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# SHELLEY, BLAKE, AND COLERIDGE WALK INTO A CHURCH: ALTERNATIVE VISIONS OF DIVINITY IN THE ROMANTIC SUBLIME

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

There is a particular sensation that occurs in my brain when I study Romantic literature. It's not the only thing that induces the sensation, but it is one of the most reliable. I was thirteen years old the first time I read Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and felt like someone had poured a carbonated, caffeinated soda directly into my mind. It is a sensation of vitality and presence, and awake-ness that both grounds me and encourages me to fly. So I suppose I must begin my acknowledgements with gratitude for *Lyrical Ballads*, for the engineers of the British Romantic Movement, and for the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Blake, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge for making my brain effervescent and shaping my worldview, spirituality, and scholarship.

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Finally, thank you to Drs. Bruhn and McGill, my amazing advisor and reader, for their invaluable insight, guidance, and expertise, for their poignant questions and thoughtful engagement, and for their patience for sleep-deprived emails at six o'clock in the morning.

My deepest gratitude and regards to everyone who has been with me on this journey. *Beannachtaí oraibh.*

## I. Introduction

Samuel H. Monk writes of the study of the sublime in eighteenth-century Britain, "The difficulty … is that the history of an idea may tend to grow into the history of a period, and one is tempted to avoid this danger by tearing up the idea by its roots, dissociating it from the soil in which it has flourished, and presenting it, a withered fragment, to an unenthusiastic world" (2). An idea held, developed, and grown by any given community cannot maintain singularity; it becomes as multiple and varied as those who have contributed to its development and definition. When studying the sublime, it is understandable to seek to study *only* the sublime; however, to divorce it from its historical contexts is to lose much of its essence, depth, and relevance. The Romantic sublime as a concept is a product of the Enlightenment, the Romantic Movement, and the ensuing tensions between the secular and the spiritual, the democratic and the aristocratic. It is a product of class tensions, ideological tensions, political division, and a newly blooming commitment to scientific discovery. Due to the multiplicity of perspectives which contributed to the Romantic sublime, it is also itself a multiple concept, a loose collection of ideas split apart, weighed against each other, reconciled, and divided again. It is a multimodal, multi-conceptual collection of ideas that upon closer inspection appears more like a string board than a cohesive philosophy.

Given the manifold nature of the Romantic sublime, this thesis seeks not to define an overarching ideology that is shared throughout Romantic art, but to explore the social, political, philosophical, and artistic implications of different modes of the sublime as a facet of different poets' spiritual and religiopolitical perspectives, with an emphasis on the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Blake, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. I have chosen this lens because I have observed an affinity between the Ultimate, which can be secular or spiritual, and the sublime. I have found Shelley, Blake, and Coleridge to observe similar phenomena in their own works.

Before such an analysis can be undertaken, however, it is necessary to provide the theory of the sublime from which these poets would have been operating. In 1757, Edmund Burke published *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*; while the concept of the sublime was hardly new to British literature, the ideas expressed by Burke would provide the foundation for much Romantic thought on the subject. Burke writes, "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (110). Identifying the sublime as "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" does two things: it foregrounds the sublime as something particularly noteworthy, and it connects that emotion specifically to cognitive processes (rather than spiritual or bodily ones). Additionally, this superlative, cognitive emotion is connected

specifically to pain, danger, and the terrible, but in a manner which, according to Burke, is removed enough for us to find pleasure in our terror.

While Burke identifies the sublime as something which is experienced mentally, he also explicitly connects this emotion to the divine, writing,

> If a discourse on the use of the parts of the body may be considered as a hymn to the Creator; the use of the passions, which are the organs of the mind, cannot be barren of praise to him, nor unproductive to ourselves of that noble and uncommon union of science and admiration, which a contemplation of the works of infinite wisdom alone can afford to a rational mind; whilst, referring to him whatever we find of right or good or fair in ourselves, discovering his strength and wisdom even in our own weakness and imperfection, honoring them where we discover them clearly, and adoring their profundity where we are lost in our search, we may be inquisitive without impertinence, and elevated without pride; we may be admitted, if I may dare to say so, into the counsels of the Almighty by a consideration of his works. (126–127)

In other words, if one believes that the human body was created by the Christian God—which Burke did—then the way the body responds to and experiences its environment is itself an act of worship and praise that can be either intentional or involuntary. For this reason, he argues that the sublime is worth studying: because if the human mind is formed in the glory of God, then elevating it, understanding it, and discovering its limits is good and right. The sublime itself is the result of the limits of the human mind, for

Burke—the place where we encounter the incomprehensible and stand before it, humbled.

While Burke found the sublime in the limits of human intellect, Immanuel Kant found the sublime rather in terms of the superiority of human reason. In his 1764 text *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant writes,

> There is still a feeling of a finer sort, thus named either because one can enjoy it longer without surfeit and exhaustion, or because it presupposes, so to speak, a susceptibility of the soul which at the same time makes it fit for virtuous impulses, or because it is a sign of talents and excellences of the intellect. … The sight of a mountain whose snow-covered peaks arise above the clouds, the description of a raging storm, or the depiction of the kingdom of hell by **Milton** arouses satisfaction, but with dread. … We must have a **feeling** of the **sublime**. (14–16)

Kant argues that the sublime and the beautiful are separate, but similarly affective, emotions capable of being experienced by humans. For him, the sublime is a "finer" feeling than other emotions specifically because it points to a more valuable, worthy, or virtuous "soul," and because it indicates a particularly impressive intellect which is not enjoyed by non-human creatures. Kant does not specifically discuss the sublime as it might connect to the divine in this section, but his concept that the human soul is greatest and most inherently virtuous by design is a deeply Christian-centric philosophy that also implies the existence of an external, objective standard of morality, such as the Christian God. While this is perhaps more removed from the view of the divine which Burke

postulated, it holds Christian theory at its core and seems to assume the existence of a higher being; it is easily divinized, as Coleridge demonstrated throughout his works. Additionally, Kant's belief in the supremacy of the human mind as the basis of the sublime is perhaps the strongest through-line between Shelley, Blake, and Coleridge: each of them specifically pointed to imagination as giving us access to the sublime, although they—particularly Blake—also rejected *reason* as the pinnacle of human intellect. Between them, Burke and Kant formulated the most recognized views of the Romantic sublime, which artists found it necessary to adopt, adapt, or respond to in accordance with their own values.

The poets this thesis will focus on are Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Blake, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Shelley was a radical atheist, whose view of the sublime intentionally decentered the divine and replaced it with a mortal but elevated human imagination, which Shelley mythologized into a kind of pseudo-divine within his works. For him, the sublime and its origin—the imagination—were inherently liberating, democratic forces which equalized human social hierarchies and unified humanity in the pursuit of art. Blake's sublime was similarly a unifying, democratic concept, but for him, a radical Christian nonconformist, it stemmed directly from the divine. For Blake, the imagination was not a pseudo-divinity as it was with Shelley; rather it was a way to access a pre-Fall godhead from which we have been separated and alienated by the act of creation. While Shelley's sublime is interpretive and creative, Blake's is both embodied and transcendent. Coleridge's sublime, like Shelley's and Blake's, is more Kantian than Burkean; however, unlike his fellows, his sublime is more conservative and traditionally

Christian, leaning away from democratic ideals of humanist unity and toward an authoritarian, traditional view of hierarchical social and religious structure as ordained by a monarchical God. While Coleridge deliberately endorses this view of the Romantic sublime as the view which is right and correct, he seems conflicted with himself, also depicting a natural, universal, pantheist sublime which could be accessible to all. Coleridge's sublime is one that is inherently in conflict with itself, undefined and perhaps undefinable. His vision of the sublime is one that contains internal diversity that could and perhaps should be reconciled to allow for nuance and universalization, but which remains in unresolved conflict.

The Romantic sublime is the product of Enlightenment-era politics, social order, and religious doctrine, whether artists choose to embrace or challenge these notions. It is worth asking, then, why the sublime is worth studying in the twenty-first century, when modernity presents us with a different set of ideological, political, and religious dilemmas to solve. I would argue that in many cases it is more relevant now than before. Whether religious or secular, Burkean or Kantian, the Romantic sublime was grounded in a spirit of universal equality, a celebration of human reason, and a glorification of human nature. In the Information Age, we have inherited Enlightenment-era ideals of democracy, but find ourselves now grappling with the institutionalized inequalities which some would say were not sufficiently challenged or eradicated during these revolutions. Questions of religious ideology find themselves once again at the forefront of societal consciousness: by one estimate, approximately 40% of Millennials were religiously unaffiliated as of 2019 (Cox & Thomson-DeVeaux). Although Christel J. Manning of the *Pacific Standard*

gives a more conservative estimate—giving the number of non-religious Millennials as only one-third—they say that Gen Z has rejected organized religion at similar rates. While our artistic and scientific communities are not focused on the sublime any longer, in an age defined by our access to information—whether that information is correct or incorrect, helpful or not—it is perhaps more useful now than ever before to consider both the infinite potential and the limitations of our own minds, the generative possibilities for our imagination, and the ways in which we choose to shape the world in the image of the gods and idols which we find worthy of worship. As we negotiate our individual ideals with the ideals of our environment, it is perhaps more valuable now than ever to interrogate our own senses of wonder and the ways these fit into our existing and ideal power structures, just as those before us have done: Where do we find our own minds elevated, liberated, and set alight into something transformative?, these works seem to ask. What do we worship, and how do we access it to make ourselves and our world better than they began?

## II. Significance and Insignificance in Shelley's Secular Sublime

An avowed atheist, Percy Bysshe Shelley's view of both the sublime and the divine was radically different from his contemporaries' in terms of his understanding of the source of the sublime and the role of the human in relation to it. While poets like Coleridge and Blake represented the sublime as a primarily theistic phenomenon, Shelley instead viewed it as something connected explicitly to the human powers of intellect and imagination. This simultaneously emphasized the significance and the insignificance of collective and individual human life. For Shelley, this foregrounding of both human life and human mortality is grounded in secularity, tied inextricably to Shelley's rejection of a theistic view of an afterlife; Shelley believed that human life, consciousness, and creations were inherently temporary and that human existence was accidental. Shelley's atheism foregrounds human existence and art as something rare and precious by virtue of their finite nature, while recognizing that both are unvalued by an indifferent universe. It is important to note Shelley's own definition of atheism: in his 1811 essay *The Necessity of Atheism*, for which he was expelled from Oxford, Shelley writes, "This negation [that there is no God] must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity. The hypothesis of a pervading Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken" (1). In other words, while Shelley claims that the concept of a divine figure who created the universe or world has been disproven, he acknowledges the possibility—even the likelihood—that there is

some “Spirit,” on the nature of which he does not elaborate, which is immortal and somehow inherently part of the universe. Although he does not explicitly say so, works such as “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” “Ode to the West Wind,” and “Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats, author of Endymion, Hyperion, etc.” primarily focus on this Spirit. These works illustrate not only Shelley’s beliefs and attitudes, but also the evolution thereof. “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” discusses a secular, but no less transcendent mode of the sublime, which Shelley describes with language comparable to the language of Christian salvation, alluding to Coleridge’s “The Eolian Harp,” and expressing doubt toward the Christian God alongside reverence for the “intellectual beauty” which replaces a deity as the object of Shelley’s worship. “Ode to the West Wind” uses a similar tone of reverence to further the ideas expressed in “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” but instead employs a distinctly more pagan symbolism to describe Shelley’s “faith” in the artistic capacity for creation. “Adonais” brings the ideas expressed in the previous poems together, showing the poet both as a Christ figure and as a pagan figure—immortal, undying, reborn, and in the bloom of youth. Here Shelley cements his faith in the artist, rather than the godhead, and holds fast to his definition of the sublime as a human, artistic achievement granted to us by our own intellect rather than a higher power. Finally, I will look at “Mont Blanc” in connection with Coleridge’s “Chamouny; the Hour Before Sunrise. A Hymn” and as an illustration of Shelley’s natural sublime, and *Prometheus Unbound* as an image of a democratic, multiple, cyclical sublime. Together, these works show Shelley’s image of the sublime as

something which simultaneously undermines, uplifts, and transcends human notions of significance.

"Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" is a seven-part poem detailing the fleetingness of the sublime moment and Shelley's own devotion to the titular "intellectual beauty," which might be interpreted as inspiration, genius, or even the sublime itself. The poem alludes to Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp" as a way to situate Shelley in his own past, his own present, and ultimately in his own mind and commitment to his art. In the first stanza, Shelley writes of "The awful shadow of some unseen Power" (1) which, though demonstrably present in the natural world, is mysterious and flighty, somehow inherently ungraspable. At this point in the poem the nature of this Power is unclear. It does not seem to be any type of god-figure, although it could possibly be the before-mentioned "Spirit" of the universe; regardless, the use of the word 'awful' indicates that it is, itself awe-inspiring, terrible, and/or sublime. Shelley claims that the impermanence of the "unseen Power" makes it more valuable overall, despite his longing for it to stay, which he establishes in the next stanza, addressing the "Spirit of Beauty" directly.

Having thus established the object of his extended apostrophe and his central issue, Shelley directly introduces the concept of the sublime in the third stanza:

> No voice from some sublimer 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,
> Frail spells, whose uttered charm might not avail to sever,
> From all we hear and all we see,
> Doubt, chance, and mutability.
> Thy light alone, like mist o'er mountains driven,
> Or music by the night wind sent
> Through strings of some still instrument,

Or moonlight on a midnight stream,
Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream. (25–36)

This stanza is particularly interesting because it explicitly contextualizes Shelley's understanding of the sublime in terms of his relationship to the divine, in which he does not believe. Shelley frames this in terms of Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp," in which Coleridge muses,

And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps,
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the soul of each, and God of all? (44–48)

But where Coleridge almost immediately suppresses this borderline-Deist thought, deferring instead to his own Christian faith and the Christian faith of his then-fiancée, Shelley takes it to its conclusion. He has already established that in his eyes there is no supreme divine being sending him inspiration or beauty or anything else: "Therefore the name of God, and ghosts, and heaven / Remain the records of their [that is, the sage or poet in search of God] vain endeavor" (27–28). And not only that, but these names are the product of fantasy as far as he is concerned, specifically because no one as far as he believes has ever received a "voice from some sublimer world." The unusual use of the comparative adjective here indicates not that there is no sublime world, but rather that a world more sublime than the material one we inhabit is incomprehensible, fantastical, and unreal; this sense of doubt is compounded by the use of the word *some*, which is left apparently deliberately vague. Particularly when considered in the context of *Prometheus Unbound* and the role of the Demogorgon, Shelley seems almost to be asking, "Why do you look elsewhere for a better world when you could be working to liberate this one?"

Underscoring this point, the rhyme scheme of this stanza (ABBAACCDDEE) is abruptly slanted at line twenty-seven, putting *heaven* in contrast to *given* at line twenty-six and *driven* at line thirty-three, seeming to suggest that we are not handed heaven (not *given* it), nor are we called to seek it (*driven* to it), because Heaven in the sense of the Christian afterlife *does not exist*. Additionally foregrounding *heaven* here, it breaks the pattern of alliteration of voiced velar stops that Shelley had been setting up with the previous items in the list with *God* (/**g**ad/) and *ghost* (/**g**ost/). Every consonant in *heaven* is a continuant—mostly fricatives—which feels insubstantial and ungrounded after the stops in the rest of the series, further pointing to its nonexistence.

By interrogating the sublime in a religious framework and finding this framework lacking, Shelley moves toward secularizing the sublime, removing it from a theist conception entirely. There is no "sublimer world" waiting for us in the next world or the afterlife; there is no savior coming to make this world better. We must find what is already sublime here, albeit in fleeting glimpses, and in these fleeting glimpses find the inspiration to imagine a better world and work toward it. This faith in imagination hearkens again to the Spirit of Beauty, which becomes its personification. Shelley expresses a belief that human beings could be "immortal and omnipotent" (39) if the Spirit of Beauty would "Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart"—or, in other words, be constantly in people's lives rather than a fleeting sensation that soon fades. Still, he finds himself enraptured with the spirit, detailing how, spending time in graveyards as a child, "Sudden thy shadow fell on me— / I shrieked and clasped my

hands in ecstasy!" (59–60). This impermanent shadow, of course, is the Spirit, which comes to him as he walks, living, among the dead.

Throughout the poem, images of graveyards and hauntings recur; Shelley ties them to feelings of nostalgia and childhood fascination—a sharp contrast to Western Christian expectations for interacting with the dead. Foregrounding Shelley's mortal life as he walks among the graves, as well as reanimating the deceased as spirits, shows graveyards as a liminal space between the edges of (im)mortality. Even the use of the word *ecstasy* (59) points to this ambiguity: the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) notes of its etymology, "in late Greek the etymological meaning received another application [besides 'insanity' and 'bewilderment'], viz., 'withdrawal of the soul from the body, mystic or prophetic trance'" ("Ecstasy, n.")—another type of suspension between life and death. In her book *Awful Parenthesis: Suspension and the Sublime in Romantic and Victorian Poetry*, Anne McCarthy identifies suspension as an integral part of both Romantic and Shelleyan literature, which frequently appears beside or relates to the sublime:

> Shelley imagines a consciousness capacious enough to arrest time by heightening perception. The description echoes certain Coleridgean structures … [such as] the suspension of the comparing powers that comes to characterize Coleridge's understanding of the sublime. At the same time, however, Shelley … is, by and large, less troubled by the distinction between willing and unwilling suspension; paralysis is not necessarily an occasion for panic. … Suspension, for Shelley, is not simply the interruption of habitual processes of perception, but becomes the

> central movement of perception itself, the realization of an infinite capacity for experience. (86)

McCarthy explains that while Coleridge viewed suspension as something troubling and terrifying, paralysis inspiring a claustrophobic anxiety and uncomfortable awareness of his own mortality, Shelley rather embraces this same sensation and leans into it. Paralysis is not entrapment, for Shelley: it is liberation. His positive feelings toward suspension are mirrored by his unreserved desire for the sublime in much of his work. Although McCarthy's commentary is about "Mont Blanc" rather than "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," the theme remains the same: Shelley is captivated by the suspension inherent within the sublime, as well as within the anti-dichotomous, which he finds in ghosts suspended between life and death and expresses in his descriptions of the sublime, suspended between the supernatural and the material. Shelley's sublime is framed as both the hyper-natural and the supernatural, the extremely human and the inhuman. For Shelley, humans are mortal. There is no afterlife or immortal soul; there is the embodied imagination and its capacity for creation which one day will perish. And while the Spirit of Beauty may immortalize that person's imagination, their creation, nothing for Shelley can immortalize the self. The imagery of lingering in graveyards is not only an aesthetic choice or a nod to his poetic ancestors or to a mode of being which lingers between two poles of a binary; it is a nod to his own mortality, his own fallibility, his own fate. He reminds us that while humans are godlike in their imagination, there is, in fact, no god.

Shelley's understanding of absolute mortality complicates his deliberately religious tone in the next two stanzas:

I vowed that I would dedicate my powers
    To thee and thine; have I not kept the vow?
    With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now
I call the phantoms of a thousand hours
Each from his voiceless grave: they have in visioned bowers
    Of studious zeal or love's delight
    Outwatched with me the envious night;
They know that never joy illumed my brow
    Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free
    This world from its dark slavery,
    That thou, oh awful loveliness,
Would give whate'er these words cannot express.

The day becomes more solemn and serene
    When noon is past; there is a harmony
    In autumn, and a lustre in its sky,
Which through the summer is not heard or seen,
As if it could not be, as if it had not been!
    Thus let thy power, which like the truth
    Of nature on my passive youth
Descended, to my onward life supply
    Its calm—to one who worships thee,
    And every form containing thee,
    Whom, spirit fair, thy spells did bind
To fear himself, and love all humankind. (61–84)

In this sense the Spirit of Beauty is not merely inspiration as we tend to think of it, nor is it only the source of a natural, secular sublime. In these two stanzas, Shelley frames the Spirit of Beauty as a savior—as a type of divinity to which he dedicates his life, his art, and his worship. He invokes the Spirit of Beauty alongside the ghosts which he seems to have denounced in stanza three—yet where the ghosts of stanza three could easily refer to the Holy Ghost, here he invokes the "phantoms of a thousand hours," which, in addition to acknowledging his own eventual fate among the dead, refer to his own past, his childhood, and perhaps even his artistic ancestors, for whom we can infer from "Ozymandias"—which subtly glorifies the artist's power while mocking both the power

of the king and, perhaps by extension in a world of divine-right monarchy, the power of divinity—Shelley had some sense of reverence. By replacing the Holy Spirit with a kind of modified ancestor-worship, Shelley leaves room to draw a parallel between the Spirit of Beauty and the Christian God or Jesus or both, such as when he writes, "… never joy illumed my brow / Unlinked with hope that thou wouldst free / This world from its dark slavery" (68–70). These lines explicitly paint the Spirit of Beauty as a savior and a liberator—a role traditionally reserved for Christ in nineteenth-century England. Going on to refer to this spirit as "thou, oh awful loveliness," Shelley once again explicitly connects the pseudo-divine object of his worship to the sublime through the use of the adjective 'awful,' seeming to accept the notion that the sublime must be somehow intrinsically worthy of reverence even if it is not tied to religion. He makes this connection more widely applicable at the end of the next stanza:

> … to one who worships thee,
> And every form containing thee,
> Whom, spirit fair, thy spells did bind
> To fear himself and love all humankind. (81–84)

Here the Spirit does not just transcend or save: the Spirit in these lines commands. Shelley explicitly describes himself worshipping the Spirit on line 80, and describes the spirit's "spells" which "did bind" its adherents "To fear himself, and love all humankind." While "love all humankind" seems explicitly referential of the Christian commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself," the specific use of *fear* here seems to shift the object of worship and the sublime away from the disembodied, fleeting Spirit and into the artistic self. Duncan Wu clarifies this word choice, defining *fear* as "revere" (1103n12). With the context of this note, it struck me rather as being related to the

Christian notion of God-fearing—implying that the Spirit of Beauty has empowered its followers not only to worship it, but to worship and find the divine within themselves and their own genius.

As Shelley metaphorically Christianizes the sublime in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," we find him rather paganizing it in "Ode to the West Wind," which Wu characterizes as "Shelley's most powerful account of the poet's function" (1131n1). Shelley addresses the West Wind throughout the work, implicating artistic genius within the death-rebirth cycle of the seasons. Appearing to carry forward his earlier declaration, "I vowed that I would dedicate my powers / To thee and thine; have I not kept the vow?" ("Hymn" 61–62), Shelley implores the West Wind to "Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is" ("Ode" 57). But where "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" expresses a more active approach to this worship, in which the speaker dedicates himself to the Spirit of Beauty, here he expresses desire to be a passive vessel for the West Wind—which could itself be interpreted as a reincarnation of the Spirit of Beauty. But this spirit appears more powerful than the Spirit of Beauty; far from merely requiring of its followers "To fear himself and love all humankind" ("Hymn" 84), the West Wind has the power literally to immortalize the artist—which is itself another type of suspension—and to distribute his works:

> Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
> Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
> And, by the incantation of this verse,
>
> Scatter as from an unextinguished hearth
> Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
> Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! (63–69)

In this sense, the West Wind acts not as the source of inspiration or a passive pseudo-divinity, as in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," but as a preservative, active power. But not only is the West Wind here more powerful than the Spirit of Beauty; it is also described in deliberately less Christian terms. While we may be tempted to interpret the image of rebirth in line sixty-four as a Christ-image, I would argue the contextualization within the cycle of seasons, as well as the address of the West Wind directly, paganizes this image; this paganization is only strengthened by the use of the word 'incantation,' which suggests a magical spell rather than a prayer.

While "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and "Ode to the West Wind" respectively Christianize and paganize the sublime, "Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats, author of Endymion, Hyperion, etc." in some ways appears to be the climax of Shelley's conception of religion and the sublime. While the poem is clearly, unequivocally about John Keats, in many ways it appears also to be a kind of allegory for the role and fate of the artist or poet generally—Keats seems to have been something of a Platonic ideal of the poet for Shelley, an unrivalled example of something to which all should strive, rather than a unique phenomenon in himself. Using Keats as an archetype, Shelley draws from three distinct categories of mythologized figures with which to compare him: Christianity, comparing Keats to Jesus; Greco-Roman mythology, comparing Keats to Adonis; and poetic ancestors, comparing Keats to Shakespeare and Milton.

Here, he also more explicitly shows the embodiment of the Spirit of Beauty, or even the sublime itself, characterizing the poet as a Christ-figure. In the Preface, Shelley,

believing Keats to have been killed by the demoralizing effect of a negative review, writes, "It may be well said that these wretched men [those who wrote the negative review] know not what they do" (1249), which Wu observes as "an echo of Christ's comment on those who crucified him: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34)" (1249n11). And though it may be tempting to assume that all such Christian apotheoses of the poet would come to an end after the preface—the title of the poem is, of course, a reference to Greek mythology—Shelley continues this throughout the work, weaving it with allusions to ancient Greek religion and with the type of ancestor-worship he hinted at in the graveyard scenes of "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty":

> The leprous corpse touched by this spirit tender
> Exhales itself in flowers of gentle breath;
> Like incarnations of the stars, when splendor
> Is changed to fragrance they illumine death
> And mock the merry worm that wakes beneath;
> Nought we know, dies. Shall that alone which knows
> Be as a sword consumed before the sheath
> By sightless lightning?—th' intense atom glows
> A moment, then is quenched in a most cold repose. ("Adonais" 172–180)

In line 172, we again see the spirit as a divine figure, likened to Christ. However, in this case, the poet is the leper, trapped *within their own* "corpse" which simultaneously defeats them and allows them access to the sublime, material world. In this way, Shelley acts almost simultaneously within Blakeian and Coleridgean views of embodiment—both as a partial facet of natural human existence and as a type of fallenness—while avoiding the Christian framework entirely. To Shelley, Christ was perhaps no holier than any ordinary person—but to forget the potential for the holy (dare I say, the sublime) within ordinary people with a talent for poetry and a connection with the Spirit of Beauty was

nigh blasphemous. The poet must overcome their own disease, their own mortal tragedy, in order to transcend these limitations and be made immortal.

No sooner has Shelley drawn this parallel to Christ on line 172 than he immediately changes track and characterizes the poet rather as Adonis on line 173; Duncan Wu clarifies that the "flowers of gentle breath" refer to "anemones, thought to have sprung from Adonis' blood when he was killed by a boar" (1255n44). According to Yves Bonnefoy, Adonis was a beautiful young man favored by Aphrodite. By different accounts, he either spent one third of each year with Persephone or one half of the year in the Underworld after Artemis caused his death (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica). James G. Frazer writes,

> It appears that certain sacred ceremonies are held every year; first he is mourned as if he had ceased to live, and then he is a cause for rejoicing, as if he had been brought back to life. But those who pride themselves on the interpretation of Greek mythology and what is called mythical theology say that Adonis is the symbol of the fruits of the earth, which are mourned when they are planed but through their growth bring joy to the farmers. (qtd. Bonnefoy 134)

This reinterprets the earlier Christ-themes of death and rebirth that Shelley connected to the poet and deliberately paganizes them, even among such lines as "Lost Angel of a ruined Paradise!" (88), in which the ruined paradise refers to "Adonais' creative imagination" (1253n24). But while in the Christian tradition the death-rebirth cycle as well as immortality generally is inherently connected to the divine, here it is connected explicitly to humanness—in fact, while it is the divine who bargains for Adonis to be able

to leave the underworld for a given amount of time per year, it is *also* the divine that causes his death to begin with. Adonis is both an active participant in and a passive recipient of his own fate—much like the poet who is both a vessel for the Spirit of Beauty and an agent of it. By mortalizing the Christ-figure, Shelley reaffirms that both the sublime and that which he finds inherently worthy of worship—the pseudo-divine—are located within human embodiment and human imagination rather than being an effect of some external power.

While Shelley thus far has been clear that the human being—even the poet in service of the Spirit of Beauty—is mortal and that there is no eternal afterlife, mythologizing Keats in the image of Adonis complicates this argument. Shelley writes, "Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven, / The soul of Adonais, like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are" (487–495). Shelley's reference to Adonais' soul, as well as the realm of the Eternal, indicates both at least one god-figure and an experience of an afterlife. Wu points out that these lines are "an allusion to Plato's epigram [on Aster]" (1265n104), which reads,

> Thou wert the morning star among the living,
> Ere thy fair light had fled;
> Now, having died, thou art as Hesperus, giving
> New splendor to the dead. (Wu 1248n2)

While the wording of these final lines of "Adonais" seem to set up a Christian, almost Blakeian view of an afterlife and an immortal soul, the epigram which Shelley quotes at the beginning of the preface seems to continue to point to the immortalization of the artist through their work rather than through an enduring consciousness. Moreover, because Keats-as-Adonais is made into an archetype rather than an individual throughout the

elegy, it does not seem contradictory for such a figure to have some kind of metaphorical enduring spirit, like the Spirit of Beauty or the West Wind. Therefore, Shelley's pseudo-divine, even mythologized or deified, remains mortal, self-contained, embodied, and imaginative.

"Mont Blanc" further embodies the sublime through the use of distance and direction in relation to the sublime object. In "Panoptic Perspectives in Shelley's *Mont Blanc*: Collapsed Distance and the Alpine Sublime," Joan Reiss Wry identifies one key difference between Shelley's relationship to the sublime object and that of his contemporaries—he places himself in the middle of the sublime scene rather than apart from it:

> In varied alpine settings in the poem, Shelley collapses the notion of distance in sublime encounters, offering a close-range perspective of Mont Blanc's glacial expanses and fluid tributaries, as well as a panoramic view of the desolate summit. Shelley's cerebral ascent situates him in a tableau of dark and disorienting topography, a mise-en-scène from which he emerges only after asserting the power of the "human mind's imaginings" (143) in posing his final question. (30)

In other words, throughout the poem, Shelley describes the sublime not as a distant onlooker but as an active participant in the midst of a sublime scene. In placing himself in the middle of this scene, Shelley connects the sublime specifically to his own distinctly and marvelously human imagination, which is both the way into the sublime scene and the way out in the final three lines of the poem: "And what were thou, and earth, and

stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" (142–144).

Anne McCarthy makes a related point in "Ecstatic Suspension in Shelley's 'Universe of Things,'" arguing, "Shelley's gaze does not travel upwards indefinitely but comes to rest on the 'broad vales' … and the 'unfathomable deeps' … that have more in common with the Ravine of Arve than with the summit of Mont Blanc" (99–100)—his sublime scene is oriented downward to the ravine rather than upward to the mountain. These two passages come to their conclusions in slightly different ways—distance in one, direction in the other—but the conclusion is remarkably similar: Shelley's sublime object is inextricably entangled with the personal, the mortal, the human. There is no Shelleyan sublime without the witness; unlike Blake's visions of eternity, which do and shall remain regardless of who notices them, Shelley's sublime is made by the viewer. This dependency upon perception is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the last three lines of the poem. These lines appear to be a celebration of imagination as a constant act of interpretation of the world around us, which thereby renders these things sublime. We do not merely access the sublime through our material senses, for Shelley; we create it. It is this creative ability, perhaps, which enables him to deify the artist even after his claim in *The Necessity of Atheism* that "This negation [that there is no God] must be understood solely to affect a creative Deity" (1).

However, while the sublime is an inherently human act for Shelley, it is equally inherently democratic. McCarthy argues that the focus on the ravine rather than the mountain is radically equalizing, writing,

> This version of the sublime does not culminate in a feeling of mastery (at least not as the word is usually understood), nor does it consist in finding the powers of the human mind reflected back in nature. Both ethical and non-coercive, it does not exchange the power of nature for the power of man, but rather points to a momentary suspension of dominance itself: not the negation of power, but the suspension of the very structures of reference and conceptual thought that make it possible to distinguish the dominant from the dominated. (90–91)

In essence, McCarthy is claiming that, far from the modes of the sublime which place humanity as the highest point in the order of nature, or which claim the dominion of nature over mankind, the Shelleyan sublime rather recognizes a unity, coherence, and equality between the natural world and human consciousness. The consciousness could not produce the sublime with nothing to perceive, but nature alone would not be sublime if not for the addition of imagination. This concept is similar to Alan Richardson's neural sublime. Richardson contrasts the triumph of the imagination with Kant's overpowering of it:

> The Kantian sublime (1) begins with an attempt on the part of the mind to grasp at the infinite or infinitely vast, entailing (2) failure and a moment of mental collapse, which is the (3) followed and compensated for by a "feeling" that the "*mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense*." This third moment at which the finite mind comes into transient, inarticulate, yet transformative contact with the transcendent, marks the ultimate victory of the Reason making up for the defeat of the imagination. … Yet, in the Romantic version, the subject is left not

> marveling at the power of Reason but rather stunned by the capacity and complexity of the human brain. (29)

In other words, while some theorists of the sublime, like Kant, understand the sublime as the result of a naturally occurring domination either of the mind or of nature by the other, the neural sublime—of which Richardson cites Shelley as a proponent—is the result of both come together. This is in sharp contrast to Coleridge's "Chamouny; the Hour Before Sunrise. A Hymn," in which Coleridge frames Chamonix-Mont-Blanc in terms of an inherently sublime object which he is lucky enough to perceive. He describes the scene as a visual worship of God, which is created by the scene itself and enjoyed by the viewer—two separate agents acting upon the other—rather than something which is cooperatively constructed between man and nature, which Shelley both equalizes and unifies.

Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* further develops the democratic, co-created nature of the Shelleyan sublime through its characterization of both Demogorgon and humanity, and through its imagery of spheres. Demogorgon as a mythological figure is, in fact, an accident. The OED gives the etymology as such: "post-classical Latin *Demogorgon*, scribal error (perhaps after ancient Greek *δῆμος* people (see DEMOS *n.*) and *Γοργώ* GORGON *n.*) in scholia on Statius *Thebaid*" ("Demogorgon, n."). Although Demogorgon is evidently a scribal error, he is a useful one for Shelley. The OED offers as a possible etymology *demos*, or people, added to *gorgon*, the mythical family of monsters including Medusa. It is important to note that both of these words imply plurality as a source of strength: *demos*, the same root for 'democracy,' implies cohesion, unity, and equality; *gorgon* implies a plurality of life within a single body—a woman

with snakes for hair. Neither is it such a stretch to imagine the mythical Gorgons as a type of sublime image; being characterized by their ability to turn people to stone, the legend connects them inherently to a state of suspension or paralysis, which, as McCarthy notes, willing or unwilling, "is not necessarily an occasion for panic" (86) for Shelley. To literally be suspended by sheer multiplicity is, for Shelley, perhaps the utmost of the sublime, the very poetic spirit itself. That he chose to make a character thus named the figure who attacks and dethrones God in *Prometheus Unbound* is particularly telling. It is important to recall that the only deliberately creative force in Shelley's world is the human imagination, which is glorified specifically by its multitudinous nature, able to render the sublime in immeasurably diverse places and ways. It is this figure who is able to liberate the sublime world, hearkening back to the vague doubts toward "some sublimer world" (25) in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." There is no Heaven in any meaningful sense, Shelley seems to reiterate; but this world is unfree, and we and the Spirit of Beauty can liberate it.

The character of Demogorgon underscores that the role of interpretation and creation is in fact reserved for humanity generally rather than a select few humans. Shelley gives us the following lines: "Man, one harmonious soul of many a soul, / Whose nature is its own divine control, / Where all things flow to all, as rivers to the sea" (400–403). Here, he emphasizes cooperation as the strength of mankind, emphasizing man as an individual among multitudes. But while he is clear in viewing community as the strength of humanity, it is unclear whether he views nature as part of this community or separate from it, and if separate, whether man or nature stand above the other or exist as

coequals. Given that it is man's nature "where all things flow to all," it would appear that the human is the receptacle of their environment, taking all in, reshaping it, and producing something new—a process which could be considered sublime or productive of the sublime. This, in contradiction to McCarthy's point, would identify humanity as the masters of nature; however, identifying man as "one harmonious soul of many a soul" does not only emphasize the diversity of human life, but the diversity of material existence, both human and non-human. This interpretation would agree with McCarthy, placing humanity and nature as diverse equals in a system of unification. But whether man and nature are hierarchical or equal, one thing remains clear: humans are at their best when they cooperate as communal equals.

Perhaps the clearest image of this plurality, especially when combined with the cyclicality present in "Ode to the West Wind" and Shelley's other poems, is in Act IV:

> And from the other opening in the wood
> Rushes, with loud and whirlwind harmony,
> A sphere, which is as many thousand spheres,
> Flow, as through empty space, music and light:
> Ten thousand orbs involving and involved,
> Purple and azure, white, and green, and golden,
> Sphere within sphere; and every space between
> Peopled with unimaginable shapes,
> Such as ghosts dream dwell in the lampless deep,
> Yet each intertranspicuous; and they whirl
> Over each other with a thousand motions,
> Upon a thousand sightless axles spinning,
> And, with the force of self-destroying swiftness,
> Intensely, slowly, solemnly roll on,
> Kindling with mingled sounds, and many tones,
> Intelligible words and music wild.
> With mighty whirl the multitudinous orb
> Grinds the bright brook into an azure mist
> Of elemental subtlety, like light;
> And the wild odour of the forest flowers,

> The music of the living grass and air,
> The emerald light of leaf-entangled beams
> Round its intense yet self-conflicting speed,
> Seem kneaded into one aerial mass
> Which drowns the sense. Within the orb itself,
> Pillowed upon its alabaster arms
> Like to a child o'erwearied with sweet toil,
> On its own folded wings and wavy hair
> The Spirit of the Earth is laid asleep,
> And you can see its little lips are moving
> Amid the changing light of their own smiles,
> Like one who talks of what he loves in dream – (236–267)

This scene gives us perhaps the clearest vision of the sublime we have yet seen. It is not the ravine in Chamonix, nor the reborn, immortal poet in "Adonais"; it is both "multitudinous" (253) and "intertranspicuous" (246)—many, diverse, and multiply, mutually informative—and spherical in shape, alluding to the cyclicality in Shelley's earlier work. In fact, throughout the stanza, there are no fewer than twelve nouns or verbs that directly describe a circular or spherical shape or motion. These spinning, plural, intersecting orbs are not alone, however, nor is their purpose merely to astound with their strangeness: rather, they house the peacefully sleeping Spirit of Earth—whom, we might assume from Shelley's consistent talk of Spirits both in his poems and in his prose, could be synonymous with the poetic spirit or the Spirit of Beauty. This is the first time in Shelley's canon we have been able to see this spirit not merely in terms of its capabilities, its dues, or its roles—as the immortalizer of the artist, as the object of supplication or worship, as the pseudo-divine—but in fact as *itself*. But the Spirit of Earth does not—perhaps *cannot*—exist alone. It is witnessed by Panthea and Ione, and it is described; in being witnessed and described, it becomes exalted. The Spirit of Earth with its interconnected, interdependent vast orbs would mean nothing if alone, and would lose its

sublime quality without one to imagine and interpret it—indeed, without a witness to know that these orbs and this spirit "[drown] the sense" (261).

Percy Bysshe Shelley's mode of the sublime is radically unlike his peers', in that it is secular, essentially human, and necessarily cooperative. By mythologizing this notion of the sublime, Shelley manages to glorify the human imagination and pay homage to the "pervading Spirit" (*Atheism* 1) of poetry, lending a weight to the Shelleyan sublime which perhaps would have otherwise gone unnoticed in a deeply religious world. By mythologizing his work, and therefore demanding attention for it, Shelley manages to use this version of the sublime to make radical, highly controversial claims—to politicize his sublime in favor of democracy and equality, to deify art in a culture beginning to more highly value science, to amplify human dignity and diversity. The Shelleyan sublime is not something to be passively received as an objective other; it is meant to be shaped, interacted with, imagined, and reborn into something new, everlasting, and, indeed, multitudinous and intertranspicuous. By framing it in this way, the sublime, although it may come with a feeling of insignificance in the face of the amazing, makes the human witness into a position of highest possible significance within the cosmic realm of art, an active participant in the Spirit of Beauty, and indeed, the mythologized creator whom Shelley denies as God. Such a role is reserved for man, the artist, the imaginer, the maker of the unimaginable. Shelley's sublime therefore becomes a collection of interlocking orbs, rolling ever forward, shifting and iridescent, yet at its heart still honoring the Spirit of Beauty and the imagination of humanity as co-equals and co-creators.

## III. Unity and Division in Blake's Sublime Eternity

As devoutly Christian as he was religiously and socially nonconformist, William Blake's poetry and prose shows us a personal, eternal view of sublimity rooted directly in the divine. This view stands in sharp contrast to his peers. Described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as "certainly, a mystic *emphatically*" (Wu 179), Blake's personal experience of the sublime was inherently connected to his religious framework, which included visions, an almost Emersonian view of self-reliance and non-conformity, and a defense of both political democracy and personal liberty. In "All Religions are One" and "There is no Natural Religion," Blake claims that there is a single origin from which stems all human life, which he claims has been interpreted variously by each religion but which is most accurately represented in biblical texts; he calls this origin the Poetic Genius and claims that its infinite nature allows mankind to similarly become infinite. Blake claims that our division from this Poetic Genius is the result of the Fall, which is inherent to the Creation; due to our divided, created nature, Blake claims that much of the sublime is terrible for us to behold, although he seems to argue that this is a result of our fallen nature rather than a reflection of some inherent aspect of the sublime. For Blake, the path back to the eternal is through the imagination, which he calls "spiritual sensation" (245) in his "Letter to the Revd Dr Trusler." In *The First Book of Urizen* Blake mythologizes this view of the sublime in a rewriting of the Creation and the Fall, while in *The*

*Marriage of Heaven and Hell* he brings this faith into his present religiopolitical moment. He further explores these thoughts with "The Chimney Sweeper," turning his concept of the infinite imagination as the sublime into a social commentary and expression of personal belief.

In "All Religions Are One," Blake writes of the Poetic Genius, "That the Poetic Genius is the true Man, and that the body or outward form of Man is derived from the Poetic Genius. … The true Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius" (180–181). It is possible to interpret the Poetic Genius variously—perhaps as a divine source, a god-figure, or even a soul. Blake directly places it into a religious framework in the fifth and sixth principles:

> Principle 5. The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nation's different reception of the Poetic Genius, which is everywhere called the Spirit of Prophecy.
>
> Principle 6. The Jewish and Christian Testaments are an original derivation from the Poetic Genius. (181)

In other words, the Poetic Genius has been the source of inspiration for every religion on Earth, but is best represented by the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. However, while Blake's choice to frame it religiously would seem to indicate that the Poetic Genius is a type of godhead, his description of it as "the true Man" would appear to undermine this for even the most unconventional Christian. However, the Application of "There is no Natural Religion" seems to bring the comparison of God and man back to the forefront: "He who sees the infinite in all things, sees God. He who sees the Ratio only,

sees himself only. Therefore God becomes as we are, that we may be as He is" (182). The Application seems to suggest that God is accessible *through* the self, and that the process of becoming more godlike perhaps results from God becoming more humanlike. In this way, the Poetic Genius could be a type of god-figure or an aspect of God which is accessible to us via its and our potential for metamorphosis. Blake identifies our ability to access this internal infinite in his "Letter to the Revd Dr Trusler": "What is it sets Homer, Virgil, and Milton in so high a rank of art? Why is the Bible more entertaining and instructive than any other book? Is it not because they are addressed to the imagination (which is spiritual sensation), and but mediately to the understanding or reason?" (245). In "There is no Natural Religion," he explains, "Man's desires are limited by his perceptions; none can desire what he has not perceived. … Man's perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception. He perceives more than sense (though ever so acute) can discover" (181). In other words, for man to even be able to imagine or desire the infinite—or, we might say, the sublime—he must be able to in some way have a concept of it, which could in theory either come through "organs of perception" such as eyes or ears, or through "spiritual sensation"—that is, the mind or imagination. Blake argues that organs of perception are limiting and inadequate for matters of the sublime and gives recognition of the sublime as evidence for the existence of a transcendent spiritual sensation.

While imagination seems to be the key to accessing eternity for Blake, this is not to say that he dismisses materiality, as the theology of his day encouraged. In "Blake's Visions," Michael O'Sullivan interprets Blake's attitude toward material sense somewhat

differently, arguing, “Blake denies the value of sense perception, and of perceptible natural objects, as sources of genuine insight. And he is dismissive of ‘natural religion’ (as natural theology was called in the period) on the ground that natural objects as present to the senses are insufficient to ground religious experience” (A317). O’Sullivan’s claim that Blake dismisses the material world—both natural objects and “organs of perception” (Blake, “Natural Religion” 181)—is understandable, but ultimately an oversimplification. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake writes, “Man has no Body distinct from his Soul, for that called Body is a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses (the chief inlets of Soul in this age)”; he goes on to identify what he calls energy as a facet specifically of the body and says of it, “Energy is Eternal Delight” (214). While it may be fair to say that Blake’s representation of Hell is ultimately a representation of an extreme, and therefore the product of division, it is equally true that Blake’s overlying philosophy holds that extremes must be unified rather than expunged. Blake cannot dismiss or condemn the material world, because for him the material world, though fallen, is still a portion of sublime eternity. While I agree with O’Sullivan that “Blake does not conceive of visions as primarily *visual* experiences at all” (A318), I would note that Blake’s world was defined largely by polarities: Church doctrine mandated the rejection of the body and bodily needs, while reactions against the Church upheld the body above all. So much of Blake’s work deals with balance and unity between extremes—it is an oversimplification to assume that he rejects any part of life. To do so would be to defy eternity.

Susanne Sklar takes another step in "'In the Mouth of a True Orator' (*Jerusalem*'s Operating Instructions)," arguing that Blake's work is fundamentally and irrevocably embodied, claiming,

> Blake declares that every word of *Jerusalem* has been chosen to suit 'the mouth of a true Orator' (*Jerusalem*, Plate 3). Though it is not written in the form of a play, the poem has been designed to be read aloud. When I try to be a 'true Orator,' the poem's peculiar language, characters, and structure become clearer and its complexities less baffling. (837–838)

While this essay will not discuss *Jerusalem*, Sklar's point is worth bearing in mind. Blake works predominantly with poetry, which in many ways remains inseparable from its early oral roots—even more so in the late eighteenth century than today. Even Blake's printing and publication process was deeply embodied as part of his art. Regarding his process of using stop-out varnish to mirror-write and illuminate his poetry onto copper plates, acid washing the copper, inking the plates, and pressing and coloring each page, the British Library explains,

> There, right in the middle of his life, is this machine, this large lumping, huge, wooden, heavy machine, with this great star wheel that takes enormous pressure to turn and it creaks like a sailing ship and is absolutely at the center of his life. … Blake is a mechanic. He's this extraordinary man who is physical. Blake was not a big man, but he was enormously strong, enormously powerful – yet the creator of these extraordinary ideas and these extraordinary poems. ("William Blake's Printing Process" 06:29–07:27)

The British Library identifies Blake's very process of imagining as a deeply physical process—and imagination, of course, was Blake's key to the sublime and therefore to the infinite. Since for Blake fallenness is a state of disunity, implying that redemption requires that all opposites be unified, it must be equally impossible to separate the material from the spiritual or to reject either one.

Although the material and the spiritual ought not be separated for Blake, *The First Book of Urizen* acts as a highly mythologized retelling of the book of Genesis in which the Creation and the Fall are in fact the same action, implying that although we must learn to unify our organs of perception with our spiritual sensation, the organs of perception themselves are a symptom of our fallenness. Additionally, the characterization of Los, or the imagination (Wu 234n21), as a creator who is both oppressor and liberator, anguished savior and reluctant damner, highlights the unification of contrasts both in sublime eternity and in our fallen state. We first hear the account of Urizen's separation from the Eternals. Described as a "Demon" (10) which "Hath formed this abominable void, / This soul-shudd'ring vacuum" (11–12), it seems tempting to assign Urizen to the role of Satan. However, the next stanza complicates this characterization, showing Urizen instead as a terrible creator:

> Times on times he divided, and measured
> Space by space in his ninefold darkness,
> Unseen, unknown; changes appeared
> In his desolate mountains, rifted furious
> By the black winds of perturbation. (15–19)

Here we see Urizen as a dark God shaping time and space both material and sublime. Duncan Wu offers the following points of clarification: "The Creation begins with

Urizen's splitting away from the Eternals into selfhood" (230n8), and "Urizen becomes a landscape: Creation and the Fall are one and the same" (230n10). Urizen's reasons for this split are given thus: "I have sought for a joy without pain, / For a solid without fluctuation" (61–62). In other words, Urizen becomes self-actualized through his realization that he, unlike the other Eternals, wishes to live in stagnant joy rather than exist in a world of change and energy. This realization of self is both a fall and an act of creation—in realizing himself, Urizen becomes the world. To proclaim this new law of the forming, falling creation, Urizen dictates, "One command, one joy, one desire, / One curse, one weight, one measure, / One King, one God, one Law" (89–91), mimicking the laws of Moses and the Old Testament Abrahamic God. Ironically, in attempting to dictate a singularity of rule, Urizen in fact undermines the unity of the Eternals, splitting from true monotheism to a pseudo-monotheism which mocks the unity of infinite nature and instead imposes tyranny. Blake's description of this splitting-away, though material, appeals more to spiritual sensation than organic. While he does not describe the process of falling as sublime, we are immersed in sublime imagery from the very start. In Chapter I alone, objects are described as "unseen," "unknown," "abstracted," or "secret" nine times, and the imagery given, though physical, is often both impossible and shrouded in darkness. Blake describes "black winds of perturbation" (19) and "voices of terror / Are heard, like thunders of autumn, / When the cloud blazes over the harvests" (37–42); he writes,

> The will of the Immortal expanded
> Or contracted his all-flexible senses.
> Death was not, but eternal life sprung.

2. The sound of a trumpet! The heavens
Awoke, and vast clouds of blood rolled
Round the dim rocks of Urizen … (44–49)

While these images are rooted in sensations such as sight and sound, they are also sense-rooted descriptions of a sublime impossibility—we are given a landscape characterized by its inability to be perceived except in glimpses of the terrifying and half-coherent. Blake does not refer to his imagery as sublime as Shelley did, but like Shelley, he presents the sublime to the reader in the very language of his verse.

Urizen's creative fall is inherently an act of division—himself from the Eternals, and his creation from each other. As Urizen falls, Blake introduces Los, the personification of imagination, who has split from Urizen:

9. Los wept, howling around the dark Demon
And cursing his lot; for in anguish
Urizen was rent from his side:
And a fathomless void for his feet,
And intense fires for his dwelling.

10. But Urizen laid in a stony sleep
Unorganized, rent from Eternity.

11. The Eternals said: 'What is this? Death.
Urizen is a clod of clay.' (143–151)

Here Urizen, both fallen angel and fallen mortal, is depicted as an Eve-figure, "rent from [the] side" of Los and in "a stony sleep" likened to death after having caused and created the Fall. Indeed, Blake soon makes clear that the very existence of a female—of a sexually divided species—is evidence of the Fall rather than the cause of it. After declaring that "pity divides the soul" (295), Blake writes,

9. All Eternity shuddered at sight
Of the first female now separate,

Pale as a cloud of snow
Waving before the face of Los.

10. Wonder, awe, fear, astonishment,
Petrify the eternal myriads
At the first female form now separate.
They called her Pity, and fled. (323–330)

Pity is an inherently divisive force, which the Eternals recognize in the first woman. However, it is worth noticing that this divisive form is itself sublime *to the Eternals,* as they view her with "Wonder, awe, fear, astonishment" (327). While the description of this woman—"Pale as a cloud of snow"—may seem less sublime to us than to the Eternals, it is worth noting that it is incorporeal and insubstantial by nature. We are not given a sense-based description of the woman but are instead forced to rely on an imaginative construction. In addition to foregrounding her in spiritual sensation, her insubstantiality makes the woman seem equally strange to us as to the Eternals; we do not recognize ourselves in this creature, but are rather forced apart from her. Again discussing *Jerusalem,* David Baulch analyzes the role of biological sex in Blake's depiction of the fall of man, writing, "Blake associates the division of the sublime and the beautiful with the division of the sexes into the male spectre and the female emanation" (354); he goes on to explain, "Sexually, this fall is the division of female and male. In the major prophecies in general and in *Jerusalem* in particular, Blake sees the Fall expressly in terms of the division of sublimity and pathos (or intellectual beauty)" (365). In other words, to Blake, *all* forms of division are a symptom of fallenness—including the division between genders or sexes and between the sublime and the beautiful. The separation of Los from Urizen is necessarily dependent on their fallen states. This

fallenness is also, according to Baulch, what Blake believes forces us to view the sublime and the beautiful as two separate concepts which cannot be confused; Blake might argue instead that we should view the sublime *as* beautiful and vice versa. One could infer, then, that our terror at beholding the sublime is, to Blake, a symptom of the Fall; similarly we must infer that the sublime has become terrible to the Eternals specifically because the Fall has separated the object of their sublime from them.

This division, to Blake, is also a reason that the sublime is often considered a terrible or fearful emotion—the Burkean sublime, to Blake, is a picture of fallenness, because it necessarily states that the sublime cannot be beautiful nor the beautiful sublime. But if the sublime is a response to visions of eternity, and eternity is desirable, it *ought* to be beautiful—unless we, like the first woman, are too deluded to see it. And indeed, this division goes both ways. In *Urizen*, the Eternals view the first woman with a terror and awe that can easily be likened to a kind of Burkean sublime: "Wonder, awe, fear, astonishment, / Petrify the eternal myriads / At the first female form now separate" (327–329), Blake writes. The emotions described are not the only indicators of the sublime—the "petrification" is also a facet of the sublime, as identified by Anne McCarthy. While McCarthy does not focus on Blake in her book, this petrification of the Eternals connects solidly to her concept of "suspension," of which she writes, "It [suspension] is not the absence of activity that one feels, but the overwhelming sense of interruptions and possibility – a form of hovering, the alternation of resistance and yielding. … These terms [of suspension] accumulate at an experiential threshold, naming a condition of both knowing and not-knowing, and of not-knowing at the very moment in

which knowledge becomes possible" (4). In other words, suspension is a type of liminal space made possible by the sublime. Knowledge becomes available, but one is incapable of receiving it; at the same time, one cannot help but know. The Eternals find themselves at this experiential threshold—they could know humanity, but they are "petrified" at the sight of this woman, horrified and awed by her strangeness and her fallenness. They know that she is fallen; they know that she is divided—it is for this reason that they call her Pity. But rather than learn what this means, as soon as their paralysis is broken, they "flee." Similarly, when the woman is given the opportunity to know Los—and therefore to know a portion of Eternity greater than herself—to know her creator, her imprisoner, her liberator, she shies away. "He embraced her, she wept, she refused. / In perverse and cruel delight / She fled from his arms, yet he followed" (340–342), Blake writes. This parallel between the Eternals' and the woman's flights from the object of their sublime highlights that they are mutually strange *to each other*. This is not an image of an omniscient God who deliberately set out to create humanity and very calmly set their fate and punished them for it; this is the image of an accident, a breaking away, a mutual estrangement from one another that is inherent to the very foundation of humanity. There is no Eve here to coyly eat an apple and damn the race; the damnation conceived the race and is inextricable from them. Yet the hope of redemption was damnation's co-parent, equally intrinsic to the human race. According to Blake, both our imprisonment and our escape hatch are baked into our very DNA. While we are the breaking apart, we are also the coming together. Whether or not reconciling the divisions inherent to material creation would lead to the apocalyptic destruction of that creation, as the narrator predicts

in “A Memorable Fancy,” is almost irrelevant—humanity embodies this very reconciliation; it is inherent both to our present reality and our fate.

While Blake does not view material existence as an inherently evil reality—rather, it is simply another facet of eternity which must be consolidated into the rest—it is clear in Chapter IVb that he does view it as symptomatic of the Fall. This Chapter shows Los forging the human body as a way to imprison Urizen and prevent him from falling further. Blake describes a scene of horror as Los links the “infernal chain” (208) of the human spine or freezes bones “Over all his nerves of joy” (214). Each section of the human body forged by Los is relegated to one “Age” of seven, each described as “a state of dismal woe” (215, 224, 233, 240, 245, 253, 260), analogous to the seven days of the Abrahamic Creation story. Perhaps most notable, though, is the role of Los and his attitude toward his task. So heavily mythologized that he is nearly akin to a Hephaestus or Prometheus character, Los plays the role of the tortured savior or the laborer who performs the necessary evil. “Restless turned the Immortal enchained” (203), Blake describes Urizen, bound by Los, “Heaving dolorous! Anguished! Unbearable / … / In a horrible dreamful slumber” (204–207). Even working against each other, Urizen and Los are crafting life in a kind of fever dream, tortured by their own creation *as they create it*; the very act of constructing a body is for Los an act of separating himself further from the immortals, requiring him to create his own prison in a last resort to prevent himself and Urizen from simply being destroyed. Additionally, like Blake’s own creative process, Los’s act of creation is a distinctly material, embodied process, even as he constructs embodiment itself. Blake describes Urizen “In heavy pain striving, struggling” (235),

Enraged and stifled with torment,
He threw his right Arm to the north,
His left Arm to the south,
Shooting out in anguish deep;
And his Feet stamped the nether Abyss
In trembling and howling and dismay. (254–259)

While this stanza describes the "seventh Age" (260), the embodiedness of both the creative action and the created is foregrounded at every opportunity throughout the description of the process. Although Urizen begins in a "horrible dreamful slumber" (207), even then we see Los's construction: "Like the linked infernal chain / A vast spine writhed in torment" (208–209). Los's work is not only painful for him and Urizen on a moral or spiritual level; it is a physically demanding, grueling labor, akin to the labor of Hephaestus, the rejected forge god with the broken body, or to the tortures of Prometheus, rewarded for his efforts by an eternity of suffering both for himself and for his creation.

Los is not only the tortured laborer or the martyr; Blake describes Los several times as "the Eternal Prophet." Additionally, he shows Los not only as a divider but as one attempting to unify his broken creation:

But Los saw the female and pitied;
He embraced her, she wept, she refused.
In perverse and cruel delight
She fled from his arms, yet he followed. (339–342)

Los's embrace here is an attempt to physically connect that which has been separated—putting two divided bodies into contact with one another—but his fallen creation scorns his attempt, either unable or unwilling to accept his offered remedy to her fragmentedness. In the chapter "Los and Jesus," Peter Otto discusses how Los makes

possible the conditions for Jesus Christ to exist and save humanity, as well as the ways that Jesus's redemptive power comes primarily through his capacity to create the conditions for relationships. Otto writes,

> Los's embrace of the 'creation' that hems us in, and his continual opening of it to Albion-in-withdrawal, changes the prison into the seed. … It is at this point that Los appears in the similitude of Jesus. … Jesus appears at the precise point that self and other, time and Eternity, male and female, enter into relationship: in *Milton* he appears where Milton and Ololon, time and Eternity, are on the verge of embrace; and in *Jerusalem* he is seen and heard in the attentiveness of Los to Albion-in-withdrawal. Conversely, when Albion withdraws into the enclosure of the self, he loses sight of the Divine Vision. Jesus is therefore seen in the casting off of enclosure and the entry into relationship with another. (218–219)

In other words, Jesus is most present at the point of relationship between self and other—and indeed, Jesus's very existence *is* the movement into relationship for Blake, even down to the concept of him existing within humanity and humanity within him. While Los is not Jesus, Los acts in part as the unifier who makes possible the relationship conditions for Jesus's existence. But while Los is the unifier, he is also the original divider. Los's act of creation was inherently one of division. Jesus would not be *necessary* if not for the actions of Los and Urizen. Therefore, although he acts as a redeemer in some respects, Los is also something of a Satan-figure. Original sin does not play into *The First Book of Urizen* in the sense of a woman eating fruit; the original sin was Urizen's act of division which sparked the Fall, and Los's reactive choice to create

mortal, embodied life as a compromise between eternity and destruction. Los is implicated in this sin, even though his sin is lessening Urizen's. In Blake's truest spirit of monotheism as radical unity, Los is both the tempter and the savior, the redeemer and the need for redemption, the divider and the unifier between body and soul.

Los's placement as both a cause of the Fall and the proto-savior of humanity puts him in line with Percy Bysshe Shelley's Prometheus in *Prometheus Unbound*. In his Preface to the poem, Shelley writes,

> The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus, is Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgement, a more poetical character than Satan, because, in addition to courage and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, revenge, and a desire for personal aggrandizement – which, in the hero of *Paradise Lost*, interfere with the interest. The character of Satan engenders in the mind a pernicious casuistry which leads us to weigh his faults with his wrongs, and to excuse the former because the latter exceed all measure. In the minds of those who consider that magnificent fiction with a religious feeling, it engenders something worse. But Prometheus is, as it were, the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends. (1139)

Shelley identifies Prometheus with Milton's Satan particularly due to their shared qualities of "firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force"—both rebel against the tyranny of what Blake might call "One King, one God, one Law" (91) in a way that

Shelley argues is particularly honorable. Both become martyrs for this rebellion, in much the same way that Jesus Christ became a martyr to save humanity. Blake may add Los to this category—he too defies the tyrannical order of Urizen, and though he acts as the imprisoner, he also adds something of a secret escape hatch for humanity by way of the mind and specifically the imagination—an escape hatch which Blake seems determined to show us to through the unembodied imagery of his poetry. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake writes, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: Infinite. For man has closed himself up till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern" (218). He does not here name Los as the one who has closed mankind up in a cavern; he names man himself. He also implies that it is possible to clear away the grime from these "doors," to again see the sublime Eternal. For Blake, this is made possible by the imagination itself. In his "Letter to the Revd Dr Trusler," Blake writes,

> And I know that this world is a world of imagination and vision. I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike. … But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees; as the eye is formed, such are its powers. You certainly mistake when you say that the visions of fancy are not to be found in this world. To me, this world is all one continued vision of fancy or imagination. (245)

While much of Blake's work—especially *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*—is deliberately controversial or extreme in order to provoke a reaction from his audience, it is reasonable to assume that this letter is a genuine statement of his values, given that he

is defending those values to his addressee. In the letter, he defends what he views as a "world of imagination and vision," in which infinite possibilities and joys are revealed to one who knows how to look with fancy. For Blake, while not everyone sees the Infinite, it is there regardless, ready to be perceived. This is in direct contrast to Shelley's view of the sublime as something which requires a human witness to interpret it. While Shelley's vision of the pseudo-eternal and pseudo-divine is produced via the sublime as a human emotional reaction, Blake understands the eternal and divine as something which exist and go on existing regardless of who notices, but which can be accessed via the imagination, which may produce a sublime response as a result due to our fallenness.

Blake's concept of the sublime diverges radically from his contemporaries; his sublime need not be witnessed—nor, therefore, experienced from a place of embodiment—to be real, unlike the Shelleyan sublime. Like Coleridge, Blake's sublime centers a Christian godhead, but diverges in his view of a democratic eternity available to any imaginative enough to see it, rather than limited to those with access to a sufficient amount of faith, as the Coleridgean sublime appears to imply. Unlike Edmund Burke's sublime, Blake views it as something which can and ought to be associated with beauty—indeed, doing so is paramount to reaching eternity. Baulch writes,

> It is here [in Blake's letter to the Reverend Dr. Trusler], in his unqualified championing of the imagination as a sublime experience of presence, that Blake's aesthetics merge with his reading of biblical narrative. In Blake's reading of the Bible, the fall of man is a fall into acceptance of limitations imposed upon the infinite potential of the imagination. Philosophically, this fall is the abyss created

> by the subject/object division. Artistically, this fall is marked by the *ut pictura poesis* tradition. Spiritually, this division is that of the body and soul, and divine and human. And sexually, this fall is the division of female and male. … Blake sees the Fall expressly in terms of the division of sublimity and pathos (or intellectual beauty). Within the fallen condition it is the struggle of the creative artist to seek to reunite the aesthetic polarities of the sublime and the beautiful and the human dichotomy of body and soul in an imaginative vision as a true contrary to the empirical vision of the natural world of pure materiality. (365)

Like Shelley, Blake identifies "intellectual beauty" as a source of the sublime and a component of the sublime. But for Blake, the two are naturally linked, but have been separated by the Fall. In fact the Fall is not so much a fall from God's favor for Blake as it is a division from eternity, from one another, and within ourselves, causing inherent conflict which it is left to the artist to resolve through imaginative, creative processes. For Blake, this creative process often takes the form of myth and hyperbole, both to achieve dramatic effect.

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, like *The First Book of Urizen*, is a highly mythologized account of Christian lore; however, while *The First Book of Urizen* seems to fall more or less in line with Blake's viewpoints on the imagination and the sublime, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* deliberately exaggerates the anti-Church, embodied, "energetic" position while almost wholly discounting the reason, logic, and self-control promoted by Christian doctrine of the day. In "The Voice of the Devil," Blake writes, "Energy is the only life and is from the Body, and Reason is the bound or outward

circumference of Energy" (214). In other words, what Blake calls energy is that which, according to the Devil, makes human life possible—allowing us to move, to breathe, to live, and—as it extends past the most bodily needs and motivations—to think and contemplate. This implies that reason owes a debt to energy and is subjugated to it. While this is undoubtedly the case in some ways—if one does not eat, for instance, they may find concentration and clear thought difficult—it is also a dismissal of the ways that reason informs and influences energy: for instance, the ability to plan a meal that meets both the needs and desires of one's body. Hell is not to be rejected because it is a portion of eternity, yet Hell only exists because of Fallenness; thus, it exists as a product of division and seeks to further divide by its very nature. While in reality reason and energy influence and inform each other as part of human life processes, Hell seeks to divide them and set one above the other. In doing so, both are stripped of their sublime qualities: no longer is there a complex, unified system of mind and body working together, each as a facet of an immortal soul and as the housing for the sublime imagination, but rather they are pitted against each other as competing agendas, leaving individuals forced to choose a side. Neither Heaven nor Hell are good or evil, because neither of these constructions make sense in the context of infinitude, but as aspects of a fallen creation, both teach humans to do violence to themselves, to split themselves apart just as Urizen did. While Hell's argument is flawed, it does serve to show the similar flaws in the arguments of Heaven. Blake condemns the Church's doctrines which preach self-denial, repression, and shame:

> Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion.
> The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.

> The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.
> The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.
> The nakedness of woman is the work of God.
> The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man. (215)

Here he identifies three of the seven deadly sins—pride, lust, wrath—alongside the bodily shame learned in the Garden of Eden, and claims that they are the product of a radical, sublime God who encompasses all of creation. Additionally, much like his earlier poem "The Tyger," Blake highlights images of destruction, wrath, anger, and violence as "portions of eternity too great for the eye of man"—as specifically sublime images of God's creation. He seems to be illuminating an oft-overlooked aspect of both monotheism and the infinite: if there is one God, and they are the God of everything, they are the God of that which we find distasteful or destructive as much as the God of that which we find pleasant or useful. Good and evil do not exist in competition in such a framework, because there can be no true competition in an infinite, unified state of being.

One clue to parsing Blake's intended meaning is to find the claims which directly contradict his other works. In "A Memorable Fancy [A Printing-House in Hell]," Blake claims,

> Thus one portion of being is the Prolific; the other, the Devouring. To the devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains, but it is not so: he only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole.
>
> But the Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer as a sea received the excess of his delights.
>
> Some will say 'Is not God alone the Prolific?' I answer, 'God only acts and is in existing beings or men.'
>
> These two classes of men are always upon earth, and they should be enemies; whoever tries to reconcile them seeks to destroy existence.
>
> Religion is an endeavor to reconcile the two.
>
> Note: Jesus Christ did not wish to unite, but to separate them (as in the parable of sheep and goats), and he says, 'I came not to send Peace but a Sword.' (219)

Using a similar model to the metaphorical "center" and "circumference" of energy and reason, Blake identifies two "classes" of humanity who are at odds, and claims that to reconcile the two factions would be ultimately destructive to existence. He goes on to claim that Jesus would agree, because Jesus himself acted as a divider, referencing Matthew 25:31–46, in which it is explained that during the Final Judgment, Jesus will divide humanity between those who helped "the least of them" and those who did not; the first category will be saved, and the second will be rejected and sent to "eternal punishment" (*The Four Gospels*, Matt. 25:46). Therefore, claims Blake, Jesus wants us to be divided. This seems starkly at odds with the rest of his philosophy and theology both. As Otto claims about *Jerusalem* and *Milton*, "Jesus is … seen in the casting off of enclosure and the entry into relationship with another" (219). Los, the imperfect savior, halfway between "Prolific" and "Devourer," attempts to find commonality with humanity, but the human female, herself a product of fallen division, rejects him. However, it is important to note that Blake is not entirely speaking of his own opinions in this work; he is giving the case in favor of Hell, as Hell would explain it. And while Blake stresses that Heaven and Hell are opposite in principles but not levels of goodness, both are also products of division and therefore fallenness—neither can be perfect on its own, but like the first woman, they shy away from the possibility of embrace.

It is possible, too, that Blake *would* have considered the unity of opposites to mean the destruction of existence—to be redeemed from fallenness would be inherently apocalyptic, as it is impossible to exist in mortal form unfallen. It is for this reason that the end of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "A Song of Liberty," is inherently

apocalyptic. The "Song" begins, "The Eternal Female groaned! It was heard all over the Earth" (1). Wu clarifies, "This momentous birth (of Revolution) heralds an apocalypse" (222n66). Revolution is, like Los, both a destructive force and a redemptive one—tearing down the old world to make a new, better existence that brings us closer to Eternity. At the birth of Revolution, we see political and religious institutions across the globe crumble to make way for liberty:

> Albion's coast is sick, silent; the American meadows faint!
> Shadows of Prophecy shiver along by the lakes and the rivers, and mutter across the ocean! France, rend down thy dungeon;
> Golden Spain, burst the barriers of old Rome;
> Cast thy keys, oh Rome, into the deep down falling, even to eternity down falling,
> And weep! (2–6)

While Blake is undoubtedly describing acts of destruction—the Bastille falling, the papacy falling "even to eternity," Europe weeping—they are, to him, positive actions. A proponent of democracy, Blake finds both the church and the class hierarchy of aristocracies inherently divisive, and therefore condemnable. Revolution's birth signals the fall of Urizen:

> 15. Down rushed, beating his wings in vain the jealous king; his grey-browed counsellors, thunderous warriors, curled veterans, among helms and shields and chariots, horses, elephants: banners, castles, slings and rocks,
> 16. Falling, rushing, ruining! buried in the ruins, on Urthona's dens.
> 17. All night beneath the ruins; then their sullen flames faded emerge round the gloomy king.
> 18. With thunder and fire: leading his starry hosts through the waste wilderness he promulgates his ten commands, glancing his beamy eyelids over the deep in dark dismay,
> 19. Where the son of fire in his eastern cloud, while the morning plumes her golden breast,
> 20. Spurning the clouds written with curses, stamps the stony law to dust, loosing the eternal horses from the dens of night, crying, 'Empire is no more! And now the lion and wolf shall cease.' (223)

Urizen here is shown as something of an Old Testament God—he is the god of law, of singularity, of division and inflexibility. But Revolution is "a Christ-like anti-Moses, anti-Jehovah figure, who is to liberate mankind" (Wu 223n82). In opposing Urizen, Revolution simultaneously opposes and aligns with Los, who is the figure of compromise and temporary salvation between the damner and the savior. Los remains a liminal figure, at once embodying polarities and unable to resolve them into something cohesive and whole. Therefore, another permanent savior is needed—in the form of Revolution, or Christ. This savior is deeply apocalyptic in nature. While Blake identifies Revolution with signifiers of his own age—the fall of the Bastille, for instance (3)—it seems in retrospect as though his prophecy did not quite come to pass. Blake's age was revolutionary, but it was unable to attain the Revolution that would save us all.

While Revolution did not come in Blake's time in the way he had hoped, he found that humanity was still left with opportunities—and duties—for smaller revolutions, accessed by way of imagination and imagination-based action. As indicated by the Proverbs of Hell which pointed to a return to natural cyclical time, Blake was less than pleased with the sociopolitical landscape he observed, identifying issues of oppression which make it impossible or improbable for humanity to use their imaginations, and therefore cutting off access to the Infinite. Blake seeks to restore this access through his verse, which is characterized by its shocking, sublime, intangible descriptions of impossible sensory experiences, such as his descriptions of the Creation or of his visions of Eternity. He ties these issues directly to issues of justice. In *Urizen*, Blake writes,

Six days they shrunk up from existence

> And on the seventh day they rested;
> And they blessed the seventh day, in sick hope,
> And forgot their eternal life. (493–496)

Blake shows an exhausted, overworked humanity who live for their singular day of rest, which they cannot truly take as holy, because they simply have no energy left to cherish it for anything other than the uncomplicated, temporary respite it provides. Similarly, in "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Experience*, Blake shows the plight of a child employed as a chimney sweeper as penance for his embodied joy:

> Because I was happy upon the heath
> And smiled among the winter's snow,
> They clothed me in the clothes of death,
> And taught me to sing the notes of woe. (4–7)

The child found joy in nature; he was exuberant and alive. As a result, his pious parents sent him to earn a wage where he became downtrodden, exhausted, and unimaginative like the rest of the oppressed masses. He is living a life of sentient death, a chained-up life where he is forbidden to access joy, self, imagination, or eternity; yet his parents—his oppressors—see that he performs joy adequately on May Day (Wu 202n1), the one day a year he is allowed to be joyful or to rest, like the "blessed" seventh day in *Urizen*: "They think they have done [him] no injury. / And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King / Who make up a heaven of our misery" (10–12). Here again Blake criticizes both organized religion and the concept of Heaven, as he did in *The Marriage*. God, religious officials, and governmental authorities become institutions which rely upon the labor and despair of the less fortunate in order to operate; the imagination and the sublime therefore become political as well as spiritual operators which draw us closer not only to Eternity,

but to liberation within the physical world. Like Shelley, Blake wishes for the liberation of these downtrodden so that they can access their artistic souls.

Blake is indisputably operating within a Christian framework. Although, like Shelley, he highly mythologizes and allegorizes his opinions, he does so from the standpoint of a radically non-conformist, anti-establishment Christianity. His understanding of monotheism, which despite his mythos he upheld as a highest truth, means that a singular eternal God cannot purely be comfortable or pleasing or merciful. Blake's God is *all*—they are what we wish them to be and what we fear they may be simultaneously. But it is only our own fallenness for Blake that makes this sublime vision into an object of fear. In *The Marriage*, he writes, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: Infinite" (218). And if all appeared to man as Infinite, it would be no less sublime, but the sublime itself would be an object of comfort, of self, of recognition, rather than an object of strangeness and fear, as the image of the speaker's eternal lot changes from a vision of terror to one of beauty and comfort in *The Marriage* (219–223). We may still be paralyzed by the sublime in a unified state, but we would be paralyzed by its beauty, its splendor, its salvation—not by its alien features which we weep at and flee from in terror. Similarly, neither would the Eternals shy away from us. Rather, we would be one—within God, part of God, inseparable and indistinguishable. In becoming one, our infinite variety and fluidity would not become repressed down into sameness, but would be honored for its all-ness, which must necessarily be diverse, self-contradictory, and liquid. Thus, when Revolution cleanses the doors of perception, all will not merely appear infinite. It—and we—will be so.

## IV. Ambiguity and Unresolved Contradiction in Coleridge's Conflicted Sublime

Among his contemporaries, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was something of an outlier: a political and religious conservative who hopscotched between traditional English values and radical Romantic notions, Coleridge seemed above all afraid to commit to a singular ideology. Unlike Shelley or Blake, firmly rooted in their own notions of the sublime and the divine, Coleridge's work shows the mind of a poet deeply ambivalent about his own values. While this makes it significantly more challenging to pinpoint his overarching ideology, his work also allows us to view his thought processes and internal debates as they occur, rather than being handed the final product of a well-organized systematic philosophy. Coleridge's relationship to the divine was strained, stretched between traditional English Church doctrine and new notions of democracy, and ultimately remained unresolved and undefinable. His ultimate attitude toward sublimity and the divine was uncertainty. He did not know where he stood in terms of the sublime as a religious, moral, philosophical, or political issue, leaving a great challenge for those seeking to analyze his work: to what degree is it possible for the scholar to understand the mind that did not even understand itself? Additionally, it brings to light the question of whether this uncertainty is itself sublime or whether it simply makes such sublimity inaccessible not only for Coleridge but also for his readers.

Perhaps the pinnacle of his paradox, Coleridge's 1795 poem "The Eolian Harp" illustrates the tension between the ideals of Coleridge's friends and those of his church, expressing a pantheist train of thought that is quickly repressed. The work seems to represent an idle musing toward Romantic pantheism via sublime imagery—"many idle flitting fantasies / Traverse my indolent and passive brain" (40–41), he writes, depicting a sublime that is both impermanent and received, rather than created—only for him to seem to grow suddenly self-aware under his fiancée's gaze, returning to a fixed Christian faith, the expansion of which he is reluctant to explore. While "The Eolian Harp" appears to frame Christianity as a means of repressing avenues of thought, his 1802 composition "Chamouny; the Hour Before Sunrise. A Hymn" seems to be the most earnestly Christian poem in Coleridge's oeuvre, describing a sublime natural scene as "call[ing] on God" (78). However, his earnest praise of the Christian God is complicated by accusations of plagiarism and by his never having visited Chamonix-Mont-Blanc, the setting of the poem. While the poem *was* influenced by a real experience, his claim that atheism is impossible "in this valley of wonders" (698) seems suspect given that he himself never visited the valley, and that the poem most often compared to "Chamouny" is Shelley's (arguably more successful) tribute to the natural sublime, "Mont Blanc" (Wu 697n1). Coleridge's own internal contradictions seem to stand in an uneasy truce for most of his earlier work, but they begin to break down in his 1802 poem "Dejection: An Ode." Coleridge revisits the image of the Aeolian harp, but shows himself now unable to access the spiritual sensation of the sublime instrument. Rendered apathetic and despairing, he seems to have reached the state of being which Blake would attribute to relying too much

on organic sense and cutting off his access to the infinite: in attempting to balance his pantheist leanings with his Christian sensibility, his physicality with his spirituality, while still attempting to keep them separate from one another, both have failed him and cut him off from his access to the sublime.

Although Coleridge often suppresses pantheist ideology in his poetry, in his *Biographia Literaria*, discussing the role of the imagination in poetry, he seems to revive it:

> The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, control, laxis efferture habenis, reveals "itself in the balance or reconcilement of opposite or discordant" qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. (Chapter XIV)

Coleridge's view of a self-contradictory, all-encompassing imagination would be almost Blakeian if not for its sense of a hierarchical organization. Like his commentary in "The Eolian Harp," the imagination is controlled by a force "gentle and unnoticed," which in "The Eolian Harp" he attributes to God and which he here attributes to "will and understanding." While Coleridge frequently diverges from Blake in his understanding of the divine, eternity, and the sublime, his depiction of imagination in this passage shows some overlap: the imagination is all-encompassing and, perhaps most importantly, it is unifying. It is able to bring together and reconcile opposites and to make them into something new. Coleridge's sublime, much like his poetry and philosophy, is in some ways characterized by paradox or contradiction. Perhaps the clearest view we are given of Coleridge's attempts at this "'balance or reconcilement of opposite or discordant' qualities" is in the 1834 version of "The Eolian Harp," both in its own right and weighed against previous versions, although it is derailed by Coleridge's jarring return to Christian piety. Offering an Aeolian harp as the sublime image of a Creator's inspiration diffusing throughout human consciousness, Coleridge uses contradiction to present a pantheist worldview that he immediately discards, apparently under the disapproval of his then-fiancée.

Coleridge begins by setting a scene that, though peaceful, is defined by contradiction and natural change. He remarks on the "clouds that late were rich with light" (6), apparently illuminated by the sunset, but which "slow-sad'ning round" lose their light, drawing attention to the "star of eve" (7), which has become a notably bright spot in the night sky now that the clouds have lost their glow. While the darkening clouds

are “slow-sad’ning,” the star is described as “serenely brilliant” (8), marking each by their contrast with one another. Coleridge takes this theme of opposites a step further at the end of the stanza: “The stilly murmur of the distant sea / Tells us of silence” (11–12). Paradoxically, the silence is defined and characterized by the presence of sound rather than its absence. This sense of self-contradiction highlights the movement of natural cycles as both antithetical and integral to the perceived sense of stillness that is accessible to humans within a natural scene.

Having established a setting of peaceful paradox, Coleridge begins his extended metaphor, comparing the influence of the divine on human consciousness to the influence of the wind on an Aeolian harp:

> And that simplest lute
> Placed lengthways in the clasping casement – hark
> How by the desultory breeze caressed!
> Like some coy maid half-yielding to her lover,
> It pours such sweet upbraidings as must needs
> Tempt to repeat the wrong. And now its strings
> Boldlier swept, the long sequacious notes
> Over delicious surges sink and rise,
> Such a soft floating witchery of sound
> As twilight elfins make when they at eve
> Voyage on gentle gales from fairyland,
> Where melodies round honey-dropping flowers
> Footless and wild, like birds of paradise,
> Nor pause nor perch, hovering on untamed wing.
> Oh the one life within us and abroad,
> Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
> A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
> Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere –
> Methinks it should have been impossible
> Not to love all things in a world so filled,
> Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
> Is Music slumbering on its instrument!
>
> And thus, my love, as on the midway slope

Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
Whilst through my half-closed eyelids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquillity,
Full many a thought uncalled and undetained,
And many idle flitting fantasies
Traverse my indolent and passive brain –
As wild and various as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject lute!
  And what if all of animated nature
Be but organic harps diversely framed,
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps,
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
At once the soul of each and God of all? (12–48)

The Aeolian harp begins as a metaphor for images of beauty and fantasy—the gentle teasing of a beautiful woman, the song of fairies at twilight. While these images are soft and gentle, they are a stark contrast to the suddenly philosophical musing on the animating life force common to all mankind. While Coleridge describes his "indolent and passive brain" as something which submissively receives thoughts from some external, random force, as the Aeolian harp is designed to simply receive the force of the wind, the end of the stanza seems to call this into question. In this musing it is not only Coleridge's mind which receives such inspiration; it is "all of animated nature" which lies waiting for the now divinized wind to bring it to life and bless it with consciousness. While Coleridge's musings undoubtedly have to do with the divine—"Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze, / At once the soul of each and God of all" (47–48), he writes—it is unclear at first glance whether they also invoke the feeling of the sublime for Coleridge. However, in an earlier draft, the final five lines were written with significantly more detail and clarity:

And what if all of animated life

> Be but as instruments diversely framed,
> That tremble into thought, while through them breathes
> One infinite and intellectual breeze,
> And all in different heights so aptly hung
> That murmurs indistinct and bursts sublime,
> Shrill discords and most soothing melodies,
> Harmonious form Creation's vast concért?
> Thus GOD would be the universal soul,
> Mechanized matter as th' organic harps,
> And each one's tunes be that which each calls 'I'. (Wu 622n8)

While the 1834 version of the poem does not explicitly mention the sublime, this early manuscript does. Coleridge is distinct from his peers in this characterization of the sublime because he seems inclined to hierarchically organize the faculties that allow him access to the sublime. While Shelley understands the sublime to be co-created by the imagination, the physical senses, and the object of our perception, and Blake hierarchizes only in terms of the physical senses stemming from the spiritual ones while acknowledging that they must work together in unity, Coleridge shows the instruments "all in different heights so aptly hung," with some only heard softly while others ring out, creating both harmony and dissonance. These differences come together to play "Creation's vast concért," but they are—and in Coleridge's mind *ought to be*—different and distinct even when they come together. Not only this, but Coleridge's setting for this emotion is also vastly different than the landscapes of Blake or Shelley, particularly because he does not seem inclined to mythologize his landscape in order to portray the sublime. Rather than a graveyard full of ghosts or Los's forge, Coleridge extracts sublime feelings and concepts from an ordinary object in an unremarkable landscape: it is the fact that such simple objects are able to produce a beautiful, grand melody as part of their nature that renders them sublime.

While much of the sublime according to Shelley or Blake seems to be characterized by its strangeness and even its violence, this image of the sublime is intellectual and removed. While Coleridge's Aeolian harp is transformed into a sublime object, it is considered with academic curiosity *toward the emotion itself* rather than purely from the sentiment. This is particularly true about halfway through the poem, after Coleridge's sentimental, almost wondering description of the "exquisite … scents / Snatched from yon bean-field" (9–10) or the Aeolian harp

> … caressed!
> Like some coy maid half-yielding to her lover,
> It pours such sweet upbraidings as must needs
> Tempt to repeat the wrong. (14–17)

These lines include a continuation of his earlier paradox motif. The harp becomes a woman chastising her beloved with the intention of encouraging them rather than an earnest attempt to ask them to stop what they are doing. This paradox is fanciful, almost self-indulgent. His imagery is rooted in emotion, pleasure, and even playfulness, as the maiden is described. This is in sharp contrast to the next few stanzas:

> And what if all of animated nature
> Be but organic harps diversely framed,
> That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps,
> Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
> At once the soul of each, and God of all? (44–48)

These lines are remarkable in part for their philosophy, but particularly for their style. Far from the "coy maid half-yielding to her lover" (15) or even the "indolent and passive brain" (41) of the previous lines, this stanza shows a complex, abstract hypothesis both poetic and academic: "what if?" In verse, Coleridge presents a thesis to be tested, a core existential question of his own theology, which suddenly digresses from the "idle flitting

fantasies" (40) that have thus far characterized the poem. As the poem becomes more intellectual than sentimental, it also adopts much higher stakes; his abstraction of emotion is not so much an indication that Coleridge didn't really connect to this emotion as it is that he was giving meaning to his emotions, and thus attempting to evoke the same feelings of the sublime in his reader. He continues his paradox motif, but resolves it and allows it to stand unquestioned, allowing both himself and his reader to be comfortable within this ambiguous space.

This sense of paradox creates a tone of uncertainty and obscurity, which Sharon Tai specifically links to a mode of the sublime recognized by both Coleridge and Edmund Burke. They write, "As a response to Burke, *clearness* in a Coleridgean sense becomes an integral part of *obscurity*, as our faith and feeling affirm the reality of the obscure Sublime. Musings on religious positions coupled with a lack of certainty contribute to Coleridge's poetic obscurity, which is also a kind of imaginative freedom within the inherent obscurity of the Sublime" (112). In other words, while Burke identified obscurity as an integral part of the sublime, Coleridge identifies clearness as a facet of obscurity which is able to lend the meaning necessary for an experience to be sublime. One such manifestation of this that Tai identifies is in Coleridge's non-committal religious musings in which he does not seem to even attempt to know the "right" answer, but rather to explore various religious viewpoints through the perspective of his own faith. And he does appear to be attempting to explore diverse religious feelings with a certain suspension of judgment; early copies of the poem were published with the following author's note: "The atheist is not, to my eyes, deceived; I can live with him as

well as – if not better than with – the zealot, because he reasons more. But he is lacking in a certain sense, and my soul does not entirely combine with his: he is untouched by the most ravishing spectacle, and searches for a syllogism when I thank God" (Wu 624n13). Coleridge seems here to earnestly be able to accept the ideas of the atheist even if his faith prevents agreement. Disagreement does not seem to mean hostility for Coleridge, and he seems to agree that even those with nearly opposite beliefs to his own have worthwhile opinions which he can explore and attempt to understand unproblematically. It is this liminal space between acceptance and disagreement, conviction and obscurity that Coleridge seems to be inhabiting in the first several stanzas of "The Eolian Harp"; he is not convinced that "all of animated nature / Be but organic harps diversely framed" (44–45), but he is certainly willing to imaginatively enter this space where it is possible and live there for a while. Like Blake and Shelley, the Coleridgean sublime as we see it here requires a certain suspension of disbelief. While Blake and Shelley's suspension of disbelief is in the face of a mythologized, dramatic sublime, Coleridge's is much quieter—it simply requires one to be willing to ask "what if?" The imagination seems to be the key to unlocking all three modes of the sublime, but must be oriented differently for each.

Considering that Coleridge's apparent goal is to simply explore the liminal space offered by the intersection of uncertainty and faith in the face of the obscure, the tonal shift that occurs at the last stanza of the poem is all the more striking:

> But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
> Darts, oh beloved woman! – nor such thoughts
> Dim and unhallowed dost thou not reject,
> And biddest me walk humbly with my God.

> Meek daughter in the family of Christ,
> Well hast thou said and holily dispraised
> These shapings of the unregenerate mind,
> Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break
> On vain philosophy's aye-babbling spring.
> For never guiltless may I speak of Him,
> Th' Incomprehensible! save when with awe
> I praise him, and with faith that inly *feels* –
> Who with his saving mercies healed me,
> A sinful and most miserable man
> Wildered and dark, and gave me to possess
> Peace, and this cot, and thee, heart-honoured maid! (49–64)

While it seems likely that Coleridge's musings would eventually steer him away from pantheist ideology and toward his own Christian faith, this passage does not depict the same gentle ramblings of one who is idly musing on the nature of God. Coleridge shows his then-fiancée chastising him for his apparently impious train of thought—giving the zealot whom he decried in his earlier author note the last word and apparently undermining the negative capability he seems to be prioritizing throughout the poem—although his own self-criticism would indicate that it is not only Sara who is alarmed at the direction in which his thoughts have turned in previous stanzas. Wu offers the analysis that "Coleridge's unease about the pantheist experience of ll. 36–40 is transferred completely to Sara" (624n11), adding, "Can Sara really have thought all this so early in her relationship with Coleridge? He attributes to her the criticisms that he is 'vain' (impractical) and 'aye-babbling'" (624n12). It seems possible, then, that it is not that he can live with the atheist more easily than the zealot merely because he prefers rationality, but perhaps also that he can live with an atheist more easily than he can live *with himself*—he values reason highly, but cannot allow himself access to similar logic for fear of sinning. What is perhaps even more surprising about his repentance for his line

of reasoning is that the first published edition of this poem, then called "Effusion XXXV," did not include the following lines, which were written in 1817 (621n2):

> Oh the one life within us and abroad,
> Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
> A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
> Rhythm in all thought, and joyance everywhere –
> Methinks it should have been impossible
> Not to love all things in a world so filled,
> Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
> Is Music slumbering on its instrument! ("The Eolian Harp" 26-33)

These lines are particularly noteworthy because they indicate a moment in which Coleridge's pantheist leanings do not appear to be purely speculative but something to which he earnestly subscribes. The "one life" Coleridge speaks of is simultaneously "within us and abroad," characterized by both visual and auditory sensations that, synesthesia-like, feed into each other, evoke one another, and become one another. He resolves the paradox of the poem in these lines, unifying the self with the other, the soul with its God. Wu explicitly ties these lines to Wordsworth's influence, writing, "Coleridge's celebration of the pantheist One Life echoes Wordsworth, *The Pedlar* 217–18: 'for in all things / He saw one life, and felt that it was joy'" (621n2). The almost-certainty of these lines seems significantly more worthy of Sara's "reproof" (49) than briefly pondering whether sentient life could be likened to an Aeolian harp. And while the poem may indicate that—through earnest faith, shame, or a bit of both—Coleridge eventually rejected the pantheist ideas he entertained from his friends and embraced Christianity, the changes made to the poem itself over time, as well as the opinion he expresses in the *Biographia Literaria*, seem to indicate rather a continued sense of conflict.

In 1817, he added the lines in which he lauded the pantheist "one life," which seems to indicate that he has not yet left this idea behind entirely. Yet around 1800, some four years after publishing "Effusion XXXV" and seventeen years before adding the lines about the "one life," Coleridge wrote the following marginalia in Immanuel Kant's *Critik der reinen Vernunft*:

> The mind does not resemble an Eolian harp, nor even a barrel-organ turned by a stream of water, conceive as many tunes mechanized in it as you like – but rather, as far as objects are concerned, a violin, or other instrument of few strings yet vast compass, played on by a musician of genius. (qtd. Wu 621n1)

If one assumes he is carrying on the analogy he created in "The Eolian Harp"—although it is possible the "musician of genius" here is meant to refer the self rather than God—Coleridge here entirely contradicts his own musings, seeming to lean toward the concept of an active, participatory creator deity who does not breathe inspiration across the human mind but actively plays their own tunes upon the passive instruments they have created. Yet if this were true, it would be entirely impossible to think an impious thought or feel a sublime which is un-Christian—yet the anxiety he projects onto his fiancée lingers even in later versions, which also seem to favor the pantheist considerations. Coleridge does not seem passively curious about religious difference any longer, nor does he appear to be uncertain yet accepting—he seems caught in a decades-long argument with himself in which he desperately wants to believe both his friends' ideologies and the doctrines taught by his religion but seems unable or unwilling to reconcile them into

something cohesive—by his own definition, he is failing his own imagination and his own faith with this inability to achieve reconciliation, and yet he remains divided.

While Coleridge conflictedly explores a pantheist vision of the natural sublime in "The Eolian Harp," he seems to celebrate a purely Christian sublime in "Chamouny; the Hour Before Sunrise. A Hymn," composed in 1802. Here, Coleridge is not interested in exploring others' beliefs or withholding judgment. No longer does he declare that "The atheist is not, to my eyes, deceived" (Wu 624n13); now he writes, "Indeed, the whole vale, its every light, its every sound, must needs impress every mind not utterly callous with the thought, Who *would* be, who *could* be an atheist in this valley of wonders?" (698). No longer passively curious and intellectually flexible, Coleridge attempts to hold up Mont Blanc as definitive proof of the Christian God, who Coleridge claims is responsible for the sublime landscape. "Chamouny" is the most uncomplicatedly Christian poem I will analyze in this thesis; it describes a sublime scene as a visual praise of the Christian God. Here we have a straightforward vision of a Coleridgean sublime that is both created by God and in praise of him. Coleridge writes,

> Oh dread and silent form! I gazed upon thee
> Till thou, still present to my bodily eye,
> Didst vanish from my thought. Entranced in pray'r,
> I worshipped the Invisible alone.
> Yet thou, meantime, wast working on my soul,
> E'en like some deep enchanting melody,
> So sweet, we know not we are list'ning to it.
> But I awake, and with a busier mind
> And active will self-conscious, offer now,
> Not, as before, involuntary pray'r
> And passive adoration. (13–23)

Like “The Eolian Harp,” Coleridge gives us a vision of the sublime that is both peaceful and intellectual in these lines. He claims that at the time he was “entranced” (15) and offered “involuntary pray’r / And passive adoration” (22–23); like “The Eolian Harp” it would appear that he has since distanced himself from the immediacy of his emotions—this is a report of his sentiment rather than an immersion—and in doing so produced a primarily intellectual view of the sublime. He separates his present self from the self who felt the sublime, but here implies that his initial reaction—“involuntary pray’r / And passive adoration” (22–23)—were insufficient at the time and must be rectified. His experience of the sublime somehow failed to honor God and rendered Coleridge “passive” where action was called for. In the next several stanzas he describes the earth “waking up” as dawn breaks, breaking into praise of the divine and further setting his own passivity apart:

> Hand and voice,
> Awake, awake! And thou, my heart, awake!
> Awake, ye rocks! Ye forest pines, awake!
> Green fields and icy cliffs, all join my hymn!
> And thou, oh silent mountain, sole and bare,
> Oh blacker than the darkness, all the night,
> And visited all night by troops of stars,
> Or when they climb the sky, or when they sink;
> Companion of the morning star at dawn,
> Thyself earth’s rosy star, and of the dawn
> Co-herald! Wake, oh wake, and utter praise!
> Who sank thy sunless pillars deep in earth?
> Who filled thy countenance with rosy light?
> Who made thee father of perpetual streams?
> And you, ye five wild torrents, fiercely glad,
> Who called you forth from night and utter death,
> From darkness let you loose, and icy dens,
> Down those precipitous, black, jagged rocks
> For ever shattered, and the same for ever?
> Who gave you your invulnerable life,

> Your strength, your speed, your fury, and your joy,
> Unceasing thunder, and eternal foam?
> And who commanded (and the silence came),
> 'Here shall the billows stiffen, and have rest'? (23–46)

Although we see Coleridge relive his sublime trance in apparent ecstasy, there are a number of internal and external elements that complicate this reading. While Coleridge describes himself and "Earth with her thousand voices" invoking and praising God in the Vale of Chamonix, it is interesting to note that the mountain itself does not directly participate in this hymn. Throughout the poem, he refers to it as "silent"; he asks it to awake to participate in the worship he is describing, but also describes it as a "dread ambassador from earth to heav'n" (75) rather than an equal participant in this worship. The mountain is not even meant to relay this message to God, but simply to *tell* the personified sky that "Earth with her thousand voices calls on God!" (78)—but for what purpose is unclear. It could be to invite the sky to join in this praise of God, but this is not one of Coleridge's stated objectives in writing this hymn. Additionally, the necessity of calling upon the landscape to help him offer praise to God implies that God *is not already present in the valley*. While this is without a doubt a much less pantheist poem than "The Eolian Harp," its implication that the landscape does not independently exist to praise God, nor in God's image, seems to disconnect this scene from Coleridge's faith far more than his musings on "the one life." Given that the sublime seems inherently connected to God for Coleridge, this disconnect from the divine also disconnects the scene from the sublime for the author—and potentially also for the reader. McCarthy explicitly ties Coleridge's sublime to suspension; the passivity and "involuntary pray'r" (22) he seeks to rectify do not seem to be a moral failing given his other works, but rather a recognition of

and reaction to a sublime, godly scene. That he finds this insufficient does not seem to be that the moment he described lacked spirituality for him but that he doubts his own expression of faith and undermines it.

While the sublimity of Coleridge's poem seems to be in question, there is no doubt that the experience which inspired the poem was. Surprisingly, however, this experience did not take place on Chamonix-Mont-Blanc; in fact, Coleridge had never visited Mont Blanc upon his writing of this piece. Rather, it was meant to be based upon an experience which Coleridge had while climbing Scafell Mountain. He wrote to Sara Hutchinson of the experience,

> every Drop increased the Palsy of my Limbs – I shook all over, Heaven knows without the least influence of Fear / and now I had only two more to drop down / to return was impossible – but of these two the first was tremendous / it was twice my own height, & the Ledge at the bottom was [so] exceedingly narrow, that if I dropt down upon it I must of necessity have fallen backwards & of course killed myself. My Limbs were all in a tremble – I lay upon my Back to rest myself, & was beginning according to my Custom to laugh at myself for a Madman, when the sight of the Crags above me on each side, & the impetuous Clouds just over them, posting so luridly & so rapidly norward, overawed me / I lay in a state of almost prophetic Trance & Delight -- & blessed God aloud, for the powers of Reason & the Will, which remaining no Danger can overpower us! O God, I exclaimed aloud – how calm, how blessed am I now / I know not how to proceed, how to return / but I am calm & fearless & confident / if this Reality were a

> Dream, if I were asleep, what agonies had I suffered! what screams! – When the Reason & the Will are away, what remain to us but Darkness & Dimness & a bewildering Shame, and Pain that is utterly Lord over us, or fantastic Pleasure, that draws the Soul along swimming through the air in many shapes, even as a Flight of Starlings in a Wind. (qtd. McCarthy 37–38)

This image seems in many ways significantly more sublime than the image given to us in "Chamouny," perhaps because it is more immediate and thus more viscerally felt. McCarthy argues that it is an image of the sublime specifically because it is a moment of what she calls suspension, which in "Chamouny" the speaker has already overcome in his call to action. McCarthy writes,

> Rather than being unambiguous signifiers of fear, paralysis and trembling become for Coleridge a way of registering his presence in a terrifying situation in a way that remains emotionally neutral. "Palsy," however, can refer, figuratively, to the suspension of sensibility in response to terror in addition to other physical symptoms. Thus, "palsy" (i.e., the sensation of suspension and the suspension of sensation) is one of the terms that marks this passage as a description of the sublime. It is not the elevating masterful sublime associated with the mountaintop, but the awakening of Coleridge's mind to his radical vulnerability and mortality. … In describing his physical and mental passage from terrified paralysis to overwhelming gratitude and freedom, Coleridge's sublime conforms to the general Kantian model of inhibition and release of the "vital forces." Terror and nervous laughter give way to "a state of almost prophetic Trance & Delight." The

> visionary trance reawakens his powers of reason and sense of humanity that, in spite of the continuing precariousness of his situation, allow him to focus instead on "higher" notions of independence and will that inhabit a space beyond sensation and calculation. (38–39)

In other words, Coleridge describes his experience on Scafell in terms of the Kantian sublime, in which the experience is sublime because it highlights the superiority of his own apparently God-given reason, given that he is able to understand the situation in terms of his mortality and his peril without feeling fear. In being able to be delighted by his near-death experience, Coleridge felt the sublime. It is crucial to recognize that in this moment, he did connect his sublime feeling to the presence and wisdom of a God who granted him the intellect to understand his danger without being terrified by it. It seems that Coleridge genuinely could have been nothing besides a devout Christian in his understanding of this particular moment, but still his poem about the experience falls short of the actual experience.

In fact, I would postulate that "Chamouny" falls short of sublimity because it is inauthentic—honesty seems to be a prerequisite for such a feeling: you cannot fake the sublime—and because it removes the sensation of terror. Not because Coleridge was inauthentic in his faith—he clearly was not—but because his faith and the setting in which it came to him seemed insufficient. Coleridge wrote to William Sotheby,

> When I was on Scafell. I involuntarily poured forth a hymn in the manner of the Psalms, though afterwards I thought the ideas etc. disproportionate to our humble mountains, and, accidentally lighting on a short note in some Swiss poems

> concerning the Vale of Chamouni and its mountains, I transferred myself thither, in the spirit, and adapted my former feelings to these grander external objects. (Wu 697n1)

In changing the landscape, Coleridge also changed the speaker's situation relative to the landscape; no longer "leaning over, the brink of the grave" (Coleridge 698) as he wrote in his introduction to the poem, the speaker seems to be peacefully, even passively situated so that he is separate from the landscape to which he calls. He describes himself as "awake" now, in contrast to his earlier suspended state, but it is unclear why or what has awakened him such that he must call out to the earth around him. The speaker is neither cognizant of any danger, nor suspended by this understanding, nor feeling any emotion either akin to or in place of fear, such as it seems the sublime ought to fill: because he is reporting on this from a moment which has ceased to be sublime, he no longer has access to the emotion that compelled him at the time, and in reflecting has found it lacking. He is trying to construct the sublime, just as he is trying—and failing—to construct a landscape he has never visited, so that the scene itself becomes generic: "Oh blacker than the darkness, all the night, / And visited all night by troops of stars, / Or when they climb the sky, or when they sink" (28–30) is a description of every landscape on earth, because it is a description of *night generally*. I do not call the experience as it is portrayed in this poem inauthentic because he changed the location, but because he has no connection to the landscape and because he changed his own emotional situation while still trying to maintain the sublime. Additionally, the poem itself was haunted by accusations of plagiarism: the poetry to which he alluded in his letter to Sotheby appears to have been

Frederike Brun's "Chamouny beym Sonnenaufgange," a Danish poem which in translation appears in some places to have been copied almost word for word by Coleridge (Brun 154–155). It is as though in feeling his location insufficient, Coleridge then began to consider his experience insufficient, and also his faith, and also his writing, so that he gradually removed himself from his experience in the process of contemplation and replaced it with something he had not experienced and did not really mean and in fact had not even independently written. While there is no doubt that his faith was sincere, it appears as though Coleridge doubted himself so intensely as to cheapen a moment of genuine religion.

Coleridge's internal contradictions and doubt grew more debilitating. "Dejection: An Ode" seems to be the natural opposite to "The Eolian Harp"; a depressed Coleridge opens the poem with the image of an Aeolian harp which is agonizing to listen to rather than joyous, but which could also stir him awake from his apathy:

> This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence
> Unroused by winds that ply a busier trade
> Than those which mould yon clouds in lazy flakes,
> Or the dull sobbing draught that moans and rakes
> Upon the strings of this Eolian lute,
> Which better far were mute. (3–8)

This "dull sobbing" ("Dejection" 5) instrument is a far cry from the Aeolian harp that "bursts sublime" (Wu 622n8), likened to a peaceful mind receiving inspiration from a divine pantheist breeze, and its oppressive silence is nothing like "the mute still air / [which] Is Music slumbering on its instrument!" ("The Eolian Harp" 32–33). Composed in 1802, this poem predates the "one life" addition to "The Eolian Harp" by some fifteen years, and predates "Chamouny" by only a few months.

Notably, Coleridge's depression is described in terms of feeling cut off from his imagination—from what Blake might call his spiritual sensation and what we might also identify as the source of Shelley's sublime. Coleridge writes,

> A grief without a pang – void, dark, and drear;
> A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief
> Which finds no natural outlet, no relief
> In word, or sigh, or tear –
> ……
> Those stars that glide behind them or between,
> Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen;
> Yon crescent moon, as fixed as if it grew
> In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue –
> I see them all, so excellently fair;
> I see, not feel, how beautiful they are! (21–38)

Coleridge's melancholy is characterized by an inability to connect with the landscape around him or emotionally feel the beauty which he is able to perceive. Unlike "Chamouny," he does not seem to be trying to provoke this emotion in himself, but instead seems to have accepted that he cannot feel it in this moment, and laments this loss. Coleridge later adds,

> But now afflictions bow me down to earth,
> Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
> But oh! each visitation
> Suspends what nature gave me at my birth –
> My shaping spirit of imagination! (82–86)

In writing of his feeling of alienation from both imagination and emotion, it is not unreasonable to assume that he also means he feels cut off from the sublime, and perhaps therefore also from the divine. In his "Letter to the Revd Dr Trusler," Blake wrote, "I feel that a man may be happy in this world. And I know that this world is a world of imagination and vision. I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see

alike," adding that books are best when "they are addressed to the imagination (which is spiritual sensation), and but mediately to the understanding or reason" (245). In other words, for Blake, human beings must interact with the world using *all* the senses available to them in order to feel happy, and must count the imagination as one of the senses. To willingly distance oneself from the sense which brings us closest to God is, for Blake, not only to delude oneself or deny God, but also to deny oneself a chance at happiness. It is precisely this feeling which Coleridge describes here: he feels unable to access his imagination and thus unable to "inly *feel*" ("The Eolian Harp" 60) either joy or sublimity or, perhaps, faith. It is worthwhile to question whether that may be, in part, because he has been denying himself every attempt to feel this spiritual sensation, repressing his imagination when chastised by his fiancée, and later when he feels that his experience with the divine has not been extraordinary enough for poetry.

As Coleridge slowly grows more alienated from his spiritual sensation, losing himself to addiction, depression, a failed marriage, and his chronic inability to reconcile his own ideals, one cannot help but look at his younger years with something approaching bewilderment: his time as an undergraduate was characterized by imagination, democratic ideals, conviction, and faith in both humanity and God. Coleridge with his friend Robert Southey had come up with a radical idea for an entirely equal society, which they called "pantisocracy." Wu writes,

> Together with Southey's college friend Robert Lovell, they planned to establish a commune on the banks of the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. … Coleridge and Southey hoped that twelve married couples could be converted to

> pantisocratic ideals, and would embark from Bristol for America in April 1795. In this society which rejected property ownership, the men would each contribute £125 to a common fund, and labour on a landholding for two or three hours a day. (612)

In his youth, Coleridge seemed to be a genuine revolutionary. In his 1798 work "Fears in Solitude" he wrote forcefully enough condemning the British position "not merely on Revolutionary France, but on God and the natural world" to warrant a government investigation into his political affiliations (Wu 613). Yet even then he was conflicted. In his *Biographia Literaria*, he recounts a time when visiting Birmingham in 1796 when he intoxicatedly declared to his friends, "I am far from convinced, that a christian is permitted to read either newspapers or any other works of merely political and temporary interest" (qtd. McCarthy 21). McCarthy writes of this moment, "They [his friends] are invoked in the pages of the *Biographia* to support the notion that Coleridge was never the radical he had then appeared to be. 'They will bear witness for me,' he declares, 'how opposite even then my principles were to those of Jacobinism or even of democracy'" (22). Even at his most revolutionary, Coleridge was harboring conflict within himself that he would not—or could not—settle. This conflict was not only reserved for his attitudes toward religion; like Blake and Shelley, Coleridge's understanding of the sublime was simultaneously personal, spiritual, and political. But while Shelley and Blake's politics were firmly understood and firmly held, Coleridge cannot commit to any one ideology—even one he helped invent, such as pantisocracy. He gives himself and his readers alike half-smothered glimpses of an imaginative, religious, and political sublime that is like his

contemporaries', but quickly buries them in his equally beloved traditionalism. Tim Fulford writes,

> His politics, then, are (like the sublime as he defines it) ambivalent: apparently not only conservative but authoritarian in their adulation of men of authority they still suggest, by applying the example of literary collaboration to the public realm, that power is produced by the efforts of many. … The commanding literary and political geniuses Coleridge would have us worship are … threatened and Coleridge remains a radical. (831–832)

In other words, although it is tempting to dismiss Coleridge's radicalism in the face of his hesitancy, to force his ambiguity into revealing which side he has "really chosen," his self-contradiction is thorough enough to hold fast: he is a radical, but he is also an authoritarian. His traditionalism informs his rebellion as much as his rebellion informs his traditionalism. Coleridge is in constant conversation with himself; we must view each of his statements not only independently, but also as a response to what has come before.

Being able to hold Coleridge's self-contradiction as its own ambiguous object rather than a shattered, fractured amalgamation of other peoples' ideas seems a noble goal—and may be the only way to view his oeuvre with anything like coherency—but it is unclear to what end. It is possible—likely even—that Coleridge was right: that what Tai calls "poetic obscurity … is also a kind of imaginative freedom within the inherent obscurity of the Sublime" (112). Yet for Coleridge it seemed to be more of an imaginative prison than freedom: he backed himself into an intellectual corner that he never quite managed to escape nor make productive. The Coleridgean sublime is

beautiful at moments and oppressive at others, but ultimately and above all it is dysfunctional. It can be appreciated and learned from and perhaps even reconciled—but it is so fluid as to fit into any space. He can be claimed by any ideology because he had none. Coleridge himself did not know what to think at any given time: it could have been possible for someone like Coleridge to reconcile the differences between Shelley's secularism and Blake's infinitude, offering us a far-reaching, almost universal view of the sublime that could fit into almost any post-Enlightenment theological worldview that values democratic equality. Instead, we are left to flounder alongside Coleridge, trying to reconcile our ideological ancestors with each other and our ancestors with ourselves. Yet Coleridge's ambiguity offers us another possibility: perhaps we can hold his contradictions more peacefully than he could and determine a vision of a new sublime, unrealized by Coleridge yet still possible, rather than writing it off as a fruitless attempt to reach an understanding of a world that is simultaneously too close and too far to bring us to eternity.

## V. Conclusion

Comparing the works and ideals of Blake, Shelley, and Coleridge, it is difficult to find a through-line between their ideologies. While Blake and Coleridge were both Christians, their versions of religion are so different as to be almost incomparable; meanwhile, Shelley rejected the framework of religion entirely. Blake and Shelley both liked to mythologize their visions of the sublime into something like a pseudo-religion, but Coleridge tried to fit the sublime into existing church doctrine. Shelley and Coleridge both alluded to existing mythoi in their creative expressions of the sublime, where Blake invented his own. But despite these poets' individual concepts of the Romantic sublime, there is one universal similarity: all, like Kant, presented the sublime as proof of human ingenuity and imagination. For Coleridge, it was in the superiority of his reason over his fear when he fell on Scafell (although he would later use that same reason to overthink the worthiness of his own experiences); for Shelley, it was the liberating power of the artist's imagination as a political and aesthetic tool; for Blake, it was the imagination as a key to a unified divinity. Each of them seemed to be working within a Kant-adjacent view of the sublime, but for each of them, the sublime was not only an aesthetic feeling—it was an engine for artistic, political, social, and religious action, whether that action was revolutionary, conservative, or somewhere in between. But the sublime, notable for its immensity, does not only have the potential to be revolutionary: it can also be

overwhelming and paralytic, as it was for Coleridge, held fast between his unreconciled ideals.

Entering an increasingly complex world, it is easy to find ourselves suspended between extremes, uncertain of what is correct and unable to reconcile the opposing messages we are receiving. We can mythologize our own opinions almost by accident, creating a kind of grandeur around our ideals that elevates them above all criticism. In the age of internet radicalization, we are almost encouraged to view only a sliver of immensity and frame it as divine revelation, believing we have found a complete, higher truth. But the Romantic sublime warns us against this type of limitation. For Blake, the infinite was accessible and attainable, but only through the power of imagination; for Shelley, the imagination was not immortal, but was unbound, allowing us to envision better worlds for ourselves and our descendants and bring them into an intergenerational reality, realizing our ideals in the tangible world. But for Coleridge the imagination was also a hindrance: it presented possibilities he could not accept. His faith and reason forced him to limit his imagination in ways that warped not only the sublime, but also his own ideals.

In the twenty-first century, we are often alienated from nature and therefore from a natural sublime. Our imagination is redirected, just as our faith has been, but redirection does not mean loss. Although we have grown further from the natural world and its sublime implications, we have constructed a similarly vast virtual reality which points to both the ingenuity of humanity and its ultimate limitations; although we seem to be rewriting the code of our own spiritualities, we seem too to be replacing or revising the

values of organized religion with knowledge and human rights. In "From Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog* to the iCloud: A Comparative Analysis between the Romantic Concept of the Sublime and Cyberspace," Miguel Gaete writes, "It is patent that both the CSS [cloud storage system] and cyberspace combine various of the elements formerly attributed to the sublime and the Romantic worldview. … Both experiences suggest the idea of limitless[ness] and, consequently, both might potentially overwhelm the human condition and our capacity to estimate distances, measurements and data" (61–62). The modern sublime may look different from the Romantic sublime on the surface—for one thing, it is neither natural, nor embodied, nor possibly divinely given—but it is no less sublime for that difference, and it surrounds us. And indeed, though the location of our sublime may have shifted, this does not mean it has left us forcing a reconstruction of our own wonder as Coleridge did in "Chamouny"; rather it gives us the opportunity to finish the work of reconciliation and balance between opposites. As our world changes, it also grows increasingly polarized. We must choose our ideals: look at all opposing sides and find a way to reconcile them rather than allowing ourselves to become trapped between them. We must learn suspension rather than paralysis. And perhaps, through imagination, we can free our world from the shackles we have yet to throw off.

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