

## HANDOUT: ICONIC MONT BLANC, ROMANTIC SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

### Mary Shelley & 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 of the Glaciers of Chamouni/Letter IV (from PBS to TLP)

Hôtel de Londres, Chamouni,  
July 22nd, 1816.

From Servoz three leagues remain to Chamouni. Mont Blanc was before us—the Alps, with their innumerable glaciers on high all around, closing in the complicated windings of the single vale—forests inexpressibly beautiful, but majestic in their beauty—intermingled beech and pine, and oak, overshadowed our road, or receded, whilst lawns of such verdure as I have never seen before occupied these openings, and gradually became darker in their recesses. **Mont Blanc was before us, but it was covered with cloud; its base, furrowed with dreadful gaps, was seen above. Pinnacles of snow intolerably bright, part of the chain connected with Mont Blanc, shone through the clouds at intervals on high. I never knew—I never imagined what mountains were before. The immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of extatic wonder, not unallied to madness.** And remember this was all one scene, it all pressed home to our regard and our imagination. Though it embraced a vast extent of space, the snowy pyramids which shot into the bright blue sky seemed to overhang our path; the ravine, clothed with gigantic pines, and black with its depth below, so deep that the very roaring of the untameable Arve, which rolled through it, could not be heard above—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. **Nature was the poet, whose harmony held our spirits more breathless than that of the divinest.**

As we entered the valley of Chamouni (which in fact may be considered as a continuation of those which we have followed from Bonneville and Cluses) clouds hung upon the mountains at the distance perhaps of 6000 feet from the earth, but so as effectually to conceal not only Mont Blanc, but the other *aiguilles*, as they call them here, attached and subordinate to it. We were travelling along the valley, when suddenly we heard a sound as of the burst of smothered thunder rolling above; yet there was something earthly<sup>[3]</sup> in the sound, that told us it could not be thunder. Our guide hastily pointed out to us a part of the mountain opposite, from whence the sound came. It was an avalanche. We saw the smoke of its path among the rocks, and continued to hear at intervals the bursting of its fall. It fell on the bed of a torrent, which it displaced, and presently we saw its tawny-coloured waters also spread themselves over the ravine, which was their couch.

The verge of a glacier, like that of Boisson, presents **the most vivid image of desolation that it is possible to conceive.** No one dares to approach it; for the enormous pinnacles of ice which perpetually fall, are perpetually reproduced. The pines of the forest, which bound it at one extremity, are overthrown and shattered to a wide extent at its base. **There is something inexpressibly dreadful in the aspect of the few branchless trunks,** which, nearest to the ice rifts, still stand in the uprooted soil. The meadows perish, overwhelmed with sand and stones. **Within this last year, these glaciers have advanced three hundred feet into the valley. Saussure, the naturalist, says, that they have their periods of increase and decay: the people of the country hold an opinion entirely different; but as I judge, more probable. It is agreed by all, that the snow on the summit of Mont Blanc and the neighbouring mountains perpetually augments, and that ice, in the form of glaciers, subsists without melting in the valley of Chamouni during its transient and variable summer. If the snow which produces this glacier must augment, and the heat of the valley is no obstacle to the perpetual existence of such masses of ice as have already descended into it, the consequence is obvious; the glaciers must augment and will subsist, at least until they have overflowed this vale.**

## Chamouni July 25

We have returned from visiting the glacier of Montanvert, or as it is called, the Sea of Ice, a scene in truth of dizzying wonder. The path that winds to it along the side of a mountain, now clothed with pines, now intersected with snowy hollows, is wide and steep. The cabin of Montanvert is three leagues from Chamouni, half of which distance is performed on mules, not so sure footed, but that on the first day the one which I rode fell in what the guides call a *mauvais pas*, so that I narrowly escaped being precipitated down the mountain. We passed over a hollow covered with snow, down which vast stones are accustomed to roll. One had fallen the preceding day, a little time after we had returned: our guides desired us to pass quickly, for it is said that sometimes the least sound will accelerate their descent. We arrived at Montanvert, however, safe.

On all sides precipitous mountains, the abodes of unrelenting frost, surround this vale: their sides are banked up with ice and snow, broken, heaped high, and exhibiting terrific chasms. The summits are sharp and naked pinnacles, whose overhanging steepness will not even permit snow to rest upon them. Lines of dazzling ice occupy here and there their perpendicular rifts, and shine through the driving vapours with inexpressible brilliance: they pierce the clouds like things not belonging to this earth. The vale itself is filled with a mass of undulating ice, and has an ascent sufficiently gradual even to the remotest abysses of these horrible deserts. It is only half a league (about two miles) in breadth, and seems much less. It exhibits an appearance as if frost had suddenly bound up the waves and whirlpools of a mighty torrent. We walked some distance upon its surface. The waves are elevated about 12 or 15 feet from the surface of the mass, which is intersected by long gaps of unfathomable depth, the ice of whose sides is more beautifully azure than the sky. In these regions every thing changes, and is in motion. This vast mass of ice has one general progress, which ceases neither day nor night; it breaks and bursts for ever: some undulations sink while others rise; it is never the same. The echo of rocks, or of the ice and snow which fall from their overhanging precipices, or roll from their aerial summits, scarcely ceases for one moment. One would think that Mont Blanc, like the god of the Stoics, was a vast animal, and that the frozen blood for ever circulated through his stony veins.

## Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus Mary Wollstonecraft (Godwin) Shelley

### Chapter 7

The road ran by the side of the lake, which became narrower as I approached my native town. I discovered more distinctly the black sides of 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?"

I saw the lightning playing on the summit of Mont Blanc in the most beautiful figures.... While I watched the tempest, so beautiful yet terrific, I wandered on with a hasty step. 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!'"

### Chapter 9

Sometimes I could cope with the sullen despair that overwhelmed me, but sometimes the whirlwind passions of my soul drove me to seek, by bodily exercise and by change of place, some relief from my intolerable sensations. It was during an access of this kind that I suddenly left my home, and bending my steps towards the near Alpine valleys, sought in the magnificence, the eternity of such scenes, to forget myself and my ephemeral, because human, sorrows. My wanderings were directed towards the valley of Chamounix. I had visited it frequently during my boyhood. Six years had passed since then: *I* was a wreck, but nought had changed in those savage and enduring scenes.

I performed the first part of my journey on horseback. I afterwards hired a mule, as the more sure-footed and least liable to receive injury on these rugged roads. The weather was fine; it was about the middle of the month of August, nearly two months after the death of Justine, that miserable epoch from which I dated all my woe. The weight upon my spirit was sensibly lightened as I plunged yet deeper in the ravine of Arve. The immense mountains and precipices that overhung me on every side, the sound of the river raging among the rocks, and the dashing of the waterfalls around spoke of a power mighty as Omnipotence—and I ceased to fear or to bend before any being less almighty than that which had created and ruled the elements, here displayed in their most terrific guise. Still, as I ascended higher, the valley assumed a more magnificent and astonishing character. Ruined castles hanging on the precipices of piny mountains, the impetuous Arve, and cottages every here and there peeping forth from among the trees formed a scene of singular beauty. But it 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.

I passed the bridge of Pélissier, where the ravine, which the river forms, opened before me, and I began to ascend the mountain that overhangs it. Soon after, I entered the valley of Chamounix. This valley is more wonderful and sublime, but not so beautiful and picturesque as that of Servox, through which I had just passed. The high and snowy mountains were its immediate boundaries, but I saw no more ruined castles and fertile fields. Immense glaciers approached the road; I heard the rumbling thunder of the falling avalanche and marked the smoke of its passage. Mont Blanc, the supreme and magnificent Mont Blanc, raised itself from the surrounding *aiguilles*, and its tremendous *dôme* overlooked the valley.

A tingling long-lost sense of pleasure often came across me during this journey. Some turn in the road, some new object suddenly perceived and recognised, reminded me of days gone by, and were associated with the lighthearted gaiety of boyhood. The very winds whispered in soothing accents, and maternal Nature bade me weep no more. Then again the kindly influence ceased to act—I found myself fettered again to grief and indulging in all the misery of reflection. Then I spurred on my animal, striving so to forget the world, my fears, and more than all, myself—or, in a more desperate fashion, I alighted and threw myself on the grass, weighed down by horror and despair.

At length I arrived at the village of Chamounix. Exhaustion succeeded to the extreme fatigue both of body and of mind which I had endured. For a short space of time I remained at the window watching the pallid lightnings that played above Mont Blanc and listening to the rushing of the Arve, which pursued its noisy way beneath. The same lulling sounds acted as a lullaby to my too keen sensations; when I placed my head upon my pillow, sleep crept over me; I felt it as it came and blessed the giver of oblivion.

## Chapter 10

I spent the following day roaming through the valley. I stood beside the sources of the Arveiron, which take their rise in a glacier, that with slow pace is advancing down from the summit of the hills to barricade the valley. The abrupt sides of vast mountains were before me; the icy wall of the glacier overhung me; a few shattered pines were scattered around; and the solemn silence of this glorious presence-chamber of imperial Nature was broken only by the brawling waves or the fall of some vast fragment, the thunder sound of the avalanche or the cracking, reverberated along the mountains, of the accumulated ice, which, through the silent working of immutable laws, was ever and anon rent and torn, as if it had been but a plaything in their hands. These sublime and magnificent scenes afforded me the greatest consolation that I was capable of receiving. They elevated me from all littleness of feeling, and although they did not remove my grief, they subdued and tranquillised it. In some degree, also, they diverted my mind from the thoughts over which it had brooded for the last month. I retired to rest at night; my slumbers, as it were, waited on and ministered to by the assemblance of grand shapes which I had contemplated during the day. They congregated round me; the unstained snowy mountain-top, the glittering pinnacle, the pine woods, and ragged bare ravine, the eagle, soaring amidst the clouds—they all gathered round me and bade me be at peace.

My mule was brought to the door, and I resolved to ascend to the summit of Montanvert. I remembered the effect that the view of the tremendous and ever-moving glacier had produced upon my mind when I first saw it. It had then filled me with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy. The sight of the awful and majestic in nature had indeed always the effect of solemnising my mind and causing me to forget the passing cares of life. I determined to go without a guide, for I was well acquainted with the path, and the presence of another would destroy the solitary grandeur of the scene.

The ascent is precipitous, but the path is cut into continual and short windings, which enable you to surmount the perpendicularity of the mountain. It is a scene terrifically desolate. In a thousand spots the traces of the winter avalanche may be perceived, where trees lie broken and strewed on the ground, some entirely destroyed, others bent, leaning upon the jutting rocks of the mountain or transversely upon other trees. The path, as you ascend higher, is intersected by ravines of snow, down which stones continually roll from above; one of them is particularly dangerous, as the slightest sound, such as even speaking in a loud voice, produces a concussion of air sufficient to draw destruction upon the head of the speaker.

It was nearly noon when I arrived at the top of the ascent. For some time I sat upon the rock that overlooks the sea of ice. A mist covered both that and the surrounding mountains. Presently a breeze dissipated the cloud, and I descended upon the glacier. The surface is very uneven, rising like the waves of a troubled sea, descending low, and interspersed by rifts that sink deep. **The field of ice is almost a league in width, but I spent nearly two hours in crossing it.** The opposite mountain is a bare perpendicular rock. From the side where I now stood Montanvert was exactly opposite, at the distance of a league; and above it rose Mont Blanc, **in awful majesty.** I remained in a recess of the rock, **gazing on this wonderful and stupendous scene.** The sea, or rather the vast river of ice, wound among its dependent mountains, whose aerial summits hung over its recesses. Their icy and glittering peaks shone in the sunlight over the clouds. **My heart, which was before sorrowful, 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. He bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution; his stature, also, as he approached, seemed to exceed that of man. I was troubled; a mist came over my eyes, and I felt a faintness seize me, but I was quickly restored by the cold gale of the mountains. I perceived, as the shape came nearer (sight tremendous and abhorred!) that it was the wretch whom I had created. I trembled with rage and horror, resolving to wait his approach and then close with him in mortal combat. He approached; his countenance bespoke bitter anguish, combined with disdain and malignity, while its unearthly ugliness rendered it almost too horrible for human eyes. But I scarcely observed this; rage and hatred had at first deprived me of utterance, and I recovered only to overwhelm him with words expressive of furious detestation and contempt.

“Devil,” I exclaimed, “do you dare approach me? And do not you fear the fierce vengeance of my arm wreaked on your miserable head? Begone, vile insect! Or rather, stay, that I may trample you to dust! And, oh! That I could, with the extinction of your miserable existence, restore those victims whom you have so diabolically murdered!”

“I expected this reception,” said the dæmon. “All men hate the wretched; how, then, must I be hated, who am miserable beyond all living things! Yet you, my creator, detest and spurn me, thy creature, to whom thou art bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us. You purpose to kill me. How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind. If you will comply with my conditions, I will leave them and you at peace; but if you refuse, I will glut the maw of death, until it be satiated with the blood of your remaining friends.”

**Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mont Blanc: Lines  
Written in the Vale of Chamouni**

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—  
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters—with a sound but half its own,  
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume,  
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,  
Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,  
Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river  
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.

**II**

Thus thou, Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine—  
Thou many-colour'd, 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-gulfs that gird his secret throne,  
Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame  
Of lightning through the tempest;—\thou dost lie,  
Thy giant brood of pines around thee clinging,  
Children of elder time, in whose devotion  
The chainless winds still come and ever came  
To drink their odours, and their mighty swinging  
To hear—an old and solemn harmony;  
Thine earthly rainbows stretch'd across the sweep  
Of the aethereal waterfall, whose veil  
Robes some unsculptur'd image; the strange sleep  
Which when the voices of the desert fail  
Wraps all in its own deep eternity;  
Thy caverns echoing to the Arve's commotion,  
A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;  
Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,  
Thou art the path of that unresting sound—  
Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee  
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange  
To muse on my own separate fantasy,  
My own, my human mind, which passively  
Now renders and receives fast influencings,  
Holding an unremitting interchange

With the clear universe of things around;  
One legion of wild thoughts, whose wandering  
wings  
Now float above thy darkness, and now rest  
Where that or thou art no unbidden guest,  
In the still cave of the witch Poesy,  
Seeking among the shadows that pass by  
Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee,  
Some phantom, some faint image; till the breast  
From which they fled recalls them, thou art there!

**III**

Some say that gleams of a remoter world  
Visit the soul in sleep, that death is slumber,  
And that its shapes the busy thoughts outnumber  
Of those who wake and live.—I look on high;  
Has some unknown omnipotence unfurl'd  
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? For the very spirit fails,  
Driven like a homeless cloud from steep to steep  
That vanishes among the viewless gales!  
Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,  
Mont Blanc appears—still, snowy, and serene;  
Its subject mountains their unearthly forms  
Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between  
Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,  
Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread  
And wind among the accumulated steeps;  
A desert peopled by the storms alone,  
Save when the eagle brings some hunter's bone,  
And the wolf tracks her there—how hideously  
Its shapes are heap'd around! rude, bare, and high,  
Ghastly, and scarr'd, and riven.—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.  
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 reconcil'd;  
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.

**IV**

The fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams,  
Ocean, and all the living things that dwell  
Within the daedal earth; lightning, and rain,

Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane,  
 The torpor of the year when feeble dreams  
 Visit the hidden buds, or dreamless sleep  
 Holds every future leaf and flower; the bound  
 With which from that detested trance they leap;  
 The works and ways of man, their death and birth,  
 And that of him and all that his may be;  
 All things that move and breathe with toil and sound  
 Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell.  
 Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,  
 Remote, serene, and inaccessible:  
 And *this*, the naked countenance of earth,  
 On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains  
 Teach the adverting mind. 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 pil'd: 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 destin'd path, or in the mangled soil  
 Branchless and shatter'd stand; the rocks, drawn  
     down  
 From yon remotest waste, have overthrown  
 The limits of the dead and living world,  
 Never to be reclaim'd. 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. 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. Below, vast caves  
 Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam,  
 Which from those secret chasms in tumult welling  
 Meet in the vale, and one majestic River,  
 The breath and blood of distant lands, for ever  
 Rolls its loud waters to the ocean-waves,  
 Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air.

## V

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.  
 In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,  
 In the lone glare of day, the snows 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?

### Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Hymn before Sun-Rise, in the Vale of Chamouni 1802

Hast thou a charm to stay the morning-star  
 In his steep course? So long he seems to pause  
 On thy bald awful head, O sovran Blanc,  
 The Arve and Arveiron at thy base  
 Rave ceaselessly; but thou, most awful Form!  
 Risest from forth thy silent sea of pines,  
 How silently! Around thee and above  
 Deep is the air and dark, substantial, black,  
 An ebon mass: methinks thou piercest it,  
 As with a wedge! But when I look again, 10  
 It is thine own calm home, thy crystal shrine,  
 Thy habitation from eternity!  
 O dread and silent Mount! I gazed upon thee,  
 Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,  
 Didst vanish from my thought: entranced in prayer

I worshipped the Invisible alone.

That as I raise my head, awhile bowed low  
 In adoration, upward from thy base  
 Slow travelling with dim eyes suffused 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! 80  
 Thou kingly Spirit throned among the hills,  
 Thou dread ambassador from Earth to Heaven,  
 Great Hierarch! tell thou the silent sky,  
 And tell the stars, and tell yon rising sun  
 Earth, with her thousand voices, praises God.