Discovering Literature: Romantics and Victorians

Landscape and the Sublime

Article by: Philip Shaw

Theme: Romanticism

Professor Philip Shaw considers how Romantic writers thought about the grandest and most terrifying aspects of nature, and the ways in which their writing responded to and influenced theories of the sublime.

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

(Lord Byron, _Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage_, Canto 3, stanza 72)

In addition to Mary Shelley’s gothic novel _Frankenstein_, two major poems were conceived in the Geneva Canton in Switzerland in the summer of 1816: the third canto of Lord Byron’s romance poem _Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage_; and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ‘Mont Blanc: Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni’. Both poems reflect their authors’ keen interest in the aesthetics of the sublime. When Byron writes of his wish to ‘mingle’ his ‘soul’ with the mountains, the ocean and the stars, he echoes over a century’s worth of thought about the relationship between human beings and the grand or terrifying aspects of nature.

In the 1690s John Dennis, Lord Shaftesbury and Joseph Addison made separate journeys across the French and Swiss Alps, which led to the publication of a series of influential accounts of wild and ‘wasted’ landscapes. In _The Moralists_ (1709), for example, Shaftesbury delights with repulsion in describing a mountain as a ‘noble ruin’, and in 1712 Addison describes ‘the heavings’ of the ocean as the source of ‘a very pleasing astonishment’. The sense of ‘agreeable horror’ that the vast and the irregular in nature instils in Addison is sustained in Edmund Burke’s description of that ‘delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the
sublime’. Written in 1757, Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* includes among its repertoire of sublime objects and events the ‘noise of vast cataracts, raging storms’ and ‘thunder’. Byron’s poem, with its focus on the dizzying sights and sounds of the alpine landscape, culminates in an account of a thunderstorm that shows the influence of Burke’s *Enquiry*. Arrested by the raging noise of the thunder, and by the contrasting sight of lightning in the ‘glorious night’, the poet wishes to become a ‘sharer’ in the storm’s ‘fierce and far delight, – / A portion of the tempest and of thee!’ (93).

**An Avalanche in the Alps, a sublime landscape painting by Philip James De Loutherbourg**

![Image of An Avalanche in the Alps, a sublime landscape painting by Philip James De Loutherbourg](http://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/landscape-and-the-sublime)

The aesthetics of the sublime revolved around the relationship between human beings and the grand or terrifying aspects of nature.

Copyright: © Tate

**Mind and mountains**

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

```
which passively
   Now renders and receives fast influencings,
   Holding an unremitting interchange
   With the clear universe of things around […]
```

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

**Manuscript of 'Mont Blanc' and other poems by P B Shelley**

The manuscript of Shelley’s ‘Mont Blanc’. In the absence of God, the poem seems to suggest, mountains have meaning solely as a result of the animating power of the human imagination.

**Some rights reserved**
Copyright: © Estate of Percy Bysshe Shelley & Harriet Shelley

Copyright: © Barclays Group Archives

**Mere de Glace, in the Valley of Chamouni**
J. M. W. Turner's watercolour sketch of the area around Mont Blanc, which depicts human figures dwarfed by vast, over-hanging precipices and barren swathes of ice.

**Land and freedom**
Importantly, for Shelley, Mont Blanc is also a symbol of political freedom, strong enough in its immensity ‘to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe’. The links between sublime landscapes and ideas of liberty were forged in the 18th century. Where enclosed gardens symbolised notions of aristocratic confinement and control, the wild, untamed landscapes beyond the country house represented freedom and release. But while earlier topographical poets, such as James Thomson, sought to accommodate the potency of the sublime within manageable, picturesque settings (see, for example, the description of the snowstorm in ‘Winter’ from Thomson’s *The Seasons*, 1730), later romantic writers seem more willing to explore the radical implications of extreme natural phenomena. Wordsworth’s *Descriptive Sketches* (1792) departs from the conventions of landscape poetry in its apocalyptic account of ‘mountains, glowing hot, like coals of fire’. Combining elements of Virgil’s fourth eclogue, of 2 Peter 3:10-13 and of the Book of Revelation, the burning landscape gives birth to ‘another earth’. Like Joseph Wright of Derby’s terrifying image of the eruption of Vesuvius, Wordsworth seems here to be fascinated by the pleasing horror of sublime violence. But Wordsworth’s apocalyptic vision is informed also by recent memories of the failure of the French Revolution. Writing as a political radical seeking to rescue the Revolution from its collapse into despotism and terror, Wordsworth appeals ‘to Freedom’s waves to ride / Sublime o’er Conquest, Avarice, and Pride’. The poet’s later rejection of revolutionary politics was denounced by Shelley and Byron, yet in many respects both ‘Mont Blanc’ and canto 3 of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* may be read as a continuation of the aesthetics of landscape and liberty explored by Wordsworth in his younger incarnation.

**Vesuvius in Eruption**
Joseph Wright of Derby's terrifying image of the eruption of Vesuvius reflects the pleasing horror of sublime violence.

Copyright: © Tate

Footnotes

- Written by Philip Shaw
- Philip Shaw is Professor of Romantic Studies at the University of Leicester. He maintains research interests in British Romantic writing and the visual arts. His publications include: Suffering and Sentiment in Romantic Military Art (2013), The Sublime (2006), Waterloo and the Romantic Imagination (2002), and, as editor, Romantic Wars: Studies in Culture and Conflict, 1789-1822 (2000). He is currently working on studies of literature, war and aesthetics in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The text in this article is available under the Creative Commons License. [http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/]

- Romantics and Victorians
- Authors
- Works
- Themes
- Articles
- Videos
- Collection items
- Teaching resources
- About the project
- Supported by