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Shelley's "Mont Blanc": The Secret Strength's Image Written on Water

Keiko Ikeda

Introduction

One might wonder why the Egyptian motif is recurrent in Shelley's poems; "Ozymandias" (1818) deals with the large statue of an ancient king erected in the Egyptian desert. In Alastor (1816), the young Poet, the hero in the narrative poem, leaves his home in search of "strange truths" (77), where he visits the Egyptian ruins. In the destination of his journey, the "pyramid / Of mouldering leaves" (53-54) is built on the dead Poet. In Adonais (1820), the protagonist's tomb is metaphorically associated with "one keen pyramid with wedge sublime" (444).

To solve the question why Shelley puts these Egyptian motives into his poems, we can find the answer in the historical background; the interest in the ancient Egypt was heightened in Europe during the period from 1800 to 1850 (Iversen 124-125). That cultural current was affected by Napoleon's invasion into Egypt in 1798 and Champollion's decipherment of the Rosetta stone in 1824 (Iversen 127-128; Lupton 21; Rice and MacDonald 7). If Shelley also absorbed this current into his writing of poetry, then his "Mont Blanc" (1816) is not irreverent to the wave of the cultural current. Considering that Shelley's Alastor mentions "eternal pyramid", one might speculate Shelley's name Mont Blanc a "pyramid" as a symbol of eternity.

"Mont Blanc", however, seems to have not been studied from the view of Shelley's concern with ancient Egypt: critics seem to postulate that this poem is about the relationship between mind

and universe. Postulating the epistemological subject of the poem based on Shelley's philosophical history, some critics have studied "Mont Blanc" from a philosophical point of view;¹ in addition to these epistemological examinations, Shelley's aesthetics has been also considered in comparison with Wordsworth and Coleridge.² Others have argued its subject is relevant to the signification.³ Nicholas Birns argues that "Mont Blanc" focuses on "a world-mastering cultural origin" (364) because the mountain was "a concrete geographical site" (360) in Shelley's time. Certainly, the poem has the setting in Switzerland, not in Egypt. Yet, we can regard the poem as a part of his series of the Egyptian motives. Strictly speaking, the poet superimposes the Egyptian image on the icy mountain in Switzerland.

The ground for the assertion is based on Shelley's terminology for Mont Blanc. When Shelley travels to Mont Blanc in Switzerland in 1816, he wrote to his friend, Thomas Love Peacock. In the letter, he describes the scene where Mont Blanc is suddenly laid out before his eyes.

Mont Blanc was before us but was covered with cloud [...]. Pinnacles of snow, intolerably bright, part of the chain connected with Mont Blanc shone thro the clouds at intervals on high. I never knew I never imagined what mountains were before. [...] Though it embraced a great number of miles the snowy pyramids which shot into the bright blue sky seemed overhang our path [...] (358; emphasis added)

In a similar vein, the poet calls Mont Blanc a "pyramid" (104) in the poem, and then it is not accidental that he expresses Mont Blanc as a pyramid both in his letter and his poem. This essay, therefore, solves this question why he represents the icy mountain as pyramid in "Mont Blanc". To consider the sense of immortality implied linking the icy mountain to the

motif of "pyramid", we will see the ice and water imagery in Mont Blanc. Here, this consideration of the sense of immortality implied in the watery source in the pyramidal mountain will arrive at the poet's consciousness of writing.

1. Ice and water Imagery

In front of the landscape in Switzerland, the poet perceives the "secret Strength", the power of the mountain. In the first section, Shelley describes the river of Being, where he compares human mind to the stream:

The everlasting universe of things
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
Now dark — now glittering — now reflecting gloom —
Now lending splendor, where from secret springs
The source of human thought its tribute brings
Of waters [...] (1-6)

If the stream metaphorically refers to human mind, then the tribute "Of waters" implies imagination. This watery image of imagination is followed immediately in the next section by the introduction of Ravine of Arve. The river of Arve is phonetically echoed from Coleridge's sacred river, the Alph in "Kubla Khan" (Kamio 336). Harold Bloom also presents the similar view that "The Arve seems to take on something of the meaning of 'Alph, the sacred river'" when Kubla Khan is echoed in the final two lines in section 1 (294), "Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river / Over its rock ceaselessly bursts and raves" (9-10). Mitsuo Kamio interprets that Ravine of Arve hides the chaos of inner original imagination (336). Just as the origin of imagination is associated with the watery source, so Shelley's "Mont Blanc" presents the similar metaphorical device. As Thomas R. Frosch points out that "The theme of a return to

the source haunts Shelley's poetry" (77), "Mont Blanc" is about the inner journey in which the poet's consciousness goes toward the source of the Arve. The section 2 begins with the description of the Ravine of Arve;

Thus, thou, Ravine of Arve — dark, deep Ravine —
 Thou many-colored, many-voiced vale,
 Over whose pines, and crags, and caverns sail
 Fast cloud-shadows and sunbeams: awful scene,
 Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down
 From the ice-gulps that gird his secret throne,
 Bursting through the tempest [...] (12-19)

The "Power in likeness of the Arve", the Power of Mont Blanc comes from the the source of the Arve where the ice-gulfs "gird his [Power's] secret throne". Angela Leigton interprets "In 'Mont Blanc' his [Shelley's] quest to find the Power which impels all things with relentless and indifferent strength is also a quest for the original Power of his own writing" (62). What becomes clear by the Arve's allusion to "Kubla Kahn"'s Alph and the Power from its source as "the original Power of his own writing", Shelley represents the source of the Arve as the origin of inspiration, the source of imagination.

Here, we will examine the watery source in the poem. In the source of the Arve,

[...] 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.

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
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 claimed. (100-114)

The glacier is "perpetual stream" which overthrows "the limit of the dead and living world". Here, the ice and water in the glacier is metaphorically parallel to the dead and the living. When the poet describes the glaciers in the source of the Arve, then one might wonder why "Frost" and "the Sun" placed together in the same line "have piled" many a precipice. Considering the ice and water parallel to death and life, this juxtaposition of "Frost" and "Sun" in the same line is appropriate for Shelley's strategy and significant to our purpose. While the icy frost freezes up the water of the river, the sun heats up and wet down the ice.

In the similar vein, Shelley in Alastor employs the watery metaphor of transformation in terms of immortal human thought. The Alastor Poet apostrophizes the stream on the way of his journey for his veiled maid toward the source of the river;

[...] "O stream!
Whose source is inaccessibly profound,
Whither do thy mysterious waters tend?
Thou imagest my life. Thy darksome stillness,
The dazzling waves, thy loud and hollow gulphs,
Thy searchless fountain, and invisible course
Have each their type in me: and the wide sky,
And measureless ocean may declare as soon
What oozy cavern or what wandering cloud

Contains thy waters, as the universe
Tell where these living thoughts reside, when stretched
Upon thy flowers my bloodless limbs shall waste
I' the passing wind!" (502-514)

Interestingly, the Poet mentions his life is associated with the transformation of water from the stream to cavern ooze and to "wandering cloud", that is the transformation from water to vapor. In the watery transformation, the Poet's life is symbolized as the water when he thinks the stream's "invisible course / Have each their type in me". More interestingly, he can feel the invisible watery course have each type in his life in terms of the watery transformation in the moment when he unifies with the universe to perceive "where these living thoughts reside". Just as the Poet's thought survives as the transformation of water to vapor, so the image of glaciers in "Mont Blanc" makes the "everlasting universe" (1) where the transformation of water and ice presents the theme of immortality associated with mobility and immobility: for water in the river moves "like snake" while icy precipice is immobile.

2. Silent whiteness in Mont Blanc

So far, we have considered the cyclic transformation of water suggests Shelley's eternal world, the sense of immortality, and then the opposition between mobility and immobility in the glaciers is parallel to that between life and death. Now, let us examine the image of death and immobility of the ice as associated with silence and solitude in Mont Blanc.

A desert peopled by the storms alone
Save when the eagle brings some hunter's bone,
And the wolf tracks her there [...]
[.]

[...] Is this the scene
 Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young
 Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea
 Of fire envelop once this silent snow?
 None can reply — all seems eternal now. (67-74; emphases added)

The poet describes the snowy scene as a desert "peopled by the storms alone", where neither human lives nor living creatures live except the eagle and wolf. This snowy world with few living creatures associates "the silent snow" with the image of death in the icy glacier. Considering the phrase "silent snow", snow as the icy water is symbolically associated not only with the dead world snow (because snow is dead ice), but with silence in this poem. If "Mont Blanc" clearly emphasizes its snowy whiteness, then these associations by the imagery show us the poem combines the image of whiteness with silence in Mont Blanc. Above the glaciers in the source of the Arve, stands the mountain, whose snowy whiteness is silent to the poet's question;

[...] the snow descend
 Upon that Mountain; none beholds them there,
 Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,
 Or the star-beams dart through them: — Winds contend
Silently there, and heap the snow with breath
Rapid and strong, but silently! Its home
 The voiceless lightning in these solitudes
 Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods
 Over the snow. The secret Strength of things
 Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
 Of Heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind's imaginings

Silence and solitude were vacancy? (131-144; emphases added)

This passage is the concluding section in "Mont Blanc", where the "secret Strength" as the power of the mountain is mentioned. While the snow associates with silence, the poet asks the question; "what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" When asking the question, he anticipates "no" as the answer. We can find the reason why his question is supposed to be replied by "no". "The secret Strength of things / which governs thought [...] inhabits" the mountain so that the silence of the mountain is not vacant or meaningless. Rather, "Silence and solitude" allow the possibility for "human imagining" to exist: the silent whiteness of the mountain is the place to project human thoughts at.

3. Paradoxical survival in the everlasting universe

Since we have examined the significance of the silent whiteness, we must here understand the relationship between the silent whiteness and Shelley's sense of immortality, the eternal world. Lloyd Abbey says "The universe of 'Mont Blanc' and the Hymn is "everlasting" because it is everlasting perceived by the successive generations of mankind" (145). I agree with him in that the everlasting universe in "Mont Blanc" consists of mind's perception. For the poet in the opening section says, "The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves" (1-2). According to both Abbey's view and Shelley's opening description, the everlasting survival of universe results from human mind's inner perception. When Shelley's concept of survival depends on human inner mind, then Abbey's term, "the successive generations of mankind" is a key to the immortal universe in "Mont Blanc". P. H. Butter rightly paraphrases

"Shelley is not yet concerned with the relationship of the individual mind to universal mind, but solely with that of mind in general to things" (119). Human perception continues to last in generations, even if each perceiver differs; by the transforming individual body, human thought can survive in a successive perception in successive generations. In the similar vein, "The secret Strength of things / which governs thought" inhabits the mountain. Though the Strength "governs thought", yet it exists through the successive human thought. "Mont Blanc creates an image of sublimity that continually hypostatizes an eternity of human consciousness. Because even the ideas of the destructiveness of nature and annihilation of mankind require human consciousness to give them their force, they thus are testimony to the necessity of the continuation of the human" (Ferguson 179). What Shelley insists on in this passage is not that the mountain outlives people but that people survive in their successive thought.

The concept of survival in the successive human thought implies human thought persists from generation to generation. The persistence of human thought is not at odds with the transformation of water from ice to water, from water to vapor. As I have said, the image of glaciers emphasizes the persistence of water from icy solid to watery liquid in terms of the immortality. Here, recall the rocky mountain is described as a "pyramid" that symbolizes the eternal, the sense of immortality.

In ancient Egypt, the pyramid is the monumental building on which the hieroglyph is written. The aim of the monumental building and writing is to survive after death; the wish for immortal life. While the European interest in the ancient Egypt affected Shelley's writing poetry, he projects this Egyptian concept of survival into the "everlasting universe" in "Mont Blanc". The poet associates the pyramid-like Mont Blanc with death and

rebirth when the mountain's "rocks [...] have overthrown / The limit of the dead and living world, / Never to be claimed" (111-114). If the mountain is a pyramid, then one might speculate that the "secret Strength" in icy rocks is the hieroglyph. As the hieroglyph survives through generations and can be read by human thought, so can the "secret Strength" in the rocky ice. Where the "secret Strength" in rocks can be read by human thought, the icy rocks outlive the living creature: the icy rocks are full of white silence and like the desert "peopled by the storms alone". This idea of the inanimate stone's outliving the animate can be also seen in Shelley's poem, "Ozymandias". The poem describes the stone statue of the ancient Egyptian king, Ozymandias, which is left in the desert.⁴

Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert... Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand mocked them, and the heart that fed: (2-7)

The image of Ozymandias stamped on "lifeless" stone survives both the sculptor's hand and the king's heart. It is Shelley's ironical and paradoxical emphasis that the survival of the "lifeless" stone enables the king's passionate to outlive their physical life: the king's image the sculptor once received owes their survival to the "lifeless" stone outliving the king and the sculptor. If we can see the sculptor's work that enables the king's pictographic image to survive in a lifeless stone, then the poem's subject is an artist's creative power in his product involved with immortal life. (It is true this is not a poet but a sculptor, but both of them work their imagination.) This concept of

paradoxical survival in "Ozymandias" is equivalent both to the hieroglyphic survival and to the "secret Strength" in the stone in "Mont Blanc".

4. Obliteration of signifying writing

In "Ozymandias", immoral life seems to be gained in the statue's image. Yet, the immortality in "Mont Blanc" is complicated. When Shelley calls the power in the mountain the "secret Strength", we must examine the reason he puts the adjective, "secret" before the noun "Strength". To examine this question, the historical background can be considered. We have speculated how the Strength in the mountain refers to the hieroglyph on the pyramid. Yet, the hieroglyph was deciphered by Champollion in 1824 while "Mont Blanc" was written in 1816. The writing inscribed in the pyramid cannot be read; the meaning of the ancient writing is forgot and then there is a disconnection of human mind between generations. The allusion to the eternal pyramid and undeciphered writing in it may be intended to evoke the answering silence of Mont Blanc in the conclusion of the poem. The similar skeptic view of immortal human mind can be found in Shelley's draught "Mont Blanc". The poet describes the Ravine of Arve as follows:

[Ravine of Arve's] earthly rainbows stretched across the sweep
Of the aethereal waterfall, whose veil
Robes some unsculptured image; the strange sleep
Which when the voices of the desert fail
Wraps all in its own deep eternity; [...] (25-29)

Here, the sense of eternity is gained by the failing "desert voices". Comparing this passage with the original one, Leighton argues;

An earlier draft of these condensed and somewhat unassimilated lines shows how far the effect of 'deep eternity' in the landscape is one which entails the sinister failure of all sound and colour in the scene: [...] The sense of 'eternity' is gained by the failing and waning of all 'voices' and 'hues'. [...] The Ravine is like a 'desert' in the sense that is emptied of its semi-animate voices and colours, and has become vast and formless" (65).

The emptiness of voices and colours reminds us of the silent whiteness in Mont Blanc, on which human thought is projected. As I have said, the mountain itself has no thought or no meaning. The poem has been argued that it ironically exposes the lack of identity between the signifier (Mont Blanc) and the signified (human thought). If we interpret the disconnection of Mont Blanc and human thought as the obliteration of ancient signifying writing, then the fluid water is associated with the obliteration of a signifying image of the Ravine and then with the non-survival of the consciousness. It is "some unsculptured image" of the Arve as the rainbow that the fluidity makes in the waterfall: when the rainbow is made from the water's spray in the Arve and the light, then the image of the Arve is "unsculptured" because of the fluidity of water.

Conclusion

While *Alastor* presents a vocation as a poet on the theme of the poet-hero's Narcissus-like self-consciousness, both "Ozymandias" and "Mont Blanc" focus on Shelley's consciousness of writing itself in terms of his sense of immortal life. In the image of the ancient Egypt, the mountain as a pyramid in "Mont Blanc" and the statue of Egyptian king in "Ozymandias", Shelley associates the non-animate stone with the preserver of immortal life.

In "Mont Blanc", Shelley associates the non-animate stone with

the silence. The unswerving silence of Shelley's Mont Blanc evokes that of pyramids, echoing the silence of Alastor's "eternal pyramids" (111) and of Ethiopian ruin where "dead men / Hang their mute thoughts on the mute walls around" (119-120). In the scene, Alastor Poet deciphers the hieroglyphs by gazing at its pictographic images. This is the moment when the Poet bridges the gap between the ancient Egyptian thought and his temporary one. Yet, "Mont Blanc" concludes by the poet's question to the mountain's silence, which implies Shelley's skeptical view of immortality.

Notes

- 1 P.H. Butter. Shelley's Idols of the Cave. (1954); C. E. Pulos. The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley's Scepticism (1962); Simon Haines. Shelley's Poetry. (1997).
- 2 Angela Leighton's Shelley and the Sublime: An interpretation of the Major Poems. (1984).
- 3 Kamio Mitsuo. Yami, Hisho, sosite Seisin-no-Naraku: Igirisu-Kotenshugi kara Romanha he. (1989); Frances Ferguson "Shelley's Mont Blanc: What the Mountain Said." (1996). Bo Earle compares Shelley and Coleridge (616-618).
- 4 In both "Ozymandias" and "Mont Blanc", the scenes are laid in the desert.

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