

**Zeitschrift:** Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata

**Herausgeber:** Association suisse de littérature générale et comparée

**Band:** - (2004)

**Heft:** 35: Das Grotteske = Le grotesque = The grotesque

**Artikel:** The grotesque & the alpine sublime

**Autor:** Hughes, Peter

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006378>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 07.03.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

Peter Hughes

## The Grotesque & the Alpine Sublime

The Siamese twinning of the Alps and the sublime began even before their birth in Burke's *Enquiry* and Kant's *Kritik*. What Kant in his *Kritik der Urteilkraft* describes as "Kühne überhangende gleichsam drohende Felsen" and Burke as "Sublime visual objects of great dimensions" had by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century been firmly located in the Alps. And the sublime had been located just as firmly in landscapes and natural objects whose ikon was the Alpine peak. Storms at sea, charging tigers, bardic heroes, Shakespearean soliloquies, giant statues, Miltonic devils, even public executions, were earlier rivals which increasingly were displaced or pushed aside by Mont Blanc or the Matterhorn. And yet this shift had the further effect of turning the sublime into the grotesque. The alpine sublime, I shall argue here, was from the start touched by the grotesque in two of the three senses analyzed by Wolfgang Kayser. "The grotesque" he concludes, "is the expression of the estranged or alienated world, i.e. the familiar world is seen from a perspective which suddenly renders it strange [...]." And attempts to represent the Alps in poetry and painting evoke the sense of the grotesque as "an attempt to control and exorcise ('zu bannen und zu beschwören' in Kayser's phrase) the demonic elements in the world.<sup>1</sup>

What I want to show here is the process by which the sublime came to be defined less and less as *rhetorical*, as the elevation of style and "echo of a noble soul" defined by Longinus, and instead more and more as *material*, as the dynamic impact of objects and forces that overwhelm us; the process by which the sublime is transferred from the painting or poem or oration to the mountain or abyss or abysmal dungeon. And yet this is a double process, and by focussing

1 Wolfgang Kayser, *Das Groteske: Seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*, Tübingen, Stauffenburg Verlag, 2004 (1957), p. 139.

on romantic responses to Mont Blanc and the Alpine landscape in German and English poetry, and on painting of the period, what I also hope to show is that the romantic sublime found in the Alps both expressed and repressed a return to the the aesthetic ideology in which it began; a return to the language and images of terror, of the demonic and the erotic, the estranged and grotesque, as these could be created and expressed in poems and pictures. This was a return of the repressed, of the elements in the sublime and in the Alps that from the beginning had been found to be at once poetic and pathological.

The beginning of this process can be traced back to a remarkable book by a remarkable 17<sup>th</sup> century thinker, the *Telluris Theoria Sacra* by the Anglican priest and scholar Thomas Burnett. The book's first version (in Latin) was published between 1681 and 1689, its German translation in 1698, and in between the author's free translation into English (1685 to 1689): all three versions had an enormous impact on the way people thought about the history and theology of the earth. Burnett's bold rethinking of Biblical accounts called much of the Old Testament into question; and called in question too Burnett's ecclesiastical ambitions. It was said at the time that he would have risen to the top of the Anglican Church had he not written this book. A little more satirically and metrically, he was also said to have argued, as comic verses of the time suggested, that the biblical account was rubbish.

That all the books of Moses  
Were nothing but supposes.  
That as for Father Adam  
And Mrs. Eve, his Madam,  
And what the Devil spoke, Sir,  
'Twas nothing but a joke, Sir,  
And well-invented flam.<sup>2</sup>

2 "The Battle Royal" in William King, *Original Works* (London, 1776), I, 221-222: cited in Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite*, Seat-

But if he shows in his book a growing skepticism about the Bible, he also shows an amazing response to the Alps, which converted him to a stupendous vision of the world and its origins. Burnett's road to Damascus was the Grand Tour he went on in 1671 with two of his noble Cambridge students, James Butler, later Duke of Ormonde, and with the Earl of Wiltshire, later the Duke of Bolton, to whom he dedicated the Latin edition of the work. It was in fact this voyage and his first view of the Alps, that led him to develop his theory and start to write his book. Burnett actually saw the Alps, just as Petrarch actually climbed to the top of Mont Ventoux, and the empirical shock, the estrangement of perspective was also his recognition of the natural sublime as a mode of the grotesque:

There is nothing doth more awaken our Thoughts, or excite our Minds to enquire into the Causes of such Things, than the actual View of them; as I had Experience my self, when it was my fortune to cross the Alps and Apennine Mountains; for the sight of those wild, vast, and indigested Heaps of Stones and Earth did so deeply stir my Fancy, that I was not easy till I could give my self some tolerable Account how that Confusion came in Nature. (I, 190)<sup>3</sup>

The Alps and their sublime shape struck Burnett as “indigested Nature”, as something monstrous and ruinous. Approaching them through the valleys of France and with his memories of his native hills and lakes of the North of England – Wordsworth's native parts – he could see at a distance some vestiges of symmetry and order. But all that vanished as he drew closer:

[...] suppose a Man was carried asleep out of a plain Country amongst the Alps, and left there upon the Top of one of the highest Mountains, when he wak'd and look'd about him, he would think himself in an in-

tle & London, University of Washington Press, 1997 [1959], pp. 188-189. I am greatly indebted to this pioneering work, especially to its discussion of the aesthetic implications of Burnett's work.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Burnett, *The sacred Theory of the Earth*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1965 (1685); further references will be to this reprinted edition (STE).

chanted Country, or carried into another World; every Thing wou'd appear to him so different to what he had ever seen or imagin'd before. To see on every Hand of him a multitude of vast Bodies thrown together in Confusion, as those Mountains are; Rocks standing naked round about him; and the hollow Valleys gaping under him; and at his Feet, it may be, an Heap of Frozen Snow in the midst of summer. He would hear the Thunder come from below, and see the black Clouds hanging beneath him; upon such a Prospect it would not be easy to persuade himself that he was still upon the same Earth; but if he did, he would be convinc'd, at least, that there are some Regions of it strangely rude, and ruin-like, and very different from what he had ever thought of before [revolution?]. (*STE*, I, 191-2)

More than a century later, gazing out from Hauptwil at the Alps, Hölderlin could see in them “das alte bildende Chaos”; Burnett for his part sees them as emblems of a destructive disorder, emblems of some primal catastrophe:

They are the greatest Examples of Confusion that we know in Nature; no Tempest or Earthquake puts things into more Disorder.  
(*STE*, I, 195-6)

And if the isolation and primitive character of the Alps might evoke primal nature, Burnett sees that earlier raw state of ruin as even worse than what we now have.

Burke in his turn saw the sublime as in part a first sighting or discovery. As Frances Ferguson has pointed out: “Without the distancing of death, there wouldn't, of course, be much to talk about, but the problem that haunts Burke's *Enquiry* is the possibility that repeated exposure to the sublime may annihilate it altogether. The sublimity of Mont Blanc becomes in some sense factitious once Mont Blanc becomes an obligatory stop on every gentlemen's grand tour, and it obviously suffers even more greatly from daily exposure [...]. As Burke says, ‘custom reconciles us to everything’.”<sup>4</sup>

There is nothing doth more awaken our Thoughts, or excite our Minds to enquire into the Causes of such Things, than the actual View of

4 Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 46.

them; as I had Experience my self, when it was my fortune to cross the Alps and Apennine Mountains; for the sight of those wild, vast, and indigested Heaps of Stones and Earth did so deeply stir my Fancy, that I was not easy till I could give my self some tolerable Account how that Confusion came in Nature. (*STE*, I, 190)

Part of Burnett's vision of the Alps sees them through ancient eyes, but part is a new scientific gaze and mode of perception. Mountains were perceived by the classical and patristic world as signs of disease, swellings and eruptions from within the body of the earth. In Augustine's phrase, mountains are tumors of the world (*tumores terrarum*) and when pre-modern cultures turned their gaze toward mountains, they thought of volcanoes and their eruptive violence rather than of alpine peaks. Volcanoes like Vesuvius and Etna were named and known and written about (by Pliny for example) a millenium and a half before the highest alpine mountains: even the Matterhorn was unnamed until late in the sixteenth century. The problem was not only *how* people perceived the Alps but also whether they saw them at all. It was first necessary to find an optic device, an explanatory system, to be able to see mountains before they could be valued or reflected upon. And the way of perceiving them that later made the Alps part of the order of the sublime, as Ulrich Stadler has shown in a recently published study, developed in the course of the 17th century as the new and proliferating science of "Physikotheologie".<sup>5</sup>

This science or pseudo-science evoked then and ever since heated controversy, and the storm that broke over Burnett's *Theoria Sacra* raged from one end of Europe to another. At the centre of the storm, as Stadler observes, was an attempt to unify the experience of nature (*Naturerfahrung*) and the experience of God (*Gotteserfahrung*) in a system in which theology would dominate. Even before Burnett, many

5 Ulrich Stadler, *Der technisierte Blick: Optische Instrumente und der Status von Literatur. Ein kulturhistorisches Museum*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2003. Further references will be given in the text (TB).

of the early treatises were the work of English, Dutch, and French scholars and divines. Their methods and goals – if not their evidence – had much in common:

Die Untersuchung der 'Works of Creation' sollte darüber hinaus zeigen, dass die Natur keine zufälligen, sinnlosen oder überflüssigen Elemente enthalte, dass vielmehr alles durchgängig von Zwecken bestimmt sei, die letztlich auf eine einzige Zweckursache zurückverweisen würden. (TB, p. 60)

Behind this pious conviction, and underlying the system that was to make the Alps part of the order of the sublime, and the sublime itself part of the order of the divine and the apocalyptic, was an aggressive theological attack on the deistic and atheistic tendencies of the New Science, given both patronage and official recognition in the founding of London's Royal Society in 1662. Stadler pointedly cites the statement of purpose drafted by Robert Hooke that was meant to assert the Society's goals:

The object and purpose of the Royal Society is to improve through experiments the knowledge of natural things, of all useful arts, means of production, mechanical practices, machines and inventions, without meddling in theology, metaphysics, morals, grammar, rhetoric, or logic. (TB, p. 59)

Hooke's draft statement of purpose was never adopted, and the godless goals it set forth were rejected: Instead

[...] contrary to Hooke's declared purpose, the Royal Society became the centre and origin of the physicotheological movement, a line of research in the natural sciences that put its work in the service of religion, and explicitly perceived itself as a service of worship. (TB, p. 59-60)

When Burnett stages/performs his service of divine worship, his original Latin text is fairly pious in style and argument – and that restraint carries over into the strict German translation. His own free English translation is something very different; baroque in its incarnation of the spiritual, in its demonizing of the physical. And in its satire:

You may tell them that Mountains grow out of the earth like Fuzzballs (Fungus Puffballs), or that there are Monsters under Ground, that

throw up Mountains as Moles do Mole-hills. Or if you would appear more Learned, tell them that the earth is a great Animal, and these are Wens (Tumors) that grow upon its Body. (*STE*, I, 189).

The grotesque and often violent language echoes the polemics of John Milton's prose, just as Burnett's exalted descriptions of mountains and marvels echo the grand style of *Paradise Lost*. In its style and scope Burnett's "Physikotheologie", like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is a reference text of the grotesquely sublime. In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge even described Burnett's English version as a prime example of "poetic prose", as proof of his opinion that "poetry of the highest kind may exist without metre, and even without the contra-distinguishing objects of a poem."<sup>6</sup>

It is no coincidence that the greatest creation of the monstrous sublime, Frankenstein's creature, quotes Milton's epic poem at every turn. When Burke first invents and launches his theory of the sublime in his *Enquiry*, he quotes and appeals to Milton's allegory of sin and death, to Shakespearean tragedy, and to a public hanging, as examples of the sublime. What is striking about this link between the baroque and the sublime is first that Burke grounds his theory in poetry, in theatre, and in the *tableau vivant* of execution and death. Not, we notice, in the immediate impact of storms or avalanches or alpine peaks, but rather in the mediated (and mediatized) experience of art.

Just as the Physicotheologian needed a systematic and "technisierter Blick" to perceive and present the world, Burke and the theorists of the sublime needed the aesthetic order of visual and verbal art to perceive and present what was supposed to be untouched and untamed by art. This paradox might even be offered as a rule of all presentations – there must always be a *pre*. This rule can be read back into Burnett's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* itself. There we no-

6 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols., London & Princeton, Routledge & Kegan Paul & Princeton University Press, 1983, II, 14.

tice that the world is insistently presented as a *theatrum mundi*: even mountains and volcanoes are placed on a stage:

Seeing that Earth was the first Theatre upon which Mortals appear'd and acted, and continued so for above sixteen hundred Years; and that with Scenes, as both Reason and History tell us, very extraordinary and very different from these of our present earth; and renew the Prospect of those pleasant Scenes that first saw the Light, and first entertained Man when he came to act upon this new-erected Stage. (*STE*, II, 364)

Just as theatre provided for both Burnett and Burke a frame and optic through which the sublime could be seen and staged, painting offered a parallel imitation through which wild and chaotic nature could be seen at all, and then seen to be sublime.

Before Burke published his *Enquiry* in 1757, painters such as Salvator Rosa had put on canvas the elements of what was later to be identified as the sublime. Until then they could only be identified as the style of the artist. As early as 1739 Horace Walpole saw and in his *Letters* wrote about wild mountain scenery in terms of painting and the painter: "Precipices, mountains, torrents, wolves, thunder claps – Salvator Rosa."<sup>7</sup> We will soon see how Turner's paintings of Mont Blanc and the Gotthard Pass established the gaze and optic through which they could be envisioned as monuments of the romantic sublime. How, in other words, these Alpine sites could be restored to the chaotic status assigned them by Burnett. But with this difference, that with Byron and the Shelley's the Alps become a voice that speaks against God.

Mont Blanc could only be seen as sublime if its viewers or readers underwent a process of reconciliation that would make it aesthetic. Even before Mont Blanc and the Alps had been touched by the banality of tourism early in the nineteenth century, they had been transformed during the eighteenth century by the pious gaze and voice of the Phys-

7 Horace Walpole, *Letters*, 4 vols., Philadelphia, Lea & Blanchard, 1841, I, 97.

icotheologian – and by the spread of pietism in Germany and England. The one dovetailed into the other, and they shared the fundamental belief of Psalm 19: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.” A further step toward the aesthetizing of the Alps was very much a kind of Swiss Heimatwerk. Albrecht von Haller's poem *Die Alpen* of 1707, together with the botanical excursion he went on with Johannes Gessner in 1728, created the sense that the Alpine landscape, especially one that ran from lakes and fields, where it was populated by virtuous villagers, up to meadows populated by wildflowers and cows, on up to glaciers and snow-covered peaks, was a spectrum that ran through and included both the sublime and the beautiful. And this spectrum is very much at the centre of Burke's *Enquiry*, which recognizes that the subject, the spectator or reader, can respond at once to the sublime and to the beautiful. The crucial difference goes beyond the notorious chasm that separates the rough huge male sublime from the smooth small female beautiful. What is crucial is the co-presence and conflict of attraction and revulsion, of overpowering and being overpowered, of the ambivalence within a single subject of the beautiful and the sublime. And this ambivalence or conflict is, as we shall see, at the centre of Percy Shelley's *Mont Blanc* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

The extent to which the Alps evoked an apparently pious response to nature that was in fact a response to art, and often anything but pious, becomes clear when we turn to poetry and pictures inscribed on the rocks and trees and ice of Mont Blanc and Chamonix. One of the most widely read and cited of Coleridge's poems in the nineteenth century is his “Hymn Before Sun-Rise, in the Vale of Chamouny”. As its title suggests, this poem was not only “unter den Alpen gesungen”; it was offered as the poet's song of praise to inspired by the impact upon him of this sublime place. It will not perhaps surprise you that Coleridge had never been to Chamonix nor seen Mont Blanc. Schiller after all had never travelled in Switzerland before writing *Wilhelm Tell*. But we might all be surprised to discover how complex and mediatized is Coleridge's sublime construct. Part of this

discovery has only recently become possible with the publication of a complete edition of Coleridge's poems by J.C.C. Mays, which shows how deeply Coleridge was enmeshed in German poetry and aesthetic theory, in his experience of English landscape and literature, during the period in which his "Hymn" was composed.<sup>8</sup> A further surprise is that Coleridge felt the sublime (and the Alps) to be part of an order of comparison, in which English hills or mountains are less sublime than those of Scotland and Wales, which Herder thought were still haunted by bards, and that, in this strange Championship League, the Swiss Alps were the absolute tops. In September of 1802, in a letter to his friend William Sotheby Coleridge wrote that when he was climbing Scafell, the highest peak in England, a modest 978 meters,

I involuntarily poured forth a Hymn in the manner of the *Psalms*, tho' afterwards I thought the Ideas &c disproportionate to our humble mountains--& accidentally lighting on a short Note in some swiss Poems, concerning the Vale of Chamouny, & it's Mountain. I transferred myself thither, in the Spirit, and adapted my former feelings to these grander external objects. (*CL*, II, 864-5).

If this seems obscure, it is meant to be. Coleridge confesses that he shifted his song of praise from England to Switzerland, but he conceals his debt to the poems of Friederike Brun.<sup>9</sup> Brun's poem, one of several she wrote in and around the Genfersee, personifies and addresses Mont Blanc as "Scheitel der Ewigkeit". Her title, "Chamonix beym Sonnenaufgange" is clearly his model, and her motto, taken from Metastasio, clearly identifies her work as one more song of praise: "La Terra, il Mare, le Sfere / Parlan del tuo potere." Like Hölderlin, both Brun and Coleridge directly address the Alps as an emblem and proof of God's power. In stanzas that show both plagiarism and originality – Coleridge thought that

8 *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1966-2000, II, 864-865.

9 *Gedichte von Friederike Brun, geb. Munter*, hrsg. v. Friedrich Matthisson, Zürich, Orell, Gessner, Füssli, 1795, p. 27.

what he translated he had turned into his own original work – Friederike Brun’s address to Jehovah is turned into something even more pious and explicit:

Jehovah! Jehovah! kracht’s im berstenden Eis;  
Lavinendonner rollen die Kluft hinab:  
Jehovah! rauscht’s in den hellen Wipfeln,  
Flüstert’s an rieselnden Silberbächen

Becomes

God! Let the Torrents, like a Shout of Nations  
Answer! And let the Ice-plains echo, God!  
God! Sing ye meadow-streams with gladsome voice!  
Ye Pine-groves, with your soft and soul-like sounds!  
And they too have a voice, yon piles of Snow,  
And in their perilous fall shall thunder, God!

Coleridge’s “Shout of Nations” reminds us that alpine Switzerland had the further distinction of being a republic that resisted tyranny. But Coleridge makes even more explicit and exclamatory the psalmic theme of Brun’s poem. Who could resist so much piety? Who could deconstruct such a confident assertion that God’s voice spoke through alpine torrents and avalanches? Shelley for one could, and in *Mont Blanc* he did.

Shelley’s title “Mont Blanc” gives us little except his subject, but the subtitle, “Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni” makes clear that he is addressing Brun and Coleridge. We know that Shelley read Coleridge’s poem when it appeared for a second time in 1809, and that on his travels through Switzerland with Mary Shelley he wrote home to a friend in England, “Tell me of the political state of England – its literature, of which when I speak Coleridge is in my thoughts.”

In the summer of 1816, Shelley left behind a spoor of his Swiss travels by identifying himself, when he signed into hotels in Chamonix and Montavert, as a “Democrat, Philanthro-

pist, and Atheist”.<sup>10</sup> The boldness of his declaration is somewhat weakened by the fact that he wrote it in Greek, “Δημοκρατικός, Φιλανθρωπάτος, και αθεός”, but it was impudent enough to encourage other travellers to inscribe their own furious comments. In this high summer of reaction and of the Holy Alliance, only a year after the fall of Napoleon, Shelley declared himself to be an Unholy Trinity of everything detested by those who would describe themselves by contrast as “Legitimists, Patriarchs, and Christians”. He saw himself as a political and moral rebel, as the spokesman of a lost cause that he could only rediscover in an imagined future or in his own poetry. It was clear to his contemporaries that by Democrat and Philanthropist Shelley meant Revolutionary and Libertine; Atheist was clear and already bad enough. And he gave Hell as his destination.

He was actually on his way to Mont Blanc. If other English alpine tourists beheld beyond the glacier’s ice a christian God, Shelley saw a monstrous idol. In his poem “Mont Blanc” he presents this mountain, encoded as “romantic”, as a landscape of windbeaten pines and glacial crevices, as a god-forsaken wilderness, a frozen hell of boulders, ice and splintered wood. In a note to the poem he compares the mountain to a gigantic undead beast: “One would think that Mont Blanc, like the god of the Stoics, was a vast animal, and the frozen blood forever circulated through his stony veins.”<sup>11</sup>

The poet and atheist no longer sees the powerful presence of the white mountain through the eyes of the christian, but instead picks out the shadows and dark stains on the apparently pure snow, discovering the animal forces that lurked under its surface. Coleridge had asked, “Who *would* be, who *could* be an Atheist in this valley of won-

10 *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Neville Rogers, 2 vols., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1972, II, 80. Further references to “Mont Blanc” and to the notes pertaining to it refer to this edition and will be cited as *Shelley*.

11 *Shelley*, 79.

ders!" Shelley's response was to present the *mer de glace* and the sublime peak as threatening and destructive:

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 ... (*Shelley*, 100-107)

The comparison with the serpent not only transforms the glacier into something dangerous and evil, but also coils it into a link with the author, who was known among his friends as "the serpent" and who said of himself "The Serpent is shut out from Paradise."<sup>12</sup>



Ill. 1

J.M.W. Turner, *Passage of Mount Saint Gotthard* (1804)



Ill. 2

J.M.W. Turner, *The Great Fall of the Reichenbach* (1804)

<sup>12</sup> *Shelley*, 77.

The painter J.M.W. Turner, who shared Shelley's radical political views, presents a similar vision of mountain, valley, and glacier, as we can see in his watercolours of the Alps. For Turner too every apparition of the sublime was part of an optical system that was grounded in a political aesthetic. This we see in his vertiginous view of the Alpine link between Switzerland and Italy, his *Passage of Mount Saint Gotthard* [Ill. 1] His fascination with the Deluge and with ocean storms is with their power to sweep away corrupted worlds, to sink mighty warships. And in his own guide to drawing and painting, his *Liber Studiorum*, Turner adopts the analogy between the alpine mountain range and the stormy ocean that is at the centre of eighteenth-century attempts to theorize and apply the sublime. [Ill. 2] As one aesthetic philosopher, Dugald Stewart, declared: "The idea of *literal sublimity* is inseparably combined with that of the sea, from the stupendous spectacle it exhibits when agitated by a storm", and the rhetorician Hugh Blair develops this analogy further: "The excessive Grandeur of the Ocean arises not from its extent alone, but from the perpetual motion and irresistible force of that mass of Waters"<sup>13</sup> The vortex or heaving swell at the centre of Turner's paintings is the application of this theory of the sublime, this two-way translation between alps and oceans. The destructive vortex of the deluge, whose analogy is an alpine storm or avalanche, is followed by a new day and new (political) order. To see how fully Turner theorized this code of the sublime, let's consider two of his oil paintings: *Shade and Darkness – the Evening of the Deluge* and *Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) – the Morning after the Deluge – Moses writing the Book of Genesis*. [Ill. 3 and 4]

13 Ronald Paulson, *Literary Landscapes*, New Haven, Yale University Press, pp. 75-76.



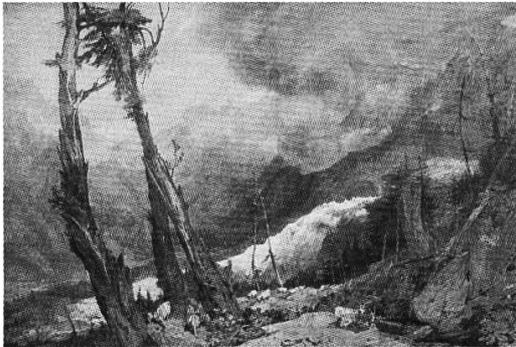
Ill. 3  
Turner,  
*Shade and Darkness – the Evening of  
the Deluge* (1843)

Ill. 4  
Turner,  
*Light and Colour (Goethe's Theory) –  
the Morning after the Deluge – Moses  
writing the Book of Genesis* (1843)

The titles alone make a clear claim, even to a theoretical grounding in Goethe's *Farbenlehre*. We notice too the apocalyptic scope of these paintings, the overwhelming of human beings, animals, and buildings by sublime power. Burke's theory of the sublime underlies all of Turner's alpine and apocalyptic paintings. In his *Enquiry* Burke describes the ocean as "an object of no small terror" and Turner's dissolution of structure and order enacts Burke's theory that dark and confused images "have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions than those have which are more clear and determinate".<sup>14</sup> The vortex swirls around a centre of light that exemplifies Burke's view of the sun as a radiant and even blinding force, as what Milton called "darkness visible", and to Turner the sun-vortex is a figure of revolution. Even here the sublime is translated into political theory, and Burke in 1790 himself accuses the French revolutionaries of creating "this new conquering empire of light and

<sup>14</sup> *Works of Edmund Burke*, 9 vols., Boston, Little & Brown, 1839, I, 103.

reason”.<sup>15</sup> What Burke feared Turner and Shelley welcomed. Shelley’s *Mont Blanc* is grotesque in another extended sense: it repeatedly cites and alludes to the poems of his romantic contemporaries, especially Coleridge, Wordsworth and Byron [III. 5]. Once again the alpine sublime begins and ends in the virtual world of art. But this attempt to control and exorcise (“zu bannen und zu beschwören”) the demonic elements in the world heightens or twists the grotesque into blasphemy [III. 6].



III. 5  
Turner,  
*Glacier and Source of the Arveiron*



III. 6  
Turner,  
*Mer de glace, Chamonix* (1802)

Let us turn in conclusion to his travelling companion in this infernal alpine region, his future wife Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, who was carrying with her the manuscript of her first novel, *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*. There she undermined the omnipotence of the divine Creator by allowing the scientist Dr. Victor Frankenstein to create an artificial human being. His creature is a synthetic product of the laboratory, of the “workshop of filthy creation”, and comes into the world untainted by any sexual origin. The alternative to “filthy creation” in *Frankenstein* is the frozen purity of *Mont Blanc* and the “fertile fields” that lie below in the valley of *Servox*. Mary Shelley even distinguishes this

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.* III, 265.

scene from the vale of Chamounix in terms of the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque.

Victor Frankenstein recounts the journey he takes to recover from the death of Justine at the hands of his creature:

Soon after I entered the valley of Chamounix. This valley is more wonderful and sublime, but not so beautiful and picturesque as that of Servoz, 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 dome overlooked the valley<sup>16</sup>

But soon after, introduced by a quoted passage from one of Percy Shelley's own poems, from a rock that overlooks the *mer de glace*, he meets the monster, the grotesque creature, the literary creation that lives at the centre of the alpine sublime.

<sup>16</sup> *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, ed. Marilyn Butler, London, Pickering, 1993, pp. 75-76.

## Abstract

Die Alpen wurden seit langem als Ikonen des Erhabenen, der Erhebung und der Grösse wahrgenommen. Doch die janusköpfige Erhabenheit weist seit dem achtzehnten Jahrhundert eine andere Seite auf, die des Horrors und des Terrors, dessen also, was Burke und Kant befähigt sahen, Furcht und Entsetzen auszulösen. Der vorliegende Beitrag zeigt, in welcher Weise poetische und visuelle Repräsentationen der Alpen jenes andere Gesicht des Erhabenen zum Ausdruck bringen. Im Zentrum der Aufmerksamkeit stehen romantische Visionen des Mont Blanc, in Gemälden und Zeichnungen als auch in Texten, wie Friederike Bruns "Chamounix beym Sonnenaufgang", Percy Shelleys "Mont Blanc" und Mary Shelleys *Frankenstein*, deren Landschaften zeigen, dass im Schweizer Kontext die Alpen ein Spektrum eröffnen könnten, welches das Schöne wie auch das Erhabene miteinschliesse.