

Skeptical Ignorance: Hume, Shelley, and the Mystery of “Mont Blanc”

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Abstract Literary history commonly holds that the Enlightenment inaugurated an epistemological crisis to which the British Romantic poets sought to respond. The skeptical separation of subject and object is considered a central problem for Romanticism, which is thought to rest on a desire to regain access to things in themselves—or, in a more recent idiom, to what Quentin Meillassoux calls “the *great outdoors*” and Jane Bennett calls “the *out-side*.” This story does not stand up to scrutiny. A reexamination of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poetry and philosophy reveals that he was positively invested in a poetic praxis of skeptical ignorance derived from David Hume and that this praxis allowed him to vacate the question of the way things really are. Eschewing the masculinist quest to penetrate the secrets of the natural world, this skeptical praxis offers a quiet solution to the mind-nature problem by dissolving its existence as a problem. It also overhauls our understanding of “Mont Blanc” and illuminates a Romantic tradition founded on a poetics of epistemic sufficiency.

Keywords Percy Bysshe Shelley, David Hume, Romanticism, skepticism, new materialism

Romanticism, the story goes, emerged from an epistemological crisis. After David Hume had pushed empiricism to its skeptical endpoint, and after Immanuel Kant had established that human knowledge is not of things in themselves, the British Romantics were supposedly left to deal with the fallout. Because “the separation of mind and nature” was something that “could not be endured” by “the Romantic sensibility,” the “central enterprise” of the Romantics “was to join together the ‘subject’ and ‘object’ that modern intellection had put asunder” (Abrams 1970: 218). They may not have been successful in this endeavor; Romantic

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1 literature may have found its “true voice” at those moments when it
2 confronted the “painful knowledge” (de Man 1983: 207) that mind and
3 nature are irreconcilable. But whether or not the Romantics sought to
4 reconcile subject and object or ultimately renounced the possibility of
5 such reconciliation, they saw the rift between the human mind and the
6 natural world as a crisis of great moment. In terms of intellectual history,
7 Romanticism was an expression of dissatisfaction with Kant’s response to
8 Hume’s skepticism, which, by “closing off the region of the thing in
9 itself,” effectively drew a line beyond which “experience, hence knowl-
10 edge, cannot, and must not presume to, penetrate” (Cavell 1988: 47).
11 More simply put, “romanticism generally is to be understood as in
12 struggle with skepticism, and at the same time in struggle with philoso-
13 phy’s responses to skepticism” (175). Such an understanding may be
14 ideological, to be sure; the Romantics’ apparent investment in the nat-
15 ural world may well have been a displacement of political hopes, an
16 evasion of social conflict, a denial of history. But such was how the
17 Romantics understood their endeavors, however idealized. “To charac-
18 terize the Romantic period as one marked by an ‘epistemological crisis’
19 is to follow Romanticism’s own definition of its historical problems”
20 (McGann 1983: 71).

21 This familiar story is no longer the only one we tell about Roman-
22 ticism, yet it continues to guide developments in Romantic studies and
23 beyond. A variety of new realist and materialist projects have sought to
24 move past the epistemological crisis that the Enlightenment left in its
25 wake. Quentin Meillassoux (2008), for example, puts forth his specula-
26 tive materialist philosophy as a solution to the old mind-nature problem,
27 which he dubs “correlationism” and redefines as the central impasse
28 of modern thought; Jane Bennett (2010: xvi) develops a vital-materialist
29 account of what she calls “*thing-power* and the *out-side*”; and Bruno
30 Latour (2004: 231, 227) urges “the cultivation of a *stubbornly realist atti-*
31 *tude*” to escape from the “wrong path” that was Kant’s “unfortunate
32 solution” to Hume’s skepticism. With their shared dissatisfaction with
33 modern skepticism and their interest in reclaiming “the *great outdoors*”
34 (Meillassoux 2008: 7), such thinkers have priorities that would seem to
35 resonate with those of the Romantic poets, at least as traditionally
36 understood. The parallels have not gone unnoticed. Bennett (2010:
37 xviii) likens her vital materialism to “the Romantic quest for Nature”;

1 Evan Gottlieb (2016: 5) argues that “it is the Speculative Realists’ desire
2 to explore reality itself that links them most closely in theme and tone
3 with the British Romantics”; and Greg Ellermann (2015: 170) claims that
4 “Meillassoux’s account of the correlation between mind and world, and
5 his attempts to get outside it, are decidedly romantic.” For if one accepts
6 that the story outlined above is at least correct with regard to a certain
7 representative strain of Romantic lyric, and if one agrees that “no one
8 wants to be a skeptic” (Cavell 1988: 44), then “romanticism itself is . . . a
9 literary and philosophical formation marked by the same concerns as
10 our speculative moment” (Ellermann 2015: 170).

11 This essay does not accept this lasting story. Instead, it examines the
12 writings of two thinkers who, in fact, do want to be skeptics and shows
13 how affirming this supposedly inconceivable desire overhauls the mind-
14 nature problem that continues to structure discussions of Romantic
15 modernity. My central claim is that skepticism is not so much a negation
16 of knowledge as an endorsement of ignorance, at least for Percy Bysshe
17 Shelley, who develops a poetics of skeptical ignorance derived from the
18 writings of Hume. It is well known that Hume’s impact on Shelley was
19 substantial. As C. E. Pulos (1954) first demonstrated and Anthony Howe
20 (2013: 108) reiterates, “perhaps the most important philosopher of all
21 for Shelley was David Hume.” Yet this importance remains obscured, I
22 argue, because the orientation of Hume’s skepticism has been funda-
23 mentally misunderstood. Although his analyses of human understand-
24 ing are almost always discussed in the context of “epistemology,” Hume
25 was simply uninterested in solving the problem of knowledge. Rather, he
26 aimed his skeptical project toward ignorance and thereby withdrew from
27 the ontological quest that would come to underwrite the post-Enlight-
28 entment enterprise of epistemology. Far from causing crisis or despair,
29 moreover, his skeptical conclusions brought him and, later, Shelley “suf-
30 ficient satisfaction” (Hume 1975: 43), allowing them to construe igno-
31 rance as an occasion to ignore the question of the way things really are.

32 To ignore: “not to know, to be ignorant of”; “to disregard inten-
33 tionally, leave out of account or consideration” (*OED*). For Hume and
34 Shelley, ignorance is fundamentally a praxis located in the drift from the
35 former, more passive sense of the verb *ignore* (which began to fade in
36 the eighteenth century) to the latter, more active sense (which came to
37 the fore in the early nineteenth century). So understood, ignorance of

1 the in-itself is neither a lack nor the outcome of a failed endeavor to
2 reach the great outdoors, but the upshot of a mode of inquiry that
3 eschews the masculinist fantasy that nature has an interiority that can
4 and must be accessed. Running counter to the imperative “to grasp the
5 in-itself” (Meillassoux 2008: 27), Hume (1975: 30), like Shelley later,
6 shows how nature’s “ultimate springs and principles are totally shut up
7 from curiosity and enquiry” and gestures, instead, toward a mode of
8 relationality freed from the desire for apodictic knowledge. Hume’s
9 and Shelley’s praxis of skeptical ignorance thus offers a quiet, even
10 quietist, solution to the mind-nature problem by dissolving its existence
11 as a problem. Accordingly, it makes Shelley’s Romanticism more closely
12 resemble eighteenth-century skepticism than the post-Kantian stories of
13 alienation (e.g., Heinrich von Kleist’s *Kant-Krise*, Friedrich Schiller’s
14 sentimental poet, G. W. F. Hegel’s dialectical idealism) that often guide
15 its interpretation.

16 Traditionally, Shelley’s thought has been portrayed as a conflict or a
17 compromise between skepticism and idealism, though criticism of the
18 past twenty or so years has complicated, if not displaced, this paradigm.¹
19 Through an extended reading of “Mont Blanc” and a short tour of the
20 “Ode to Heaven,” I bring into view a consistently skeptical Shelley largely
21 unrecognized insofar as he challenges the assumption that everyone
22 (especially metaphysical skeptics) desires knowledge of what lies beyond
23 the world of the senses. Earl Wasserman’s canonical account of Shelley’s
24 skeptical idealism is instructive here. While Wasserman (1971: 7, 9) notes
25 that “as a student of Hume’s skepticism [Shelley] had to confess the
26 absence of any evidence that mental images correspond to an extra-
27 mental reality,” he also assumes that this absence entails a loss that
28 Shelley then seeks to recompense; hence he almost immediately trans-
29 lates the implications of the Humean lesson into a post-Kantian frame-
30 work in which “Shelley’s Hegelian Unhappy Consciousness repeatedly
31 senses that it is attended in life by its fulfilling self, from which it has been
32 divided and alienated.” The Shelley I unearth, by contrast, does not
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¹ Hugh Roberts (1997: 129), for example, notes that “describing Shelley as ‘torn’
between idealism and skepticism is one of the hoarier clichés of Shelley criticism,” but
he nevertheless asserts that this description “contains an element of truth that has
not yet been ascertained” and uses it to structure his account of Shelley’s poetry and
poetics, which, he argues, owe a greater debt to Lucretius than has been previously
acknowledged.

1 yearn for reconciliation because, as a student of Hume, he does not see
 2 “extramental reality” as a real problem to be solved or even approached.
 3 Quite the contrary, what he finds problematic is just this desire to pen-
 4 etrate to the truth of the natural world, which he comes to associate with
 5 the “materialism” that he critiques in “On Life” as well as with “those
 6 sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the
 7 external world” (Shelley 2002: 506, 530) that he critiques in *A Defence of*
 8 *Poetry*. Shelley’s praxis of skeptical ignorance thus resonates with the
 9 concerns of readers invested in ecocriticism, though it challenges the
 10 notion that “to the Ecocritic, the concepts of the organism and the
 11 ecosystem must . . . necessarily correspond to something *really out there*”
 12 (McKusick 2000: 18). It also changes how we understand “Mont Blanc”
 13 and its many interpretive impasses, not least the ontological question
 14 with which the poem concludes:

15 And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
 16 If to the human mind’s imaginings
 17 Silence and Solitude were vacancy?

18 (ll. 142–44)²

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 20 The recent turn in the humanities from epistemology to ontology is
 21 often touted as groundbreaking. In the preface to Meillassoux’s *After*
 22 *Finitude*, for example, Alain Badiou (2008: vii) claims that, by demon-
 23 strating how “we can think what there is,” Meillassoux “opened up a new
 24 path in the history of philosophy, hitherto conceived as the history of
 25 what it is to know.” Yet, in the history of philosophy, epistemology was
 26 developed as a path to ontology. James Ferrier (1854: 46) coined the
 27 word *epistemology* not only to refer to the study of knowledge but also to
 28 designate the first step in a philosophical system that leads to the onto-
 29 logical absolute:

30 It is clear we cannot declare *what is*—in other words, we cannot get a
 31 footing on ontology until we have ascertained *what is known*—in other
 32 words, until we have exhausted all the details of a thorough and systematic
 33 epistemology. It may be doubtful whether we can get a footing on ontology
 34 even then. But, at any rate, we cannot pass to the problem of absolute
 35 existence, except through the portals of the solution to the problem of
 36 knowledge.

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² Shelley’s poetry is quoted from Shelley 2002 and cited parenthetically by line numbers.

1 Epistemology is a portal. Far from being opposed to ontology, the post-
2 Enlightenment study of knowledge came into being precisely as a means
3 through which to regain access to “*what is*.”³ And though many subse-
4 quent epistemological inquiries do not ostensibly work toward the abso-
5 lute, most retain the general teleological framework of Ferrier’s project;
6 the more or less implicit belief guiding the enterprise of epistemology is
7 that if the problem of knowledge can be solved, then, finally, everything
8 else—ontology, ethics, politics, and so on—will fall into place.

9 Within such a framework, skepticism can be seen only as a failure.
10 “Epistemology aims at a wholesale justification of our beliefs about the
11 world,” writes Michael Williams (2009: xxvii). “Accordingly, skepticism is
12 where you end up if you think that epistemology ought to work but
13 doesn’t.” But can this be correct? Did Hume, the modern skeptic par
14 excellence, really think that epistemology ought to work? Is his skepti-
15 cism just a failed epistemology? It has long been assumed that the answer
16 to these questions is yes and that “Hume despaired” at his inability to find
17 “justification of our knowledge of truths about nature” (Quine 1969: 71).
18 Yet, throughout his writings on human understanding, Hume tells a
19 much different story. Indeed, one need look no farther than the opening
20 pages of *A Treatise of Human Nature* to see that he never really cared to
21 justify any form of knowledge. “When we see, that we have arrived at the
22 utmost extent of human reason, we sit down contented,” Hume (1978:
23 xviii) writes, “perfectly satisfied in the main of our ignorance, and per-
24 ceive that we can give no reason for our most general and most refined
25 principles.” Apparently not sharing Hume’s sense of satisfaction, how-
26 ever, most readers have imposed the aims of epistemology on his skepti-
27 cal project and therefore construed his analysis of causal relation as a
28 tragic impasse. Little wonder, then, that modern skepticism is generally
29 characterized in terms of difficulty and despair. If it were truly the case
30 that a self-defined skeptic like Hume thought that epistemology ought to
31 work, then his project would be tragically doomed to failure from
32 the start.

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35 ³ Cf. Richard Rorty’s (2009: 134) critique of epistemology, in which the “picture of
36 ‘epistemology-and-metaphysics’ as the ‘center of philosophy’ (and of ‘metaphysics’ as
37 something which emerges out of epistemology rather than vice-versa)” is established by
mid-nineteenth-century neo-Kantians.

1 This characterization has also tended to frame discussions of Shel-
2 ley's poetry and poetics. Take "Mont Blanc." Because the poem is "one of
3 Shelley's most labyrinthine and skeptical articulations of the relation
4 between 'the everlasting universe of things' and 'the human mind's
5 imaginings'" (White 2000: 106), many readers have assumed that it is
6 dominated by "various epistemological conundrums" (Jager 2010: 614).
7 As a result, "Mont Blanc" has been portrayed as a difficult work not only
8 for its readers but also for its author. As critics variously have it, Shelley
9 "takes up the burden of Hume's skepticism over causation" (Isomaki
10 1991: 63), undergoes "an almost agonizing effort to understand the real
11 nature of the mind" (Vivian 1955: 55), "struggles with the epistemolog-
12 ical questions that dominate the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge"
13 (Chernaik 1972: 47), "struggles with the epistemological difficulties of
14 language" (White 2000: 105), and so on. For when one sees the poem as
15 both invested in epistemology and decidedly skeptical, such apparent
16 burdens and agonies are inevitable and "the chief conclusion at which
17 Shelley arrives is that the attempt to solve these problems is necessarily a
18 struggle" (Vivian 1955: 61). "There is," after all, "no easy ascent to the
19 Power behind Mont Blanc" (Isomaki 1991: 58).

20 Indeed, even readings of "Mont Blanc" that balance Shelley's skept-
21 icism against his supposed epistemological project still frame the poem
22 with lofty ontological aims. Wasserman (1971: 238), for example, con-
23 cludes that the poem offers "a visionary knowledge of the absolute Power
24 behind all worldly action, or, in more appropriately religious terms, of
25 a transcendent and absolute divine Cause," only to pull back and con-
26 cede that "*Mont Blanc* does not actually end with this affirmation but
27 with a question." For Wasserman, skepticism is not where Shelley ends
28 up when he fails to ascend the mountain; rather, it functions as a critical
29 check that ensures such failure. And yet, for Wasserman, Shelley's
30 ultimate aim is still clearly on the side of an epistemology that leads to
31 an idealist ontology: "The assertion Shelley would like to make is evi-
32 dent, just as it is clear he wishes he could assert more than his 'modest
33 creed' in the 'Conclusion' of *The Sensitive Plant*; but the skeptical
34 grounds of the poem will not sustain it" (238). Thus, whether skepti-
35 cism is where Shelley ends up when epistemology fails or skepticism is
36 what causes this failure, the metaphysical ends of epistemology define
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1 how the poem is understood, guiding readers to speak of the claims
2 Shelley “would like to make” rather than of the ones he does make.⁴

3 My basic claim is that Shelley does not reach “knowledge of the
4 absolute Power” in “Mont Blanc” or elsewhere because he does not reach
5 for such knowledge. What he does reach is ignorance. Shelley’s essay
6 “On Life,” one of his central philosophical statements, is quite explicit on
7 the matter. It is “vain,” he writes, “to think that words can penetrate the
8 mystery of our being. Rightly used they may make evident our ignorance
9 to ourselves, and this is much” (Shelley 2002: 506).⁵ Abandoning as futile
10 and foolish the masculinist desire to penetrate the mystery of being,
11 Shelley finds sufficient satisfaction in making our ignorance of ontology
12 evident. His claim that such ignorance is “much” may bring to mind a
13 certain hallmark of second-generation Romantic aesthetics involving the
14 ability to reside in “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts” (Keats 2009: 41). But
15 whereas Keats finds “reaching after fact and reason” to be “irritable”
16 because it leads someone like Coleridge to “let go by a fine isolated
17 verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery” (42), Shelley lets
18 go of the fantasy of an unknown interiority that could be accessed or
19 possessed. Giving up the mystery of being, his skeptical poetry “estab-
20 lishes no new truth, it gives us no additional insight into our hidden
21 nature. . . . It leaves, what is too often the duty of the reformer in political
22 and ethical questions to leave, a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that
23 freedom in which it would have acted” (Shelley 2002: 507). And this
24 is much.

25 No doubt, the challenge is to take Shelley’s sense of sufficiency at
26 face value, since, by most accounts, ignorance would seem like much too
27 little. To be ignorant is to be “destitute of knowledge”; to be destitute is
28 to be “devoid *of*, wanting or entirely lacking *in* (something desirable)”
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31 ⁴ Such is the case especially with recent speculative realist readings of “Mont
32 Blanc,” all of which draw on Meillassoux 2008 to find ways beyond the so-called corre-
33 lationism that the poem foregrounds. See, e.g., Ellermann 2015, McCarthy 2015, and
34 Shaviro 2014.

35 ⁵ “On Life” further details how Shelley (2002: 506) became “discontented” with
36 materialism and how this discontent led him to the skeptical philosophy he derived
37 from Hume and Hume’s disciple William Drummond. See Hoagwood 1988 and Pulos
1954 for discussions of Drummond’s influence on Shelley.

(*OED*). Knowledge is something desirable, and ignorance is its negative counterpart—a formula with which most modern philosophy would agree. Ferrier, for one, not only devised the term *epistemology* but also developed the first modern philosophy of ignorance, which he designated with the somewhat more awkward neologism *agnoiology*. As the second branch of his three-tiered metaphysical project, “the agnoiology carries out the work of the epistemology” and is similarly designed as a portal to an “impregnable ontology” (Ferrier 1854: 414, 415). Indeed, agnoiology is the high-water mark in the aggressive sexual imaginary that drives this project toward ontology. Since Ferrier defines ignorance as “an intellectual defect, imperfection, privation, or shortcoming,” he can claim that there is ignorance only of that about which there can be knowledge—“the most fruitful and penetrating proposition in the whole system”—and this allows him to come “in possession of a lever powerful enough to break open the innermost secrecies of nature” and “lay open the universe from stem to stern” (397, 405). For if all ignorance is of a knowledge, he reasons, then “it matters not whether Absolute Being be that which we know, or that which we are ignorant of; we can demonstratively fix its character all the same; we can screw it down, whichever of them it be” (48). If all ignorance is lack, in other words, then Absolute Being can be penetrated, broken open, screwed, impregnated.

This is the exact opposite of how Mary Shelley’s husband understood ignorance. Whereas the Frankensteinian Ferrier (1854: 405) constructs “truths” about ignorance that function as “instruments” with which to penetrate the secrets of nature, Percy Bysshe Shelley derives from Hume a poetics of skeptical ignorance whereby one withdraws from the question of being. For Hume and Shelley, ignorance of the absolute is not a privation; it neither indicates a *manque à être* nor generates an infinite desire for being.⁶ Rather, their praxis of skeptical ignorance entails recognizing the rewards that come from simply ignoring ontology, and it involves learning this mode of ignorance from “nature” itself.

⁶ Addressing “the impossibility of explaining ultimate principles,” Hume (1978: xviii) claims that “we are no sooner acquainted with the impossibility of satisfying any desire, than the desire itself vanishes.”

1 “Where we trace the principles of the human mind through a few
 2 steps,” writes Hume (1975: 61), “we may be very well satisfied with our
 3 progress; considering how soon nature throws a bar to all our enquiries
 4 concerning causes, and reduces us to an acknowledgment of our igno-
 5 rance.” One takes up the question of causal relation, nature in turn
 6 provides no idea of power or necessary connection, and the requisite to
 7 ontologize the world is therefore ignored with satisfaction. As a result,
 8 the loaded question of whether power is located in mind or in matter
 9 becomes irrelevant; either way, “power . . . is, to the last degree, myste-
 10 rious and unintelligible” (66). But for Hume and for Shelley—and this is
 11 the crux of what I am calling skeptical ignorance—the “mysterious and
 12 unintelligible” does not signify some numinous *mysterium tremendum et*
 13 *fascinans*, or “some invisible intelligent principle” like that posited by the
 14 occasionalist philosophers for whom “every thing is full of God” (69, 71).⁷
 15 On the contrary, *secret*, *mysterious*, *unintelligible*, and *inaccessible* are all
 16 adjectives used to mark the points at which one stops and walks away,
 17 empty-handed but satisfied, thereafter ignoring the demands of meta-
 18 physical inquiry.⁸

19 A brief look at one of the central intertexts of “Mont Blanc” will
 20 provide a backdrop against which the praxis of skeptical ignorance can
 21 be brought further into focus. In “Lines Written a Few Miles above
 22 Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth (1984: 132) describes one of nature’s gifts
 23 as a
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25 ⁷ See Hume’s (1975: 69–73) short polemic against occasionalism, in which he
 26 principally targets the Cartesian Nicolas Malebranche.

27 ⁸ Many readers deny Hume the right not to take an ontological position. Meil-
 28 lassoux (2008: 88, 91), for example, acknowledges that Hume “replaces a question
 29 about the nature of things with a question about our relation to things” but then asserts
 30 that Hume “continues to believe in the necessity that metaphysics has extrapolated into
 31 things.” After all, Meillassoux reasons, Hume does not claim that causal power does not
 32 exist; ergo he must believe that it does exist. According to this logic, the only way for
 33 Hume not to believe in “the world of metaphysics” (91) is to make an ontological claim
 34 that denies the existence of causal power. Yet it is just this ontological paradigm that
 35 Hume chooses not to engage. Neither confirming nor denying the existence of causal
 36 power, he ignores the very problem and withdraws from the so-called world of meta-
 37 physics. It is also worth noting that the skeptical realist position Meillassoux attributes to
 Hume was developed, not without controversy, by a handful of Hume scholars in the
 1980s, most notably Galen Strawson (1989) and John P. Wright (1983). See Read and
 Richman 2000 for a sampling of arguments both for and against this reading.

blessed mood,
 In which the burthen of the mystery,
 In which the heavy and the weary weight
 Of all this unintelligible world,
 Is lightened.

According to Joshua Wilner (2011: 155), who draws on Stanley Cavell, this passage grows out of a “skeptical crisis.” While acknowledging that in 1798 “there can be no question of Wordsworth directly responding to Kant or expressing a ‘disappointment with the Kantian settlement,’” Wilner nevertheless hears these lines “in relation to the unknowability of the thing in itself as a major burden of the critical philosophy” and this philosophy’s “undertow of melancholy.” For Wilner, then, the “burthen” Wordsworth describes stems from Hume’s skeptical arguments as well as from Kant’s unsatisfactory response to Hume; hence he interprets the broader passage as a “response to the immobilizing threat of skepticism alternative to that proposed by the Kantian settlement” (157). Yet, for Wordsworth, the burden here is less the world’s unintelligibility than the unnecessary association between skepticism and melancholy. The mystery is not, after all, solved, nor is the world made intelligible. Instead, a simple shift in “mood” lightens the “weary weight” and thereby demonstrates that unintelligibility need not be a burden in the first place. Far from combating the threat of Humean skepticism, Wordsworth’s “lightened” mood recalls the affective outcome of skeptical ignorance. If these lines suggest anything about the so-called Kantian settlement, it would seem to be that Kant unnecessarily created the very burden he sought to ameliorate.⁹

But Wordsworth is neither Hume nor Shelley. If he momentarily makes peace with the unintelligible world, his “blessed mood” quickly dilates into “that serene and blessed mood” in which “we see into the life of things” (Wordsworth 1984: 132, 133). To be sure, this moment of ontological insight is itself followed by a skeptical surmise: “If this / Be

⁹ See Terada 2009: 97 for a brilliant discussion of how the *Critique of Pure Reason* has been habitually misread—for example, by Coleridge, Kleist, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche—as demanding full-blown affirmation of the given world, whereas Kant’s point is precisely to make such “coercion of value” as “minimal and untraumatic” as possible. While quite different, my argument in this essay owes a certain debt to the general arguments Terada puts forth in *Looking Away*.

1 but a vain belief . . . ” (133). Yet such doubts run throughout “Tintern
2 Abbey” and are, as Eric Reid Lindstrom (2011: 76) points out, “the very
3 means on which Wordsworth relies to maneuver his way through the
4 poem,” as “the feeling of having further resources is elicited by conces-
5 sions about proximate failure.” The skepticism practiced in “Tintern
6 Abbey” is, in other words, precisely what pushes the poem on (and on),
7 propelling Wordsworth (1984: 134) toward “something far more deeply
8 interfused.”¹⁰

9 The movement of skeptical ignorance is rather onanistic. In the
10 *Treatise*, for example, Hume (1978: xviii) declines to impose “conjectures
11 and hypotheses on the world” and finds that the “impossibility of making
12 any farther progress” allows him to “derive a more delicate satisfaction
13 from the free confession of his ignorance.” Anticipating the objection
14 that he “explain[s] only the manner in which objects affect the senses,
15 without endeavouring to account for their real nature or operations,” he
16 responds by “pleading guilty, and by confessing that [his] intention
17 never was to penetrate into the nature of bodies, or explain the secret
18 causes of their operations” (64). If, as he reiterates in the *Enquiry con-
19 cerning Human Understanding*, “we can push our enquiries no farther”
20 than the principle of custom, then we can also “rest contented,” since it is
21 with “sufficient satisfaction, that we can go so far” (Hume 1975: 43). Such
22 satisfaction may resemble the *ataraxia* of classical, Pyrrhonian skepti-
23 cism, yet Hume’s feeling of having done enough does not so much result
24 from a suspension of judgment as follow from his relinquishment of the
25 ambitions of metaphysics.¹¹ “At this point,” he then writes—only a
26 quarter of the way through the first *Enquiry*—“it would be very allowable
27 for us to stop our philosophical researches. In most questions, we can
28 never make a single step farther; and in all questions, we must termi-
29 nate here at last, after our most restless and curious enquiries” (47).¹²

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32 ¹⁰ As Lindstrom (2011: 76) observes, there are at least five points when “Tintern
33 Abbey” might have ended earlier and still been a coherent poem.

34 ¹¹ See François 2008: xx for an exploration of “moods of ‘enoughness’” that fly in
35 the face of normative expectations concerning what counts as fulfillment.

36 ¹² Hume himself does carry on, to be sure, but his course is notably lateral: he
37 further examines the nature of customary conjunction to “meet with some explications
and analogies that will give satisfaction” while also welcoming readers to neglect the rest
of his inquiries (Hume 1975: 47).

1 Of course, there is also the combination of “philosophical melancholy
2 and delirium” that appears to trouble the conclusion to book 1 of the
3 *Treatise*, where Hume (1978: 270, 263) is “inclin’d to stop a moment” and
4 rest before “launch[ing] out into those immense depths of philosophy.”
5 But this often-cited and deeply ironic passage is framed by the same
6 ethos of sufficient satisfaction found elsewhere in Hume’s writings.¹³
7 However melodramatically formulated, Hume’s “resolve to perish on the
8 barren rock” of skepticism, “rather than venture [him]self upon that
9 boundless ocean, which runs out into immensity” (264), conveys a similar
10 sense of having gone far enough, or as far as one can go. The irony, after
11 all, is that Hume was indeed satisfied to leave metaphysical questions
12 “shut up from curiosity and enquiry.”¹⁴

13 “With regard to the great question, the System of the Universe, I
14 have no curiosity on the subject. I am content to see no farther into
15 futurity than Plato and Bacon. My mind is tranquil” (Trelawny 2000: 87).
16 So says Shelley in Edward John Trelawny’s *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the*
17 *Author*, which, as one Victorian-era reviewer notes, “show very strikingly
18 how devoid of metaphysics,—how free from anything like teleological
19 inquiry, was the mind of Shelley” (Buckingham et al. 1878: 563). “My
20 mind is at peace respecting nothing so much as the constitution and
21 mysteries of the great system of things,” Shelley concurs in an 1821 letter
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23 ¹³ It would require much more space to develop a reading that does justice to the
24 end of book 1 of the *Treatise*, where Hume (1978: 264) claims that the impossibility of
25 “amending” the faculties brings him “almost to despair.” Suffice it to say that the passage
26 not only ironizes the Protestant spiritual autobiographical narrative, as Adela Pinch
27 (1996: 42) shows, but, more specifically, recasts Blaise Pascal’s (1966: 88) fragment 198/
28 693 to ironize Pascal’s apparent “despair” at the “wretched state of man.” Further, the
29 questions that Hume (1978: 270) famously poses—“Where am I, or what? From what
30 causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return?”—are part of his
31 broader allusive engagement with the figure of John Milton’s Adam, whom he uses
32 explicitly in the first *Enquiry* and elsewhere to demonstrate why the supposedly
33 imperfect faculties of humans are, in fact, “entirely perfect” (Hume 1975: 27).

34 ¹⁴ As a good reader of Hume, Kant (2004: 10, 11–12) recognized Hume’s skeptical
35 satisfaction (though it did not garner his approval) when, in the *Prolegomena to Any Future*
36 *Metaphysics*, he expanded on the nautical metaphor to distinguish his own ambition to
37 “settle the possibility of a metaphysics” from the onanism of his predecessor: “[Hume]
deposited his ship on the beach (of skepticism) for safekeeping, where it could then lie
and rot, whereas it is important to me to give it a pilot, who, provided with complete sea-
charts and a compass, might safely navigate the ship wherever seems good to him,
following sound principles of the helmsman’s art drawn from a knowledge of the globe.”

1 to Thomas Medwin; “my curiosity on this point never amounts to solici-
 2 titude” (Trelawny 2000: 174). Yet Shelley is usually portrayed as the
 3 most metaphysically curious and searching—and despairing—of the
 4 Romantic poets. When, for example, Anne Mellor (1988: 27) describes as
 5 Wordsworthian the “ecological vision” that Mary Shelley held during the
 6 time of her six-week tour of the Continent with Percy, she makes sure to
 7 contrast this vision with Percy’s “restless seeking after intellectual beauty,
 8 for participation in a divine energy—the One, the True, the Good—
 9 that he perceived constantly in motion around him.” Indeed, one finds a
 10 similar image in Mary’s preface to Percy’s *Essays, Letters from Abroad,*
 11 *Translations and Fragments* when, after commenting briefly on the essay
 12 “On Life,” she quotes two lines from the “Ode to Heaven”—“Peace! the
 13 abyss is wreathed with scorn / At your presumption, Atom-born” (ll. 37–
 14 38)—as evidence of “his despair of being able to conceive, far less
 15 express, all of variety, majesty, and beauty, which is veiled from our
 16 imperfect senses in the unknown realm, the mystery of which his poetic
 17 vision sought in vain to penetrate” (Shelley 1839: xiii). Such is most likely
 18 the Percy Bysshe Shelley who first comes to mind for many readers: a
 19 poet-philosopher forever striving to climb the highest metaphysical
 20 mountains despite woefully recognizing the impossibility of doing so.
 21 And if such readers were interested in discerning Percy’s ecological
 22 vision, then they would probably assume that this vision was founded on a
 23 ceaseless—albeit futile—desire to grasp an ontological ideality beyond
 24 the phenomenality of the natural world.

25 But why does this portrait have such appeal? After all, throughout his
 26 poetic writings, even those that would seem the most “idealist,” Shelley
 27 eschews just this desire in no uncertain terms. The aforementioned lines
 28 from the “Ode to Heaven,” for example, are in fact deployed as a critique
 29 of the “presumption” that there is an unknown realm veiled by the
 30 senses. Indeed, this ode—which, as Christopher R. Miller (2005: 591)
 31 notes, “is as much an ode *on* heaven as an ode *to* heaven”—is designed
 32 precisely to dramatize Shelley’s peace with the mysteries of the universe.
 33 Introducing, first, a “CHORUS OF SPIRITS” that puts forth a deistic view of
 34 heaven as the “Palace-roof of cloudless nights” (l. 1, à la Joseph Addison’s
 35 “Spacious Firmament on high”), Shelley then brings in a “REMOTER
 36 VOICE” that debunks the preceding voice’s terms of praise and asserts
 37 that heaven is, instead, a “portal” to an inconceivable spiritual realm
 beyond the world of the senses:

1 Thou are but the mind's first chamber
 2 Round which its young fancies clamber,
 3 Like weak insects in a cave,
 4 Lighted up by stalactites;
 5 But the portal of the grave,
 6 Where a world of new delights
 7 Will make thy best glories seem
 8 But a dim and noonday gleam
 9 From the shadow of a dream!
 (ll. 28–36)

10 The Platonic imagery here is conspicuous, and if one were looking for
 11 evidence of Shelley's metaphysical desire to penetrate past the shadowy
 12 world of appearances, then these nine lines might seem a decent place to
 13 start. But the poem does not end here. Instead, "A LOUDER AND STILL
 14 REMOTER VOICE" interjects with the lines Mary Shelley quotes in her
 15 preface, shifting the poem's direction entirely:

16 Peace! the abyss is wreathed with scorn
 17 At your presumption, Atom-born!
 18 What is Heaven? and what are ye
 19 Who its brief expanse inherit?
 20 What are suns and spheres which flee
 21 With the instinct of that Spirit
 22 Of which ye are but a part?
 23 Drops which Nature's mighty heart
 24 Drives through thinnest veins. Depart!
 (ll. 37–45)

25
 26 Ignoring the formal conventions of the ode, this third and final voice has
 27 no interest in addressing heaven or in synthesizing the philosophical
 28 views of the first two speakers. Rather, the epode turns the poem toward
 29 these speakers to quiet ("Peace!") and dismiss ("Depart!") their entire
 30 line of inquiry, particularly the second voice's notion of a portal to a
 31 world beyond appearances. The epithet "Atom-born" may resonate with
 32 Lucretian materialism, but this resonance is "brief," like Heaven's
 33 appearance, and the questions that follow become more and more
 34 obviously rhetorical, to the point that Shelley does not even punctu-
 35 ate the end of the series with a question mark, thereby emptying out
 36 any ontology they may seem to imply. The voice then repeats its ini-
 37 tial question in the final stanza, this time offering an answer: "What is

1 Heaven? a globe of dew" (l. 46). But the equation of Heaven with a
 2 dewdrop is deflationary, even bathetic, and only drives home Shelley's
 3 critique of metaphysical reaching. "All things exist as they are perceived,"
 4 says *A Defence of Poetry*; "nothing exists but as it is perceived," says "On
 5 Life" (Shelley 2002: 533, 506). The "Ode to Heaven" concurs. Far from
 6 positing an unknown realm, "the final voice refuses to say what lies
 7 beyond" (Miller 2005: 596) and thereby completes the onanistic move-
 8 ment of a poem that withdraws from the metaphysical quest it stages.¹⁵

9 "Mont Blanc" enacts this withdrawal less dramatically. Starting with
 10 Hume's (1975: 32) observation that "nature has kept us at a great dis-
 11 tance from all her secrets," the opening of the poem at once brings up
 12 and sets aside "the source of human thought" by also introducing "secret
 13 springs" from which this so-called source emerges (ll. 5, 4). Rather than
 14 deepening the ontological mystery, however, this doubling of sources
 15 effectively removes the question of the absolute. As we are told some
 16 ninety lines later, "power dwells apart in its tranquility / Remote, serene,
 17 and inaccessible" (ll. 96–97). Unlike the Wordsworth of "Tintern Abbey,"
 18 Shelley does not attempt to "see into the life of things," nor does he seek
 19 to approach, much less enter, "the secret strength of things" (l. 139).
 20 Where the place deixis of "Tintern Abbey" displays an "insistent prox-
 21 imity" that emphasizes the "here," as Mark J. Bruhn (2005: 410) notes,
 22 that of "Mont Blanc" displays an insistent distality that leaves the
 23 mountain and its powers well enough alone: "thou art *there*," "the power
 24 is *there*," and "none beholds them *there*" (ll. 48, 127, 132; my emphases).¹⁶
 25 If one assumes that Shelley nevertheless strives to access the absolute,
 26 then, indeed, "the quest for understanding of the Principle [of Power] is
 27 necessarily a struggle. The goal is virtually inaccessible" (Vivian 1955: 65).
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¹⁵ Shelley dramatizes such withdrawal in a number of poems. At times a meta-
 physical question is asked and "a voice / Is wanting," for example when Asia interrogates
 Demogorgon in *Prometheus Unbound* (2.4.115–16). At other instances, as in the "Hymn
 to Intellectual Beauty," a speaker addresses a series of metaphysical questions to an
 absent spirit, only to drive home the point that "no voice from some sublime world hath
 ever / To sage or poet these responses given — / Therefore the name of God and ghosts
 and Heaven, / Remain the records of their vain endeavor" (ll. 25–28). At still others, a
 voice equates such a "thirst of knowledge" with the pursuit of death, such as in *The
 Triumph of Life* (l. 194) and in the sonnet "Ye hasten to the grave!"

¹⁶ See White 2000: 106–13 for an account of how Shelley's use of deixis in "Mont
 Blanc" foregrounds the positing power of language.

1 Yet the widely held notion that Shelley struggles in “Mont Blanc” is
 2 incorrect, not because knowledge of the absolute comes with ease but
 3 because he does not undertake a “quest for understanding” in the first
 4 place.

5 To be sure, “Mont Blanc” is a “many-voiced” poem (l. 13) that
 6 explicitly raises questions and thereby stages a certain desire to know,
 7 particularly in section 3:

8 Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled
 9 The veil of life and death? or do I lie
 10 In dream, and does the mightier world of sleep
 11 Spread far around and inaccessibly
 12 Its circles?
 13

14 Is this the scene
 15 Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young
 16 Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea
 17 Of fire envelop once this silent snow?

(ll. 53–57; 71–74)

18 Yet such fantastic questions fall under the banner of what “some say”
 19 (l. 49) and are raised precisely to demonstrate their futility. After all,
 20 “none can reply” (l. 75), obviously. Christopher Hitt (2005: 148) glosses
 21 these unanswered questions in familiar terms of quest, failure, and
 22 impasse: “Once again, the speaker is led to a dead end. Steadfastly
 23 refusing to confirm or deny the speaker’s musings about it, the landscape
 24 yields only a blank. The voices have failed yet again, leaving the speaker
 25 staring at a vacancy.” Yet who, really, refuses to confirm or deny these
 26 musings? Given that the speaker is, in fact, the one who makes “the voices
 27 of the desert fail” (l. 28), such so-called failure seems more like a retreat
 28 than an epistemic impasse. Instead of furnishing an answer, the poem
 29 simply takes leave of the metaphysical line of inquiry that “some” carry
 30 out. “Skeptical silence,” writes Roland Barthes (2005: 25), “is a silence not
 31 of the mouth . . . but of ‘thought,’ of ‘reason,’ of the implicit system that
 32 underlies and articulates all philosophy.” In “Mont Blanc” skeptical
 33 silence is a tactic of skeptical ignorance: what is silenced is the pursuit of
 34 metaphysical truth.

35 Mystification is also a tactic of skeptical ignorance. After going silent
 36 on the question of first causes, Shelley presents what has become one of
 37

1 the poem's lasting interpretive impasses when he discusses the "myste-
 2 rious tongue" of the natural world and addresses explicitly the problem
 3 of reconciling "man" and "nature":

4 The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
 5 Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
 6 So solemn, so serene, that man may be,
 7 But for such faith, with nature reconciled.
 8 (ll. 76–79)

9 Nature's lesson here is notoriously enigmatic. Does the conjunctive *or*
 10 between *doubt* and *faith* make these mutually exclusive or appositional
 11 dispositions? Does *such faith*, in turn, allow for reconciliation or thwart it?
 12 Should we accept that a rejected line from the Scrope Davies manuscript
 13 ("In such a faith with Nature reconciled") represents Shelley's true
 14 intention and therefore construe *but* as an adverb meaning "only," so
 15 that "But for such faith" reads as "Only through such faith"? Or should
 16 we accept that *but* is indeed a preposition meaning "except," so that "But
 17 for such faith" reads as "Except for such faith"?¹⁷ Both readings pose
 18 difficulties: the former finds clarity but requires substantial interpretive
 19 gymnastics, while the latter results in the baffling claim that faith at once
 20 promotes and prevents reconciliation.¹⁸ Yet if one lets go of the idea that
 21 Shelley desires to penetrate the mystery, then one is left with what was
 22 there all along: four lines of verse that positively baffle the mind-nature
 23 paradigm. The claim that a mild faith might allow for reconciliation if it
 24 were not for such a faith is less an inconsistent thesis that requires rec-
 25 onciliation than a koan-like statement that renders inoperative the very
 26 project of reconciliation. In brief, nature's "mysterious tongue" does not
 27 articulate a consistent message about how to reconcile man and nature
 28 because Shelley does not care to offer a solution to a pseudoproblem that
 29 nature has taught him to ignore.

30 "Let Nature be your teacher." Such is the well-known lesson of
 31 Wordsworth's companion poems "Expostulation and Reply" and "The
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33
 34 ¹⁷ The enigmatic "But for such faith" has received a great deal of critical attention.
 35 For detailed discussions, see, e.g., Erkelenz 1989 and Rees 1964.

36 ¹⁸ Put differently, the former "inflicts seriously disfiguring violence on the
 37 semantic molecule of *but for*" (Duffy 2009: 16), while the latter "can only be justified by
 the most torturous explanations" (Webb 1977: 137).

1 Tables Turned”; it is also one of the lessons of skeptical ignorance.
 2 But whereas Wordsworth (1984: 130) recommends the cultivation of a
 3 “wise passiveness” in which “we can feed our mind” if we “deem that
 4 there are powers / Which of themselves our minds impress”—if, that is,
 5 we posit the empirical effect of causal powers that have no empirical
 6 existence—Shelley practices a poetics in which the inaccessibility of
 7 power is given by nature as an occasion for giving up ontology. In section
 8 4 of “Mont Blanc” he positions “power” “apart” not only thematically but
 9 also syntactically:

10 The fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams,
 11 Ocean, and all the living things that dwell
 12 Within the daedal earth; lightning, and rain,
 13 Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane,
 14 The torpor of the year when feeble dreams
 15 Visit the hidden buds, or dreamless sleep
 16 Holds every future leaf and flower;—the bound
 17 With which from that detested trance they leap;
 18 The works and ways of man, their death and birth,
 19 And that of him and all that his may be;
 20 All things that move and breathe with toil and sound
 21 Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell.
 22 Power dwells apart in its tranquillity
 23 Remote, serene, and inaccessible:
 24 And *this*, the naked countenance of earth,
 25 On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains
 26 Teach the adverting mind.
 27 (ll. 84–100)

28 The first twelve lines bring together “all the living things” in one long,
 29 sweeping sentence that surveys the empirical world. Following a full
 30 stop, “power” is then positioned “apart”—not only from “all things” in
 31 the preceding sentence but also from any preposition that would relate it
 32 to anything at all—and marked as “inaccessible,” the subject of two
 33 discrete lines that bear a minimally contiguous relation to what precedes
 34 them. Although the colon after *inaccessible* would then seem to set up a
 35 point of access, creating the expectation that what succeeds these two
 36 lines will expound the nature of “power” (much as the “blessed mood” in
 37 “Tintern Abbey” is dilated through two colons into an epiphanic, onto-
 logical vision), this mark only leads on to another paratactic construc-
 tion: “And *this*, the naked countenance of earth.” If Shelley momentarily

1 allows the reader to connect the emphatic deictic back to “power,” he
 2 then clarifies that the poem has in fact already moved on, as the referent
 3 of “*this*” turns out to be the appositional “naked countenance of earth.”
 4 Power is thus quietly passed by, ignored, as the poem vacates the ques-
 5 tion of the absolute. What the mountains “teach the adverting mind”
 6 is without a direct object, because the lesson is just this movement
 7 of ignorance.

8 For most readers of “Mont Blanc,” however, the inaccessibility of
 9 “power” presents a sublime “threat to consciousness” (Mitchell 2008)
 10 that demands resolution; hence Shelley is seen either as submitting to
 11 the power of nature or as coming to view himself as superior to this power
 12 insofar as its realization requires the power of his imagination. Never
 13 mind that Shelley’s understanding of the concept of power derives quite
 14 clearly from Hume, who rather notably had no interest in the sublime, or
 15 that Shelley’s knowledge of Kant was slight;¹⁹ the poem’s treatment of
 16 power and the mind-nature relation is almost always read through the
 17 Kantian dynamic sublime and therefore resolved into a relation of sub-
 18 mission and dominance.²⁰ If, as Frances Ferguson (1984: 202) writes,
 19 “critics seem to have agreed on one thing about *Mont Blanc*—that it is a
 20 poem about the relationship between the human mind and the external
 21 world,” they have also agreed with Christoph Bode (1997: 340) that it is
 22

23 ¹⁹ Aside from the obvious resonances between Hume’s and Shelley’s treatments of
 24 “power,” *secret springs* is a phrase that appears prominently in the opening of Hume’s
 25 (1975: 14) first *Enquiry* and later in the text (94n1), as well as in the *Treatise* (Hume 1978:
 26 409), while the phrase *secret powers* appears eleven times in the first *Enquiry*. Indeed,
 27 when Shelley explains his understanding of power in his “Speculations on Metaphysics,”
 28 he lifts his discussion almost verbatim from Hume’s text (Shelley 1954: 182–83). For
 29 exceptional readings that address Hume’s influence on “Mont Blanc,” see Isomaki
 30 1991: 59–63 and Keach 1985: 200.

31 ²⁰ As Robert Mitchell (2008) notes, even readings of “Mont Blanc” that do not
 32 explicitly mention Kant “develop interpretations that rely upon Kant’s sublime, in the
 33 sense that they read the poem within the paradigm of what we might call ‘threat to
 34 consciousness and its resolution.’” According to Forest Pyle (2010), this paradigm is
 35 simply unavoidable. “Try as one might to resist it,” he writes, “I cannot imagine a
 36 genuine engagement with the poem which can ultimately escape the problematic of the
 37 sublime.” Matthew C. Borushko (2013: 249) attempts to do just that, though insofar as
 he concludes that the poem enacts “a veritable reversal of Kantian sublime subreption,”
 thereby demonstrating that “‘the adverting mind’ has learned well its own agency in the
 making of the world,” he rather seems to prove Pyle’s point, since the Kantian sublime
 ultimately reverses subreption on its own.

1 “in the concept and in the experience of the sublime that Shelley finds a
2 paradigmatic and genuinely aesthetic solution for a philosophical antinomy
3 that had haunted him for quite a while.” But what if Shelley were not
4 so much interested in solving this antinomy as in demonstrating that it
5 need not be seen as a problem in the first place? And what if inaccessibility
6 were not construed as a threat to consciousness? What mode of
7 relation might then appear in place of the sublime drama of confrontation,
8 domination, and subordination?

9 Such relational drama would seem to come to a head at the end of
10 “Mont Blanc,” when Shelley finally confronts the so-called “threat of
11 Power’s sheer vacancy” (Fry 1980: 198):

12 And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
13 If to the human mind’s imaginings
14 Silence and Solitude were vacancy?
15 (ll. 142–44)

16 While the philosophical significance of this most famous of poetic
17 questions has long been the subject of debate, what the term *vacancy*
18 signifies has been agreed on: a void, a blank, a lack, an absence, nothing.
19 So construed, the sublime vacancy with which Shelley’s poem closes gives
20 way to the two lines of interpretation mentioned above. Read literally,
21 the question codes as a skeptical realist confrontation with the great
22 outdoors: human thought is seen as subordinate to material nature,
23 since the latter’s power is independent from any human concern, an
24 inaccessible and awful mystery that the speaker nevertheless desires to
25 penetrate. Read rhetorically, however, the question codes as an idealist
26 celebration of the imagination: Shelley is seen as telling the mountain
27 that it would be nothing without him, for he perceives that the very idea
28 of nature’s destructiveness and indifference is itself dependent on
29 human thought. In the former reading, the “vacancy” of nature points
30 toward a negative knowledge, even a negative theology; in the latter
31 reading, such nothingness rebounds to point toward knowledge of
32 the mind’s sovereignty. Both readings assume that either mind or
33 nature must be dominant; both are positioned by the impossibility that
34 “vacancy” could remain absolutely vacant. For when understood as a
35 void, blank, or lack, “vacancy” can and will be filled in with different
36 beliefs and claims, positive and negative, about the absolute; the word is,
37

1 quite literally, a vacancy *sign*: like that found outside a motel, it advertises
2 available accommodation.²¹

3 But this is not the only sense in which *vacancy* can be understood.
4 From the seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth century, the word
5 was also used to signify a somewhat different set of meanings: a “tem-
6 porary freedom or cessation from business or some usual occupation”;
7 “an interval of leisure or unoccupied time”; “the state or condition of
8 being free from or unoccupied with work, business or action; idleness;
9 inactivity”; “freedom from mental preoccupation”; “an unoccupied
10 period or interval; a time of absence of some activity” (*OED*). Although
11 readers across the board have construed the vacancy left by Shelley’s
12 skepticism as a void turned sublime threat, Shelley’s theorization of
13 his skepticism in “On Life” suggests that he understands vacancy as a
14 vacation—not as a threatening lack but as a cessation and mental
15 “freedom” from the business of metaphysics.²²

16 And such a vacation is enacted in and through the ontological
17 question with which “Mont Blanc” concludes. Again:

18 And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
19 If to the human mind’s imaginings
20 Silence and Solitude were vacancy?
21

22 Both the realist and the idealist readings of this conditional sentence
23 focus on the apodosis (“And what were thou . . . ?”) and assume that
24 silence and solitude *are* vacancy, that their equation is itself the condi-
25 tion that positions Shelley’s question. Yet the protasis (“If to the human
26 mind’s imaginings / Silence and Solitude were vacancy”) is not in the
27

28 ²¹ This understanding of vacancy motivates Meillassoux’s (2008: 47) argument
29 that modern skepticism is essentially a fideism insofar as it grants “any piety whatso-
30 ever. . . an equal and exclusive right to grasp the ultimate truth.” Skeptical ignorance, in
31 turn, puts into question Meillassoux’s own belief that getting epistemology and ontology
32 “correct” will somehow combat the “fanaticism” with which he is ostensibly concerned
33 (49). See Sedgwick 2003 for a discussion of the faith in knowledge that informs the
34 politics of not only the hermeneutics of suspicion but also many of the new realisms and
35 materialisms.

36 ²² Here it is perhaps useful to recall Harold Bloom’s (1971: 282) suggestion that
37 “Shelley’s urbanity is unique in literature in that it can manifest itself on the level of the
sublime.” But see also Davie 1960 for a different take on Shelley’s urbanity, as well as
Brown 1991: 22–39 for a discussion of “the urbane sublime” in eighteenth-century
poetry.

1 indicative but in the subjunctive, suggesting that any equation of
2 silence and solitude with vacancy is, at best, purely hypothetical, if not
3 counterfactual—after all, the construction “If silence and solitude *were*
4 vacancy” strongly implies that they are not. The possibility of answering
5 the principal ontological question (“What would the universe of things
6 be?”) thus recedes as the reality of the ontological equation on which this
7 question is conditional fails to materialize in the first place. One could
8 perhaps say that the protasis itself implies a question: “*Are* silence and
9 solitude vacancy to the human mind’s imaginings?” But no determinate
10 answer to this question is available. “Silence and solitude are,” according
11 to Tilottama Rajan (1980: 88), “not very different from vacancy,” but
12 Shelley’s sentence nevertheless marks and implicitly asks for their dif-
13 ference, which is why Rajan also finds it “enigmatic.” Enigmatic indeed,
14 the final lines do not provide the means with which to answer the
15 question implied in the protasis, or even with which to determine whe-
16 ther Shelley is really asking. And yet, of course, this “question,” whether
17 or not it is one, needs to be determined before one can begin to address
18 the poem’s principal ontological question.

19 What would the universe be without the human mind? If the central
20 problem of modern thought is staked on this question, Shelley vacates
21 the question itself. It is unanswerable and unapproachable, and that is
22 just the point: he poses the question of the nature of things to make this
23 question inaccessible. One can keep trying to answer it and wind up
24 arguing that mind dominates nature or that nature dominates mind, but
25 that makes sense only if one thinks that the mind-nature relation is a
26 problem in need of resolution. If, on the other hand, one thinks that this
27 problem is an important but by no means unavoidable invention of post-
28 Kantian philosophy, then it makes more sense to follow Shelley in
29 ignoring the pressure to reclaim the great outdoors. As Ferguson (1984:
30 207) notes, “Mont Blanc” “suggests the inevitability of any human’s see-
31 ing things in terms of relationship.” Rather than approach this inevita-
32 bility as an obstacle that must somehow be overcome, we might see it as a
33 prompt to think about forms of relationship that begin with letting the
34 nature of things be. Such a thinking would not close off the thing in itself,
35 since the very idea of the in-itself is itself a product of the mind-nature
36 problem qua problem. What it would do is allow for a mode of inquiry
37

1 that does not entail the fantasies of possession and penetration that
2 accompany the fantasy of absolute knowledge.

3 Since at least the mid-twentieth century British Romanticism has
4 been closely associated with “that attempt, apparently doomed to failure
5 and abandoned by our time, to identify subject and object, to reconcile
6 man and nature, consciousness and unconsciousness by poetry which is
7 ‘the first and last of all knowledge’” (Wellek 1963: 221). Yet the case of
8 Shelley suggests that the reverse is actually more accurate; the Romantics
9 may have largely ignored a “vain endeavor” that, however renounced or
10 tricked out, has been more definitive of twentieth- and early twenty-first-
11 century thought. Which, in turn, would mean that what constitutes the
12 Romantic tradition needs to be rethought. For a so-called post-Romantic
13 poet like Wallace Stevens (1972: 174), modern poetry begins in the wake
14 of the failed project of reconciling subject and object, in an attempt “to
15 find what will suffice” after the destruction of “Romantic tenements” or
16 illusions—a task that, for Stevens, is also “the finding of a satisfaction.”
17 But Shelley had, in a sense, already accomplished this task, not by playing
18 the role of a “metaphysician in the dark” (175) but by giving up on
19 metaphysics and embracing the most supposedly destructive of all mod-
20 ern skepticisms. For a Romantic like Shelley, in other words, the pro-
21 ject of reconciling subject and object neither failed nor succeeded,
22 because it never really was a project in the first place. “The dilemma in
23 which Hume placed philosophy delighted him” (Medwin 1847: 154). In
24 rethinking the Romantic tradition, we might ask why such skeptical
25 satisfaction has been buried under a mountain of literary-historical nar-
26 ratives that take their cue from those post-Kantian stories and schemas
27 that turn thwarted metaphysical dreams into conditions of existential
28 loss and alienation. Or we might simply take such satisfaction as a starting
29 point and begin to trace a rather different constellation of Romanticism,
30 one that has less to do with an imagined epistemic impasse and more to
31 do with a poetics of epistemic sufficiency.

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37 *Poetics of Skepticism* and has published essays and reviews in *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, *Romantic Circles*, *Studies in Romanticism*, and *SubStance*.

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