, taken up by Wordsworth as "the plainer and more emphatic language" to be found in "[j]low and rustic life" ("Preface" 60). In both essays, natural language is set against the artificiality and inauthenticity of "poetic diction" (66) in Wordsworth's famous phrase, which Baillie's formulation "the enchanted