Doors to the Invisible World: Towards an Understanding of the Romantic Imagination--Ramond, Wordsworth and Shelley

We have spent a good deal of this semester concentrating on the sublime. We have asked what (in nature) is sublime, how is the sublime described and how do different writers interpret the sublime. A sublime experience is recognizable by key words such as ‘awe’, ‘astonishment’ and ‘terror’, feelings of insignificance, fractured syntax and the general inability to describe what is being experienced. Perception and interpretation of the sublime are directly linked to personal circumstance and suffering, to spiritual beliefs and even expectation (consider Wordsworth's disappointment at Mont Blanc). It has become evident that there is a transition space between what a traveler experiences and what he writes; a place wherein words often fail but the experience is intensified, even understood by the traveler. This space, as I have understood it, is the imagination. In his quest for spiritual identity Thomas Merton offers the above quotation to illustrate what he calls 'interpenetration' between the self and the world. As travel writers engage nature through their imagination, Merton's description of the 'inner ground' is an appropriate one for the Romantic conception of the imagination. Examining Ramond's Observations on the Glaciers, Book XIII of Wordsworth's Thirteen-Book Prelude and a combination of Shelley's "Mont Blanc" and A Defense of Poetry provides a range of literary genres in which to consider descriptions of the imagination.

M. Ramond's Observations on the Glaciers recounts his experiences while traveling in the Alps. His descriptions are characteristically sublime; in awe of his surroundings, Ramond is "threatened" yet astonished, "transformed" and "regenerated" yet aware of his insignificance (301 & 348-49). Ascending the mountains offers "the greatest force given to his imagination...that kind of enthusiasm which kindles great ideas" (349). Whereas his first experiences are paired dichotomies, the kindling of his imagination does not have an opposite but rather its own creations (ideas). Chronology is either indescribable or of no importance as it is difficult to understand what happens when during Ramond's sublime experience. Taking flight, his soul is able to "co exist with all beings" and transcend time and space (351). Imagination succeeds when reason cannot, offering a glimpse of eternity (351). All "elevated and noble sentiments" have their beginnings in the imagination (352). As a creator, it is fitting that the imagination is female (351). Ramond acknowledges that his experience is constructed of "illusions" but "...what would be great in our conceptions, or glorious in our actions", Ramond asks, if imaginative power did not exist? (352).

Inspired by his imaginative experience, Ramond articulates his final question as his understanding of the 'real' world and role of the imagination therein. Through the 'illusions' created by the imagination the self interacts with the natural world and eternity. Illusion is not to be understood as inauthentic but rather as not grounded in the world of the senses- hence reason fails at interpreting the sublime. The imagination is a 'self creating mystery' as it seems to simply appear, turned on as it were, by the sublime experience. The self, recognized as the soul, is subject to but not necessarily part of the imagination. During its illusionary flight, the soul experiences transcendence and a sense of unity with all living things. This sense of unity is an extension of what Merton identifies as the 'freedoms of other men'. The imagination acts as the mediator between Ramond's soul and the "image of eternity" (351). I have been unable to find any biographical information on Ramond, so the effects of his personal beliefs on his imagination will remain unknown.

Observing the night mist on Snowdon, the nature of the imagination and the soul are revealed to Wordsworth. He records this incredible experience in the thirteenth book of his Thirteen-Book Prelude. The imagination is part of the "higher mind" (90). It can observe the natural world and also interpret it, molding, enduring, abstracting and combining its surroundings (79). These creative powers can also transcend the senses, allowing one to grasp the "invisible world" (105). Wordsworth believes that those who have imaginative power are divinely inspired and capable of knowing "the consciousness/ Of who they are" (107-108). This imagination is one's "moving soul", "absolute strength" and "clearest insight" (166-68 &171). It is the moving soul that alerts us to the "great thought by which we live": God (183-4). It is through the imagination that one experiences divine love. Again, the imagination is female (78).

The imagination is Wordsworth's inner ground and through it he interacts with the natural world, his soul and is granted access to the divine. There is a very fine line between the soul and the imagination, the latter realizing the former and both uniting to receive divine love. There is no sense, in Wordsworth's work, that the imagination is the creator of illusions, rather it is the revealer of intrinsic and universal truths. In his inner ground, Merton is "mysteriously present at once to [him]self and to the freedoms of other men" (in Finely 45). Wordsworth experiences something very similar. Recognizing the transcendent power of his own imagination he is simultaneously aware not only of the ability of "even the grossest minds" to benefit from imaginative thought[1] but also the universal journey of humanity and the moving soul (83, 171-83). The imagination has become more than a creator or mediator between the soul and the divine. Wordsworth's imagination is a provider, offering those capable of imaginative vision "sovereignty within and peace at will... cheerfulness in every act of life; / Hence truth in moral judgments, and delight / That ails not in the external universe" (114-19). The imagination is not self-creating; an "under-presence" feeds the "mighty mind" (71 and 69). But if God is the creator and sustainer of the mind and He is self-creating one could draw a parallel with Merton's idea. Wordsworth understands the real world through his imagination, recognizing himself in nature and in them both 'something more deeply interfused'.[2] Wordsworth is a 'unique door' to his imagination; his personal spiritual beliefs open his imagination to the presence of God.

"Mont Blanc" and A Defense of Poetry are the two works in which Percy Shelley examines the imagination. Shelley makes a clear distinction between the role of reason and the role of the imagination:
Shelley understands reason to be passive contemplation and imagination to be active creation. The mind is passive as well, unable to create, only able to perceive (On Life 863). The mind itself is a part of the One Mind, a greater "everlasting universe of things ("Mont Blanc") 1). In "Mont Blanc", Shelley describes a "trance sublime" wherein he experiences an "unremitting interchange" between the universe and the mind (35 and 39). During the interchange, the surroundings he observes are filtered through his imagination or the "still cave of the witch Poesy" (43).[3] Just as Ramond experienced eternity and Wordsworth the invisible world through imaginative power, Shelley wonders if he is encountering the "gleams of a remoter world" (49). His imagination, however, has a very different effect on his soul than that of Ramond and Wordsworth: Shelley's "very spirit falls...and vanishes among the viewless gales!" (56-58). Regardless of his vanishing self his imagination is able to interpret the liberating capability of Mont Blanc. The mountain's "voice" is heard and deeply felt by those who engage their imaginative powers (79). The "secret strength of things which governs thoughts" is the same strength that is present in Mont Blanc (139). Shelley asks what power nature would have without the imagination (144-46).

As a part of the One Mind, it is possible to consider the human mind and imagination as self-creating. Merton's "self creating mystery of which I am myself a part" could be applied to the imagination within the One Mind but not necessarily to the soul within the imagination (in Finley 45). Shelley writes that his spirit vanishes, but I do not believe that it is a rejection of the self in the imaginative process. It is as if in the shadow of Mont Blanc one needs to momentarily set aside the notion of self to hear nature's "mysterious tongue" (76). Recognition of the self, for Ramond and Wordsworth, seems to be a requisite for their experiences of unity. Shelley does experience a type of unity, recognizing that there are other imaginative minds that will interpret Mont Blanc and even "make felt" its power to those that are not "the wise, the great and good" (82). His belief in the One Mind is another kind of unity he experiences. Shelley's inner ground, or imagination, is subjective: his atheism is evident in the "awful doubt" he understands as the answer to the violence found in nature (77). What Shelley has understood about the real world through his imaginative experience he distills into a question at the end of the poem. He has recognized a Power within nature that is not God and wonders if the Power is simply a product of his imagination: would nature have power if “to the human mind's imaginings/Silence and solitude were vacancy?” (143-44). Although Ramond has a similar question, there is an acceptance in his understanding of the power of the imagination that is not present in Shelley's question.

The Romantic conception of the imagination is very similar to Thomas Merton's description of the inner ground. The imagination is the link between the natural world and the soul, the soul and the invisible (even sacred) world beyond. The imagination is essentially self-creating, subjective and invisible. Ramond's imagination seems to be awakened, not created, by the sublime scenery. Wordsworth's imagination is sustained by God. Shelley's mind is part of the One mind, itself a tributary of a greater self-creating entity. Each writer is his own unique door to his inner ground; their personal beliefs influence how their imagination interprets the natural and invisible world. Wordsworth's spiritual beliefs reveal God in nature whereas Shelley's atheism uncovers an undefined Power. Each writer's conception of the imagination is subjective but there are similar aspects to each writer's experience. Engaging the imagination, Ramond, Wordsworth and Shelley have experienced a kind of unity: conscious of the self as the soul they are simultaneously aware of 'freedoms of other men'. I suggested in the introduction that the imagination is a transition place wherein words often fail but the experience is intensified, even understood by the traveler. For all three writers the nature of the imagination has, amazingly, been communicable. Ramond and Wordsworth are able to come to articulate conclusion about the effects imagination has on their perceptions of nature. Shelley, however, remains skeptical about the power of the imaginative process. Nonetheless, Shelley's experience is as real, as intense as that of Ramond and Wordsworth.

Notes

1. Duncan Wu's foot note, page 403.
2 "Tintern Abbey". Line 97.
3 As Shelley explains in A Defense of Poetry: "poetry...may be defined to be the expression of the imagination" (944).

Works Cited


Why is imagination important to the Romantics?’ and find homework help for other Literature questions at eNotes.Â The imagination is
of particular importance to the Romantics because they can see a world that has started to disappear with the arrival of the Age of Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason. People had begun to turn toward the answers science was beginning to reveal to the world. However, the Romantics believed that there were many truths to be found in the natural world. Coleridge, for instance, grew up in a town. The imagination is of particular importance to the Romantics because they can see a world that has started to disappear with the arrival of the Age of Enlightenment, also. Historically, Shelley and Byron are considered to have been the most outspoken and radical of the Romantic poets. By contrast, Wordsworth appears to have been of a pleasant and acceptable personality, even receiving the status of Poet Laureate in 1843. He was born in 1770 in Cockermouth, Cumbria. By the time he entered his early teens, both his parents had died. As he grew older, Wordsworth developed a passion for writing. Wordsworth shared some of the years at Dove Cottage in Somerset with his friend and poetical contemporary, Coleridge. Coleridge was born in Devon in 1772. He was a bright young scholar but never achieved the same prolific output of his fellow Romantic poets. In 1804 he left for a position in Malta for three years. ‘The Invisible World’ contains ten chapters on important aspects of Romantic Poetry. There are detailed assessments of the poetry of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats with references to Shelley and Byron. Central ‘Romantic’ questions are addressed such as: What did Romanticism consist of? What was the Romantic Imagination? How did Wordsworth engage with the French Revolution? How did Wordsworth engage with women? What was the importance of Ossian and Burns? How does an eccentric writer like Blake fit into ‘Romanticism’? What do the great Romantic poets have i