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# Keeping an Open Mind: The Transcendence of Boundaries in “Kubla Khan,” “Mont Blanc,” and “Ode to Psyche”

Rebecca Pyeon  
rpyeon@wellesley.edu

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Keeping an Open Mind:  
The Transcendence of Boundaries in  
“Kubla Khan,” “Mont Blanc,” and “Ode to Psyche”

Rebecca Pyeon

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Prerequisite for Honors in English  
under the advisement of Alison Hickey

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## Introduction

*Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man—  
My haunt, and the main region of my song....  
How exquisitely the individual Mind ...  
to the external World  
Is fitted:—and how exquisitely, too ...  
The external World is fitted to the Mind;*

—“The Excursion,” 54–55, 77–82

A region of Romanticism that has proven to be timelessly compelling is that of the natural world. Percy Bysshe Shelley, one of the poets considered in this thesis, paints an apt picture of the relationship between man and nature in his essay “On Love”:

[I]n solitude, or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings, and yet they sympathize not with us, we love the flowers, the grass, the waters, and the sky. In the motion of the very leaves of spring, in the blue air, there is then found a secret correspondence with our heart. (792)

It is indisputable that one of the most distinguishing characteristics of British Romanticism is its exaltation of nature. William Wordsworth is particularly notable for the development of poetic perspective on the relationship between the natural and the human, as he considerably influenced the tenor of Romantic poetry through his earlier works, namely *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). A collection of poems produced by Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* is considered to be so influential that some recognize its publication as the initiation of British Romanticism (Stillinger 70). Besides introducing a plainer style and subject matter of poetry, poems within the collection exemplify the themes that characterize Romanticism—including the intermingling of nature and man. *Lyrical Ballads* and, by extension, Wordsworth’s early poetic ruminations consequently serve as a poetic cornerstone for later works with similar topics and questions.

Of Wordsworth's poems in this collection, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" and its portrayal of the interflowing of nature and man have been repeatedly echoed throughout the works of Wordsworth's contemporaries:

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,  
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise  
In nature and the language of the sense  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being. (93–111)

A primary understanding of "Tintern Abbey" finds a relationship in which nature becomes the source of inspiration for the creative imagination. This is unsurprising; the interflowing of the natural and the human is often understood and illustrated in this way. Needless to say, a more nuanced reading will reveal that this interconnection is more complicated than it may initially seem. Although he does receive inspiration from nature, the speaker of "Tintern Abbey" is disturbed "with the joy / [o]f elevated thoughts" by an indeterminate "presence" rather than a tangible natural object. It is not immediately apparent whether this presence exists externally or internally relative to the speaker. Furthermore, it should be understood that the basis for this inspiring quality may not be exclusive to nature. It is possible that inspiration can be found both

outside and inside of the poet, as suggested by “a sense sublime / [o]f something far more deeply interfused” that exists not only within the natural scenery but also within “the mind of man.”

The three poems of interest in this thesis—Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Mont Blanc,” and John Keats’s “Ode to Psyche”—complicate relationships between the poet, his internal world, and his external world like Wordsworth does in “Tintern Abbey.” This is accomplished in all three poems through the speaker conjuring up a physical region, delineating the various elements of this space, and disrupting their boundaries in order to illustrate the flow of connections across said borders. I explore how the poems’ speakers position themselves and other entities relative to these outside features, which include not only natural objects but also their literary predecessors, the creative product, and death.

As poetic creation is central to all of these poems, the most important section of the poet’s inner world is the mind. In discussing the flux of these relationships with the mind, I naturally come to discuss how poetry manifests from the poet and other actors. The consideration of these processes is informed by the poets’ nonfiction prose works, which yield immediate insight as to the poets’ ongoing thoughts and philosophies while writing their poems.

Speaking very generally, the chapters in this thesis move from the poem that most asserts the autonomy of the mind to the poem that most acknowledges the necessity of the world. I start with “Kubla Khan,” exploring the layers of the surreal Xanadu, the twin “failures” of building the “dome in air” and completing the poem, and the tension between fragmentation and unity. I then move to “Mont Blanc” and its juxtaposition of various physical and metaphysical objects, including the dynamic “flow” of the mind and the stillness of the eponymous mountain. I end with “Ode to Psyche,” examining the presence of Psyche in different spaces, the numerous processes of the poem, and the final note of hope for the future of his poetry. The insights gained

from these three poems will ultimately be of lesser consequence for nature and its significance in British Romanticism than they will be for the human mind and its role in the broader sphere of the universe. Through the exploration of ambiguous boundaries in the relationships that the speaker holds with the external world, we must consider the reach of poetry beyond the physical and temporal limitations of the poem's space and towards new worlds.

## **“Kubla Khan”: Synthesis through the Unifying Power of the Imagination**

Considered difficult at best and unintelligible at worst, “Kubla Khan” is notoriously complex and demands attentiveness from its audience. This challenge of understanding “Kubla Khan” starts even before the poem with the preface. The preface explains the circumstances around Coleridge’s writing of “Kubla Khan.” After taking a painkiller, Coleridge fell asleep in the middle of reading *Purchas His Pilgrimage*. This led to a vivid dream in which “he could not have composed less than two to three hundred lines” of poetry. Upon waking, Coleridge attempted to transcribe these lines but was interrupted in the midst of doing so “by a person on business from Porlock.” He returned later to finish writing only to realize that he had forgotten most of the poem (464–465).

There has been a long critical debate regarding the truth of the preface’s compositional history. Regardless of whether it is factual or fictional, the role of the preface is to present a preparatory framework for key issues of “Kubla Khan.” The most recognizable is that of the poem’s fragmented nature, as the surface-level meaning of the preface is to explain why the poem is unfinished. This leads to related discussions about failure and poetic creation, in general. There is the beginning of a conversation on inspiration from other literary works. The preface also includes a fragment from Coleridge’s poem “The Picture, or The Lover’s Resolution”:

Then all the charm  
Is broken -- all that phantom-world so fair  
Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread,  
And each mis-shape the other. Stay awile,  
Poor youth! who scarcely dar'st lift up thine eyes--  
The stream will soon renew its smoothness, soon  
The visions will return! And lo, he stays,  
And soon the fragments dim of lovely forms  
Come trembling back, unite, and now once more  
The pool becomes a mirror.

This poem parallels the narrative trajectory of “Kubla Khan,” even and especially in the Narcissus-like metamorphosis of the “poor youth” (Levinson 108–109). This hints at the destination of the poem—when things blur from uniting together, the speaker will be left looking at himself.

“Kubla Khan” begins with creation: “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree” (1–2). It is apparent that Kubla Khan is a significant figure—he is the poem’s namesake and appears within its first line. It is less clear who he is and why he has earned significance. The verb “decree” implies that Kubla Khan has built the entire pleasure-dome with his words alone. Powerful and extraordinary, this accomplishment implies several possible allegories for Kubla’s role. Kubla Khan is a ruler figure, as his name is an obvious reference to Kublai Khan of the Mongol Empire, and he has the authority to issue official orders. On an allegorical level, Kubla could be a poet figure, who creates worlds out of language; an enchanter figure, who uses his verbal incantations to create supernatural outcomes; and even a god figure, as his decree is similar to that of the Old Testament God’s: “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (*King James Version*, Gen. 1.3).

The mystery of Kubla Khan’s identity is enhanced by the obscurity of Xanadu’s setting. Being not only fictitious but also vague about its whereabouts, Xanadu feels unmoored. At most, the “mystic” nature of the poem—reinforced by the its incantatory mixture of alliteration, repetition, and iambic meter—and Eastern-inspired features of the landscape sets Xanadu in the “Orient.” But to Coleridge’s nineteenth-century Western audience, most of whom had never and would never travel to Asia, this in itself is otherworldly. Thus, the “exotic” quality of Xanadu further contributes to its mystique.

The geographic ambiguity of Xanadu extends past its vague placement within the larger sphere of the world to its internal physical features, with a description of the landscape following the first two lines of “Kubla Khan”:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea. (3–5)

The syntactical ambiguity of these lines reflects the obscure relationship between the pleasure-dome, the river Alph, the caverns, and the sunless sea. The relative pronoun “where” could refer to either Xanadu or the pleasure-dome. Since it is confirmed that the pleasure-dome has been built in Xanadu, all of these features do reside within Xanadu. However, their positioning in relation to the pleasure-dome is unclear; perhaps they are inside, outside, or partially inside and outside of the dome. It is impossible to confirm which one is correct. This blurring of boundaries is essential to “Kubla Khan.”

Kubla Khan’s decree, whether alone in its speech or through other vessels, creates a pleasure-dome: “So twice five miles of fertile ground / With walls and towers were girdled round;” (6–7). Compared to the rest of Xanadu, the pleasure-dome is conspicuous in its appearance as a construction that is not natural to the landscape. This sense is emphasized through the description of its measurements. Aside from its atypical, contrived phrasing in place of simply saying “ten,” “twice five” evokes an image of a pair of hands, a common symbol for human creation. The pleasure-dome has been created not by a natural, incorporeal force but by a man. The round shape of the pleasure-dome is also abnormal to nature. By building his pleasure-dome, Kubla Khan has forcefully imposed his notions of order on the landscape (Levinson 105).

The precision that Kubla Khan desires, however, does not occur as planned. The pleasure-dome is “girdled round,” implying that there should be distinct boundaries that set it

apart from its surroundings, but its subsequent lines immediately challenge this with its obscure placement of objects:

And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery. (6–11)

Similar to the river Alph, the measureless caverns, and the sunless sea, it is unclear whether the greenery described exists inside or outside of the pleasure-dome. The speaker offers the words “here” and “there” to locate these features, but they ironically fail to achieve their goal.

Furthermore, the supposed prominence of the pleasure-dome—suggested by how the poem opens on its creation—is negated by the comparative dominance of the rest of Xanadu’s landscape. The description of the other features of the landscape occupies twice as much space within the poem and provides much more vivid detail about itself than the pleasure-dome does. Ironically, the forests mimic the “girdled round” dome in how they are “enfolding sunny spots of greenery.” The juxtaposition of the pleasure-dome with the greenery serves as the initial portrait of the pleasure-dome’s shortcomings.

The chasm is introduced by the poem’s first exclamation (“But oh!”), an emotional height that stands in marked opposition from the steady tone used thus far in the poem (the pleasure-dome is introduced with a solemn “so”). This contrast hints to the many other differences that exist between the chasm and the rest of Xanadu:

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted  
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!  
A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover! (14–16)

Along the lines of everything else in Xanadu, the chasm evades geographical placement. The chasm is positioned into the side of a green hill covered in cedar trees but otherwise does not

reveal its location, such as its relation to the pleasure-dome. However, this spatial ambiguity is less noticeable in this instance, as the chasm easily distracts with its other more dramatic characteristics. Like the initial interjection, there are exclamation marks throughout the lines illustrating the chasm. They break the poem's previously stable rhythm to give it an unpredictable cadence. This is accompanied by an increase in abstract language. For the pleasure-dome and the greenery, the descriptions remain grounded in the physical. Even when the forests are characterized as "ancient," the degree of intensity is compared to "the hills," which are material objects and thus offer a quantifiable measure of the forests' age. In contrast, Coleridge describes the chasm as "romantic," "savage," "holy," and "enchanted," all adjectives that rely more on the emotional than on the tangible. There is a vivid, startling energy to this chasm, in a way that renders it impossible to explain the chasm through the same physical, absolute descriptors used for the world above. This "holy and enchanted" nature of the chasm is compared to the space beneath a "waning moon" that is haunted "[b]y woman wailing for her demon-lover." This analogy contains the poem's first auditory element and its first human, other than Kubla Khan. Since it is compared to the chasm, it increases the vitality of the chasm, giving it even more of a life of its own. Yet these dynamic elements are separate from the actual space of Xanadu and the chasm because they are contained within the analogy—it is happening figuratively, not literally. The "woman wailing" does not exist within Xanadu but instead within the speaker's imagination.

But perhaps the most memorable and important feature of the chasm is the relationship between the fountain and the river:

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,  
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,  
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:  
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst

Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,  
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:  
And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever  
It flung up momentarily the sacred river. (17–24)

The interaction between the fountain, the rock fragments of the chasm, and the river recall Coleridge's theory of the imagination. As the source of all water in Xanadu, the fountain has parallels with the primary imagination:

The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite of the eternal act of creation of the infinite I AM. (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 172)

The corresponding qualities between the fountain and the primary imagination are undeniable. The fountain's ceaseless turmoil is such that it creates the illusion that the earth is "breathing," a basic requirement to being alive. Accordingly, it is the origin to the earth's life—in other words, the fountain is the "living power." The pattern of its flow is clearly a "repetition," since it is portrayed as "ceaseless" and forced "momently." Lastly and most importantly, the fountain participates in its own act of "creation," as its bursts of water induce the "dancing rocks" in the chasm.

If the fountain is a symbol of the primary imagination, then the river, which flows from the fountain and into the world, is a symbol for the secondary imagination:

The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet still identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 172)

As previously discussed, the river emerges from the fountain, its source. It is clearly an "echo of the former" and "identical with the primary in the kind of its agency" in how it comes from the same waters as the fountain but with a different flow.

Since the relationship between the fountain and the river parallel the relationship between the primary and secondary imaginations, the chasm that contains the two of them must be representative of the creative mind. The pleasure-dome is the finished creative product, shown through the narrative of its creation through Kubla Khan's verbal "decree" as well as its distinct proportions and boundaries. Those two connections are straightforward—instead, the uncertainty lies in how Xanadu can be interpreted on an allegorical level. Through the physicality of its description and Kubla Khan's existence within it, it is evident that Xanadu is, in part, the physical world external to the poet and poetic product. This notion is further supported by how the imagination and, consequently, the creative mind (i.e., the chasm) reside within it. However, it is important to recognize that "Kubla Khan" is itself a poem, a poetic product. Xanadu, the physical world, is also contained within a larger creative work. But "Kubla Khan" has also emerged from another work; as Coleridge indicates in the preface, *Purchas His Pilgrimage* is the chief source of literary inspiration for this poem. This is apparent through the sheer number of images and motifs that "Kubla Khan" shares with *Purchas His Pilgrimage* and its counterpart *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, which John Livingston Lowes asserts as being an equally if not more important source of "Kubla Khan" even though Coleridge neglects to mention it. The influence of these texts extends but is not limited to the name of the setting, "Xanadu"; the pleasure-dome; and the gardens (Lowes 360–361). "Kubla Khan" has blended together with *Purchas His Pilgrimage* and *Purchas His Pilgrimes*.

There is a potentially infinite number of layers to this scheme of containing and being contained, with the only reason for stopping here at three layers being to avoid redundancy. Everything about "Kubla Khan" is much more complex than it originally appears. But one thing that is clear about Kubla's Xanadu is his endeavor to hold the chasm and the rest of Xanadu

separate from each other. The distinction between these two spaces—the difference in tone, in type of description used—is apparent, albeit inconsistent considering the poem’s emphasis on the difficulty of drawing boundaries.

Regardless of how powerful he may seem, Kubla Khan is an example of how the attempt to hold all of these concepts separately from each other will prevent the attainment of full poetic power. It may seem surprising that the powerful Kubla Khan has been revealed to be weak. However, this tension has been building alongside the instability of the pleasure-dome and Xanadu since the beginning of the poem. Chayes describes the limitations of Kubla Khan’s authority, citing the infrequent mentions of him in the poem, and argues that his true role is to prepare the poem for the entrance of the greater poet in the final stanza (Chayes 5). Moreover, the description of both Xanadu and Kubla Khan bears a strong resemblance to the “commanding genius” described by Coleridge:

For the conceptions of the mind may be so vivid and adequate, as to preclude that impulse to the realizing of them, which is strongest and most restless in those, who possess more than mere talent ... yet still want something of the creative and self-sufficing power of absolute genius. For this reason therefore, they are men of commanding genius. While the former rest content between thought and reality, as it were in an intermundium of which their own living spirit supplies the substance, and their imagination the ever-varying form; the latter must impress their preconceptions on the world without, in order to present them back to their own view with the satisfying degree of clearness, distinctness, and individuality. *These in tranquil times are formed to exhibit a perfect poem in palace, or temple, or landscape-garden .... But alas! in times of tumult they are the men destined to come forth as the shaping spirit of ruin* (italics mine), to destroy the wisdom of ages in order to substitute the fancies of a day, and to change kings and kingdoms, as the wind shifts and shapes the clouds... (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 18).

The description of the men of the commanding genius during “tranquil times” is notably similar to that of Kubla Khan, as he too has created a poem in a “landscape-garden.” It is clear from Coleridge’s disparaging tone towards the commanding genius that Kubla Khan’s shortcomings are inexcusable.

There is a refrain from the first stanza on the sacred river's path through the landscape to ultimately end in the ocean:

Five miles meandering with a mazy motion  
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,  
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,  
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean; (25–28)

The river is the only physical feature of the landscape that is able to travel across all different areas of Xanadu. While pondering one of his unfinished poems titled “The Brook” in *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge explores this idea of the river transcending boundaries:

I sought for a subject, that should give equal room and freedom for description, incident, and impassioned reflections on men, nature, and society, yet supply in itself a natural connection to the parts, and unity to the whole. Such a subject I conceived myself to have found in a stream, traced from its source in the hills ... to the first break or fall ... to the peat and turf barn ... to the sheepfold; to the first cultivated plot of ground; to the lonely cottage ... to the hamlet, the villages, the market-town, the manufactories, and the seaport. (Coleridge 114)

Similar to the stream described above, the river in “Kubla Khan” is able to run through the gardens and forests, through the caverns and the chasm, and finally to the sea. The river cannot be limited by boundaries, which makes it the ideal subject to give “a natural connection” and “unity to the whole” of Xanadu. This is confirmed in the river's role as the secondary imagination, specifically that of the unifying power: “or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and unify.”

But complete unity is yet to come. Placed at the end of the description of Xanadu, the verbal echo in these lines from the beginning of the poem brings a sense of completion as well as containment to this world. The boundaries have been drawn. In Kubla Khan's strict world of separated parts, the “sacred river” of imagination can only sink “in tumult to a lifeless ocean.” The adjective to describe the sea has changed from “sunless” to “lifeless” in this reiteration, evoking a sense of lost hope. The river of imagination is lost in an ocean that is like death. If the

distinct parts of Xanadu are not able to reconcile through the river, the imagination, there will be an incredible loss of creative power. This is the true weakness of Kubla Khan's Xanadu.

The development of "Kubla Khan" bears a resemblance to Coleridge's idea of the "technical process of philosophy" used to "obtain adequate notions of any truth"; the first step is to "intellectually separate its distinguishable parts" (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 176). This occurs in the poem through the opposition of the chasm to the rest of Xanadu. Therefore, the rest of this process must now be carried out: "But having so done, we must then restore them in our conceptions to the unity, in which they actually co-exist" (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 176). Parallel to the start of the first step, the start of this second step arises with an appearance from Kubla Khan: "And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far / Ancestral voices prophesying war!" (29–30). The phrase "from far" is perhaps the most spatially ambiguous placement in the entire poem. In this instance, it is difficult to even assess whether the ancestral voices originate inside of or beyond Xanadu. "Far" could also refer to other types of distance, such as temporal and emotional distance. The existence of a temporal distance between Kubla Khan and these voices is confirmed, as the voices are characterized as "ancestral" and consequently from a time that predates Kubla. If considering Kubla Khan as a poet figure, the "ancestral voices" point to the literary tradition before Kubla Khan. Daniel Robinson uses Mary Robinson's creative response to "Kubla Khan," "To The Poet Coleridge," as a framework for understanding the poem's complex metric scheme. After outlining said pattern, Robinson:

So, by the end of 'Kubla Khan,' Coleridge has essentially told the story of English poetic practice from the native ballad forms to Chaucerian foot verse to Renaissance sonneting to eighteenth-century couplets and ending finally in a return to the ballad form in the Romantic period. (6)

Thus, the poem's meter as a subtle gesture towards the legacy of English poetry supports this interpretation of the "ancestral voices" as late poets. Kubla Khan hears these voices while "mid

this tumult,” which refers to the imagination becoming lost in the “lifeless ocean.” As the voices come in a moment of vulnerability for Kubla, during which he realizes that the world he attempts to create is not sustainable, it seems that these are prophesies of war against him.

The following lines reveal the aftermath of the war, which can be used to deduce its purpose:

The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
Floated midway on the waves;  
Where was heard the mingled measure  
From the fountain and the caves.  
It was a miracle of rare device,  
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice! (31–36)

The pleasure-dome and the chasm have both lose their concreteness: only the “shadow” of the pleasure-dome and the sound from the chasm are described, not the actual objects themselves.

The “tumult” and “turmoil” of the sacred river has transformed into a “mingled measure.” The final image of this stanza (“A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!”) is a single image that has combined the pleasure-dome and the chasm together (Chayes 13). Thus, the result of the prophesied war is a breaking down of the distinction between the pleasure-dome and the chasm.

The pleasure-dome and the chasm have united. Just as the secondary imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate,” these previously distinct units have been dissolved and then recreated into a joined unit. The poets that have come before Kubla Khan, masters of this craft, know that the Xanadu that he previously decrees is unsustainable. Their prophesy is proven correct, and Kubla Khan’s presence fades away from the poem. This new version of the dome and the chasm together is clearly superior, as it is doubly described as a remarkable phenomenon: a “miracle of rare device.” This phrase itself is a unity between the dichotomy of supernatural and human, as “miracle” connotes the mystical and “device” connotes the manmade.

This absolute breakdown in boundaries is appropriate considering Coleridge's personal drive for unity. In his essay "On Poesy or Art," Coleridge writes on reconciliation:

It is, therefore, the power of humanizing nature, of infusing the thoughts and passions of man into everything which is the object of his contemplation . . . [It is] the union and reconciliation of that which is nature with that which is exclusively human.

In "Theory of Life," Coleridge reveals the strict consequences of separation, calling this distinction in parts "the philosophy of Death" and expressing that "only of a dead nature can it hold good"—that is, the separation of the mind from nature is no better than a death-like life. Thus, the unification between all parts of Xanadu, the external world, the creative product, and the internal imagination, must occur to create a meaningful world.

In the last stanza, "Kubla Khan" shifts away from the narrative of Kubla's Xanadu to a retelling of a vision by a speaker who has finally stepped into the space of the poem:

A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw:  
It was an Abyssinian maid  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
Singing of Mount Abora. (37–41)

Though the dream is unacknowledged in the first and second stanzas, the third stanza opens with this information in its second line. As the second female figure of the poem, the Abyssinian maid recalls the "woman wailing." Though they are similar in certain aspects, such as their close associations with auditory imagery, the Abyssinian maid is notably more composed. She sings instead of wailing and is labeled a "damsel," which implies that she is of a higher social standing. The Abyssinian maid is an additional image that has been inspired by *Purchas His Pilgrimes*. In its famous account of the "Old Man of the Mountain," there are damsels who are skillful in singing, playing instruments, and dancing (Lowes 362–363). Thus, the Abyssinian maid is another form of unity between several different fragments. She embodies fragments from

the chasm, depicted through her ties to the woman wailing; the orderly pleasure-dome; and the external source of inspiration, *Purchas His Pilgrimes*. The speaker's admiration of this unity is portrayed through his exaltation of her as a muse figure, made apparent through his association between his ability to recall the melody of her "symphony and song" and his ability to create.

Schneider argues, however, that there is a disconnect between the Abyssinian maid's significance to the speaker and her description within the poem. The five lines dedicated to the damsel are less finished in comparison to the rest of the poem, since three of them make up the only unrhymed lines in the poem (801). However, this incomplete nature of her portrait does not decrease her importance. Rather, this further supports the idea that the Abyssinian maid represents the unity of the various features of Xanadu. The sudden shift away from Kubla Khan's Xanadu occurs right when the pleasure-dome and the chasm merge together because this is the moment when the speaker forgets the remaining lines of the dream-poem. It is consequently implied that there would have been more description and narrative regarding this combined image if the speaker were able to recall his dream. Thus, he has difficulty writing about the Abyssinian maid as well, since she shares an identity with the lines that he has forgotten.

The speaker reveals that he would build his own dome, conditional on remembering the Abyssinian maid's song:

Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice! (42–47)

Through declaring an intention to build his own dome, the speaker creates a parallel between himself and Kubla Khan. The difference between these two poetic figures is that the speaker exhibits more potential than Kubla does and desires to build a superior, unified version of the

dome. The speaker aspires to build his dome not in a fixed physical location like Xanadu but in the air. Similar to the “miracle of rare device,” this is a location that lies between the supernatural and the human, as air is part of the material world but building something in the air is an accomplishment that transcends physical limitations. There is also a fundamental difference in the creation-driving emotion between the speaker and Kubla Khan. Kubla Khan’s palace is referred to as the “pleasure-dome,” yet the speaker’s is referred to as just the “dome.” The emotion that propels the speaker into action is not pleasure but “delight.” Though it may be assumed that the speaker desires to build the dome with the caves of ice that appears at the end of the second stanza, this new dome is actually even more powerful than that one. The latter has a “mingled measure,” unclear and indefinite, but the former has “music loud and long,” confident and assured.

The creation of this dome in air is framed as mere conjecture to what could have been. The speaker declares that his all-powerful will only be realized if the speaker can recall the Abyssinian maid’s “symphony and song.” That is, the speaker would be able to finish “Kubla Khan” if he were to find a source of inspiration so powerful that it unifies the external world, his creative product, his imagination, and essentially every aspect of his world together. However, the conditional verbs used throughout the remainder of the poem are a strong reminder that this achievement is contingent on the speaker remembering his muse’s song, which he has yet to accomplish.

But it is contentious as to whether this declaration is true. No matter how many conditional terms the speaker insists upon, the truth is that a dome has been created. Though the speaker does not literally build this dome within the space of the physical world, he has built it

within the space of the poem. By describing it, he has placed his dome into the mind of his audience.

The poem shifts in perspective once more to focus on the audience to the speaker's transformation:

And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise. (48–54)

The speaker would be able to gain a widespread audience, which is apparent from the repetition of “all.” But whether this audience exists internally, externally, or both internally and externally to the poem is vague. This audience witnesses the speaker's creation, seeing “them”—“That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!”—“there.” The positional word “there” is as ambiguous as it is in the first stanza. It does not help in revealing where the audience will see the dome. Perhaps the audience will see them in the air, or perhaps they will see them on the page while reading this poem.

“Holy dread,” the “milk of Paradise,” and the number “thrice” evoke the biblical trinity and reveal this version of the speaker to be a divine figure. Unlike the vagueness surrounding Kubla Khan's identity, there is no doubt here that the speaker would be a god. This proves the power that comes with the unity of the imagination with the rest of the world.

The power of this potential outcome is so great that it would cause the speaker himself to become a poetic object. This is apparent through the third-person pronouns in reference to the speaker, who has now become a character within the poem himself. Throughout the poem, the speaker has constantly shaped and disturbed the boundaries set to himself. He has gone from

being outside of Xanadu in the first two stanzas to stepping into the poem, from poetic speaker to poetic object. However, the essence of who he is remains unmistakable through the entirety of “Kubla Khan.” Regardless of how he becomes unified with other identities and objects around him, the sense of his identity is never lost.

The narrative is told through the perspective of the audience, who witness the speaker’s deeds and chronicle them through their own words. The audience is given a poetic voice, with the speaker functioning as both the external inspiration and the poetic object that they place their own impressions on and use to tell their poems. The poem’s self-professed state as a fragment becomes especially relevant after this realization. “Kubla Khan” is a fragment in order to render the ending of the poem as ambiguous as possible. Thus, the audience to the poem must fill in the remainder of “Kubla Khan” through their own imagination. In doing so, the poem enters the mind of the audience, transforming them to contain their own finished products—their own domes.

The speaker successfully creates the images of his dome inside both the space of the poem and the minds of his audience. As opposed to the commanding genius of Kubla Khan, the speaker follows the ways of the absolute geniuses, who “rest content between thought and reality, as it were in an intermundium of which their own living spirit supplies the substance, and their imagination the ever-varying form” (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 18). The speaker understands, seeks, and accomplishes the unity between his imagination and all things.

It seems that his imagination is sufficient in itself of achieving this; he does not have to rely on recalling the “song and symphony” of the Abyssinian maid. But it is also true that the damsel comes from the speaker’s “vision,” a phenomenon that occurs within the mind. This dream, the damsel, and consequently the damsel’s song is inside of the speaker. The damsel and

the speaker have succeeded in uniting together like everything else in “Kubla Khan.” To Coleridge, this cognitive attainment of having the Abyssinian maid in his mind as a thought would be not only a sufficient but also a fitting form of attainment:

But where the ideas are vivid, and there exists an endless power of combining and modifying them, the feelings and affections blend more easily and intimately with these ideal creations than with the objects of the senses; the mind is affected by thoughts, rather than by things; and only then feels the requisite interest even for the most important events and accidents, when by means of meditation they have passed into thoughts. (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 24)

As seen in the ambiguous boundaries and placement of the various features of the landscape, there is a flow to all things, in which everything blends together to enter the mind as thoughts. To the mind, thoughts are ultimately the only things of significance.

An argument could be made that this seems too convenient. If the damsel’s song is within the speaker’s mind merely because the speaker has dreamed of her, then anything and everything can be considered to be within the speaker. But this statement, far from being the flaw in this argument, is the truth at which the poem arrives. Coleridge himself expresses this belief in his writing:

In looking at objects of Nature while I am thinking ... I seem rather to be seeking, as it were *asking*, a symbolical language for something within me that already and forever exists, than observing anything new. Even when that latter is the case, yet still I have always an obscure feeling as if the new phaenomenon were the dim Awakening of a forgotten or hidden Truth of my inner Nature / It is still interesting as a Word, a Symbol! (Coleridge, *Notebooks* 2546)

Everything that exists in this world can be found within his “inner Nature.” Like the “poor youth” of the poem in the preface, the visions can only be found by looking within the self. In this way, the mind reigns supreme—there is nothing that is outside of the poet’s mind.

**“Mont Blanc”:  
The Flux of the Universe as a Representation of the Mind**

Shelley begins “Mont Blanc” not with the eponymous mountain, as might be expected, but rather with an abstract picture of the relationship between the “universe of things” and the mind:

The everlasting universe of things  
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,  
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—  
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs  
The source of human thought its tribute brings  
Of waters—with a sound but half its own,  
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume,  
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,  
Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,  
Where woods and winds contend, and a vast river  
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves. (1–11)

The “universe of things” shares characteristics with a body of flowing water, such as “waves,” “secret springs,” and, literally, “water.” Moreover, it is depicted as being in a constant state of change and motion. This is emphasized through both the repetition of “now” and the repeated use of the suffix “-ing” in words like “everlasting,” “glittering,” “reflecting,” and “lending.” As these represent its sudden and uninterrupted nature respectively, the “universe of things” is clearly depicted as a ceaseless flux of motion into the human mind.

To illustrate the movement of the “universe of things” through his own mind, Shelley turns to a description of the physical landscape. The poem first appeared in 1817 in his and Mary Shelley's travel narrative *History of a Six Weeks' Tour through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany and Holland*. The introductory note to “Mont Blanc” clarifies Shelley’s approach to writing the poem:

The Poem, entitled ‘Mont Blanc,’ is written by the author of the two letters from Chamouni and Vevai. It was composed under the immediate impression of the deep and

powerful feelings excited by the objects which it attempts to describe; and as an undisciplined overflowing of the soul, rests its claim to approbation on an attempt to imitate the untameable wildness and inaccessible solemnity from which those feelings sprang. (Shelley and Shelley vi)

The assertions that the poem was “composed under the immediate impression” of the scene reveal that the poem portrays the flow of Shelley’s thoughts in response to the physical landscape in which he physically resides. The lines read in the same stream of thought that Shelley experienced while in the Vale of Chamouni. As the vast landscape motivates a variety of observations and reflections, “Mont Blanc” presents a challenge in simply keeping pace with the rapid changes in Shelley’s thoughts, not to mention interpreting the overall meaning of the poem.

The ambiguity of “Mont Blanc,” a product of the poem’s syntactical and contextual complexities, contributes to its difficulty. There is wide disagreement among scholars about the literal interpretation of the poem as a result of the intricate structuring of its lines. A relevant example is the discourse over whether the “universe of things” or the “mind” is the tenor that is altered by the vehicle “a feeble brook.” The dash between “[o]f waters” and “with a sound but half its own” creates ambiguity, as it could be used either to refer back to the original subject of the lines or to create a stylistic emphasis in the next words. Kenneth Neil Cameron asserts that the subject of the metaphor is the mind, as it would seem incongruous to suddenly compare the striking “universe of things” to a weak stream and because Shelley typically uses dashes as exclamatory punctuation (244–245). This would be a complement to the previous description of their relationship, as the metaphorical river is portrayed as bursting against and, inevitably, into the brook in a way that is not unlike the “universe of things” influencing the mind.

Already perplexing because of their abstract nature, the spatial relationships of the elements in this system are unclear, possibly even paradoxical. The repetition of “where,” a word that should aid in clarifying these connections, makes it even more difficult to trace these origins.

The “everlasting universe of things” retrieves human thoughts from its “secret springs” but leaves the location of this source at a vague distance, away from the forefront of the first stanza. Though meant to elucidate the relationship between abstractions in a material way that is familiar to mankind, the simile of the brook complicates these images. This description includes the word “where” to indicate that the “vast river,” a representation of the “universe of things,” is located within this larger landscape alongside other similarly sized objects. As contradictory as it seems, the “universe of things” is inside of another universe.

The interplay between the “universe of things” and the mind is further complicated in the representation of the power dynamics between them. The poem begins with an emphasis on the “everlasting universe of things,” giving it a line to itself, and continues for a few lines to attentively describe its features. This illustrates the grandness of this “universe of things.” In contrast, very little is said about the mind beyond stating its presence in this process. In spite of this, “the everlasting universe of things” is the one that brings a “tribute”—that is, an object that is given to another as a display of respect—to the mind. It becomes clear that the relationship between the “universe of things” and the mind is more mutually dependent than the initial descriptions may suggest.

The metaphor towards the end of the stanza offers a similar paradox: the “vast river / Over [the feeble brook’s] rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.” It can be concluded from this description that the river is feeding into the brook and consequently giving it some of its waters. Apart from reinterpreting the relationship between the “universe of things” and the mind, it also raises questions as to the status of the brook. If the river is sending more of its waters into the brook, thus enabling the current of the brook to become larger and stronger, is the brook still only a brook, or is it now a river?

Another challenge of “Mont Blanc” is its considerable number of allusions to other notable texts. Hitt asserts that “[n]o other Shelley poem ... is more densely intertextual than ‘Mont Blanc’” and lists “Plato, Homer, the Bible, Virgil, Ovid, Lucretius, Hesiod, Shakespeare, Milton, Locke, Hume, Buffon, Godwin, and William Drummond” as all being potentially alluded to in the span of this single poem (Hitt 144). Furthermore, the first stanza is reminiscent of William Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” (Endo 285):

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,  
And what perceive.... (93–107)

Shelley’s allusions to other contemporary and historical poets illustrate an awareness of the poetic tradition to which he belongs. He knows how others perceive the landscape and write on it, a point that I will revisit later in this chapter. These earlier poets have succeeded in “burst[ing] the circumference of the reader’s mind, and pour[ing themselves] forth” (Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* 11). Like the “universe of things” flows into the mind, the influence of his predecessors takes the shape of a flux from the external world to Shelley’s mind.

The complexity of the first stanza of “Mont Blanc” not only prepares the audience for the equally challenging remainder of the poem but also reflects how complex the nature of this

material truly is. Shelley does not want to offer an easy summary of epiphanies but rather desires to push his audience to wrestle with the flux of “Mont Blanc” in the same way that he did.

The simile at the end of the first stanza has a “plethora of ‘external’ imagery [that] has broken in upon the phenomenal reality,” and it is only then that “the poet [looks] outward to the Ravine of Arve ... to find it a remarkably consistent objective correlative of his metaphor for a total universe that is indifferently things or thoughts” (Wasserman 224). Seeming to morph straight out of the metaphorical river and the near anagram “raves” that end the stanza, the newly introduced Ravine of Arve, which also has a river flowing through it, acts as the physical representation of the “universe of things.” The Ravine of Arve is introduced through an apostrophe: “Thus thou, Ravine of Arve—dark, deep Ravine— / Thou many-colour'd, many-voiced vale” (12–13). Shelley illustrates his vivid, almost overwhelming experience with the landscape of Chamouni by rendering into words the influx of information into his mind. The adjectives “many-colour'd” and “many-voiced” reflect this, demonstrating the diverse nature of the ravine.

As a sublime object whose qualities manifest themselves in extremes, Shelley explains the intensity of the Ravine of Arve’s attributes by measuring it against a different object as a reference. The extreme depth of the Ravine is emphasized by contrasting it with an illustration of what is above: “Over whose pines, and crags, and caverns sail / Fast cloud-shadows and sunbeams:” (14–15). The younger pines that run along the Ravine of Arve reveal its antiquity:

thou dost lie,  
Thy giant brood of pines around thee clinging,  
Children of elder time, in whose devotion  
The chainless winds still come and ever came  
To drink their odours, and their mighty swinging  
To hear—an old and solemn harmony; (19–24)

The description of the pines as associated with “elder time” and a part of “an old and solemn harmony” clearly indicates the old age of these trees. However, this age pales in comparison to the Arve. The trees are merely “children,” and they are described in relation to the Arve as “clinging” like infants. Like the description of its sheer depth, this emphasizes how old the Arve is through virtue of contrast with another object.

The Ravine of Arve is so powerful and dynamic that Shelley suspects that it is not actually a chasm that he witnesses but power embodied into a material object. He creates a myth for the origin of the river Arve:

Power in likeness of the Arve comes down  
From the ice-gulfs that gird his secret throne,  
Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame  
Of lightning through the tempest;— (16–19)

The personification of “Power” gives a sense of the Arve’s transcendent power, almost like that of a god; with that naturally comes a degree of awe that is not unlike a worshipper’s reverence for his god.

But as powerful as the Ravine of Arve is, it lacks certain abilities—most notably for a poet like Shelley, the ability to create:

Thine earthly rainbows stretch'd across the sweep  
Of the aethereal waterfall, whose veil  
Robes some unsculptur'd image; (25–27)

The rainbows cover the front of the waterfall, which in turn covers the “unsculptur’d image” of a cliff. A moving body of water, the waterfall recalls the “everlasting universe of things” that enters the mind to prompt the creative process. It has its own “aethereal” power and seems ready to erode the cliff and form it into a shape that it desires, as the “universe of things” flows into the mind and prompts its own creative process. However, the waterfall has left the cliff “unsculptur’d,” thus indicating a lack in either the waterfall’s desire or ability to create. The

description of the obscuring “veil” evokes Shelley’s explanation of the power of poetry on the mind and world:

[Poetry] awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar;  
(*A Defence of Poetry* 16)

The waterfall does not have the “poetry,” created by the imagination, that would enable it to lift the veil and reveal a fully completed work of art. This essential difference between these parallel processes of the waterfall and the “universe of things” is caused by the waterfall’s lack of a mind through which it can channel its raw energy.

This inability to create is followed by a suddenly dark, apocalyptic moment:

the strange sleep  
Which when the voices of the desert fail  
Wraps all in its own deep eternity; (27–29)

This is a biblical allusion to the following image: “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (*King James Version*, Isaiah 40.3). Having been expelled from Oxford University for publishing the pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism*, it is unlikely for Shelley to be using this quote as a warning for non-Christians. Rather, this verse paints a picture of people whose ideas are not readily accepted by society. Shelley had been very conscious at the time of the scorn that people had for the Romantic poets as well as poetry in general for their perceived lack of utility. Only a few years after “Mont Blanc” appeared in Shelley’s travel narrative, he published *A Defence of Poetry* against Thomas Love Peacock’s satirical *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820), a work that simultaneously parodied yet called attention to contemporary reasons for why poetry has no value. Shelley thus uses the image of the rock veiled behind a waterfall to warn against an impending death, however literal or figurative, for these poets who “fail” to create. This is the

first instance of death encroaching on the space of the poem, though far from the last. Throughout “Mont Blanc,” Shelley creates a tension between death and the symbiotic relationship of the “universe of things” and the mind.

The final description of the Ravine rings like a chant:

Thy caverns echoing to the Arve's commotion,  
A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;  
Thou art pervaded with that ceaseless motion,  
Thou art the path of that unresting sound— (30–33)

This is a reminder of the constancy of sound and motion in the Ravine. The latter two lines are chiasmic; the first line progresses from sound to movement (“pervaded” to “motion”), and the second line progresses in the other direction from movement to sound (“path” to “sound”). These metaphors influence and shape each other, much like the “universe of things” rolling through the mind.

The anaphora “[t]hou art” builds on itself, until the climax arrives with the speaker’s physical entrance into the setting of the poem:

Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee  
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange  
To muse on my own separate fantasy,  
My own, my human mind, which passively  
Now renders and receives fast influencings,  
Holding an unremitting interchange  
With the clear universe of things around; (34–40)

When the speaker looks at the ravine, it prompts the speaker’s “human mind” to both give and be given the “fast influencings” of the ravine. The description of his mind “holding an unremitting interchange / [w]ith the clear universe of things around” calls back to the first stanza’s “everlasting universe of things.” Through this, it is confirmed that the ravine gives the speaker the “source of human thought.” The words “trance” and “passively” impress a sense of

obedience and malleability, revealing the lack of intent on the speaker's part. This is a natural phenomenon.

The process of connecting his mind to the universe of things unleashes another process:

One legion of wild thoughts, whose wandering wings  
Now float above thy darkness, and now rest  
Where that or thou art no unbidden guest,  
In the still cave of the witch Poesy,  
Seeking among the shadows that pass by  
Ghosts of all things that are, some shade of thee,  
Some phantom, some faint image; till the breast  
From which they fled recalls them, thou art there! (41–48)

The description of the “legion of wild thoughts” as a distinct entity from “the breast” where they originate—that is, the mind—recalls the “human thoughts” that the “everlasting universe of the mind” brings in the first stanza. These two passages distinguish them from each other in the same way. The mind is passive, and the thoughts active, albeit dormant. “Mont Blanc” thus presents two modes of human consciousness: the pliant mind is defined by the “universe of things,” whereas the imaginative thoughts take action in the process of defining their own identity in the midst of the unfamiliar (Hall 204). However, this does not mean that the thoughts do not share a connection with the “universe of things” and the mind. When the latter looks for the “universe of things” while it rests in the “cave of the witch Poesy,” it can only find Platonic shadows. But when they are recalled to the mind, they are able to find that the “universe of things” is “there!”

Endo claims that “[t]he cave of the witch Poesy is not some original source ... [but] a place of simulacra, of appearances without originals” (289). It is true that the “[g]hosts” and “faint” images seem to be imitations of other objects. However, Endo does not acknowledge that the cave is inhabited not only by these shadows but also by the entire legion of “wild thoughts,” which rest in the cave. The adjective “wild” indicates something that has not yet been tamed,

which has nothing to do with being an imitation. On the contrary, it suggests that this has just arrived from its place of origins—a fresh, not yet used image. These “wild thoughts” waiting in the cave among the other faint images can be interpreted as novel poetic concepts among their conventional peers. This reflects the position of “Mont Blanc” within the long tradition of poetic tradition, to which it constantly alludes throughout its body of work. The thoughts remain in the cave until they are recalled; this corresponds with Shelley’s description of the creative process in *A Defense of Poetry*:

A man cannot say, ‘I will compose poetry.’ The greatest poet even cannot say it; for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness (47)

Poetry cannot be willed out of the poet. Rather, an influence like that of the “everlasting universe of things” or the “Ravine of Arve” must spontaneously stimulate these poetic thoughts. Now that the speaker’s mind “renders and receives” the influence of the Ravine, he can begin to create.

Death returns to “Mont Blanc” in its role as a constant, looming threat to this cycle of creation between the “universe of things” and the mind. The third stanza is introduced with another reference to the legacy of poets who have come before the speaker:

Some say that gleams of a remoter world  
Visit the soul in sleep, that death is slumber,  
And that its shapes the busy thoughts outnumber  
Of those who wake and live. (49–52)

The phrase “[s]ome say” is the most direct mention of Shelley’s contemporaries and predecessors. Hitt notes that “it becomes increasingly clear that the speaker’s quest for truth involves turning to an array of voices not his own” (146). These poets say that the busy thoughts of waking life outnumber the “gleams of a remoter world.” By calling these other poets “some,” the speaker refrains from identifying himself with them, thus creating distance between their ideology and his own. Thus, it can be inferred that the speaker does not agree with what they

have to say. He seems to be frustrated with how these other poets hold on to their current mode of life instead of attempting to receive knowledge from the “remoter world” and to improve the flawed society in which they live.

The speaker then sees Mont Blanc:

I look on high;  
Has some unknown omnipotence unfurl'd  
The veil of life and death? or do I lie  
In dream, and does the mightier world of sleep  
Spread far around and inaccessibly  
Its circles? For the very spirit fails,  
Driven like a homeless cloud from steep to steep  
That vanishes among the viewless gales!  
Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,  
Mont Blanc appears—still, snowy, and serene; (52–61)

There is a gap between the moment that the speaker sees Mont Blanc and the moment when Mont Blanc enters the poem, in which the speaker processes how grand the sight in front of him is through rhetorical questions. The veil of death unfurls, indicating the dissolving of boundaries that had previously been so rigid, as the speaker struggles to comprehend the awe he feels for Mont Blanc. This shows Shelley the “gleams of a remoter world” even while he is awake. Mont Blanc is described as “still, snowy, and serene.” This stands in contrast to the Ravine, which is full of sound and motion. It also connects to “the still cave of the witch Poesy,” as they both share the same tranquility.

Though it is the poem’s namesake, Mont Blanc emerges only halfway through “Mont Blanc.” It becomes apparent that the mountain appears only after the interaction between the speaker’s mind and the Ravine of Arve. This reveals that Mont Blanc is the product of that interaction. But as soon as this realization occurs, it is challenged:

Its subject mountains their unearthly forms  
Pile around it, ice and rock; broad vales between  
Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,

Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread  
And wind among the accumulated steeps; (62–66)

Like the initial description that follows the Ravine of Arve when it is introduced, this description of the mountain emphasizes its materiality. Though the forms may be described as “unearthly,” it is defined in the physical elements of “ice and rock.” The speaker then continues with a description that reaffirms the abstract nature of the mountain as well:

A desert peopled by the storms alone,  
Save when the eagle brings some hunter's bone,  
And the wolf tracks her there—how hideously  
Its shapes are heap'd around! rude, bare, and high,  
Ghastly, and scarr'd, and riven.— (67–71)

The complexity of this mountain—a metaphor, but also simply a tangible rock formation—confuses the speaker. In an attempt to gain clarity, he directly asks about the source of the mountain:

Is this the scene  
Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young  
Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea  
Of fire envelop once this silent snow? (71–74)

In these questions, the speaker first asks whether the origins of Mont Blanc are mythological, then if they are scientific. This parallels the tension for both Mont Blanc and the Ravine of Arve between their metaphorical and physical existences. His questions are ultimately met with silence: “None can reply—all seems eternal now” (75). Though it seems that there is nothing gained from this lack of a reply, the speaker’s comment on the mountain’s silence reveals that his questions are not rhetorical. He first poses the questions because he does not know the answer, and now that Mont Blanc has not answered, he still does not know. Thus, Mont Blanc is neither a metaphor for poetic creation nor just a rock formation but *both*. The mountain resists simplified definition through its defiance of boundaries.

The speaker then comments on Nature as a whole to make an observation about its relationship with man:

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue  
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,  
So solemn, so serene, that man may be,  
But for such faith, with Nature reconcil'd; (76–79)

Though the poem has many lines with difficult syntax, the phrase “[b]ut for such faith” is particularly ambiguous. In this line, the “but” could either signify “except for such faith” or “only because of such faith”: two opposite meanings. “Mont Blanc” has been widely considered as a response to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Chamouny; the Hour Before Sunrise. A Hymn” (Hitt 143). In this poem, Coleridge’s speaker praises God for creating the wondrous Vale of Chamouni, the same location that inspired “Mont Blanc.” This is not unique to Coleridge. Endo’s remark on the intersection between poetry on Nature and poetry on religion summarizes the Romantic tradition for natural scenes:

[T]he received interpretation of silence, the accepted conversion of pre-meaning into meaning, had long since hardened into the formulaic: the silence of nature, that is, invariably gave voice to the majesty of God (287)

As an atheist, Shelley would not have subscribed to this interpretation (Greenblatt 764). It can be inferred from this connection that the “faith” in these lines seems to be that of Christian faith. The wilderness teaches about the “awful” power that it holds independently from other things—which would consequently lead listeners of the wilderness to have a decrease in faith in the Christian God as a consequence of knowing the true source of power. Faith in God keeps poets from fully embracing the beauty and sublime of Nature as its own, not that of a different eternal being. Shelley emphasizes the importance of reconciliation with Nature, as this leads to experiencing the “everlasting universe of things” as the speaker does previously.

The stanza ends with a return to Mont Blanc:

Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal  
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood  
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good  
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel. (80–83)

The mountain's ability "to repeal / [l]arge codes of fraud and woe" evokes the following idea from Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world"

(46). The essential point of this is not that poets create legislation but that they build the intellectual atmosphere needed to create new sociopolitical structures in society (Cameron 207).

The ability of only "the wise, and great, and good" to understand the mountain can also be tied to a quote from *A Defence of Poetry*:

A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. (14)

Though it was already apparent that the mountain is, in part, a symbol of the creative product, these lines serve as a direct connection between the mountain and the creation of poetry.

The prospect of reconciliation with Nature gives Shelley's an even broader perspective of the world, past Mont Blanc and the wilderness, to the whole world. With this heightened understanding, he illustrates the dynamism of the world to portray the connection between the cycle of life and the flow of the "universe of things":

The fields, the lakes, the forests, and the streams,  
Ocean, and all the living things that dwell  
Within the daedal earth; lightning, and rain,  
Earthquake, and fiery flood, and hurricane, (84–87)

Similar to the previous list of the Ravine of Arve's features, Shelley lists various attributes of the living world, demonstrating that the flux of his thoughts does not interact only with the Ravine but with the rest of the world as well. The speaker describes the transition of the world from a sleeping to waking state:

The torpor of the year when feeble dreams  
Visit the hidden buds, or dreamless sleep  
Holds every future leaf and flower; the bound  
With which from that detested trance they leap; (86–91)

The “sleep” of the plants represents winter. The arrival of spring is illustrated as a “bound” away from “that detested trance.” The rebirth portrayed here parallels the blossoming imagination of the speaker, having united his mind with the Ravine of Arve to ultimately find Mont Blanc. The speaker continues, including mankind as a feature of the living earth: “The works and ways of man, their death and birth, / And that of him and all that his may be” (92–93). The inclusion of mankind in the flux of the “universe of things” that enters the speaker’s mind reflects the influence of poets rolling through him. Everything that has been listed in this stanza has the capacity to be born and die, a natural process of life: “All things that move and breathe with toil and sound / Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell” (94–95). Like the sleep of the “voices of the desert” associated with the Ravine of Arve, the dynamic space of the world is connected to mutability.

The tone of the stanza shifts as the speaker introduces something that is different from these living beings:

Power dwells apart in its tranquillity,  
Remote, serene, and inaccessible:  
And this, the naked countenance of earth,  
On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains  
Teach the adverting mind. (96 – 100)

The relationship between death and movement is contrasted with that of power and tranquility. When all fades away, power remains. Aware of this difference between him and Mont Blanc, the speaker invites the mountains to teach his mind.

But the lesson becomes an apocalyptic scene, where the death that merely encroached on the periphery of the poem has now broken into it:

The glaciers creep  
Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far fountains,  
Slow rolling on; there, many a precipice  
Frost and the Sun in scorn of mortal power  
Have pil'd: dome, pyramid, and pinnacle,  
A city of death, distinct with many a tower  
And wall impregnable of beaming ice.  
Yet not a city, but a flood of ruin  
Is there, that from the boundaries of the sky  
Rolls its perpetual stream; (100–109)

The malintent of the glaciers is indicated by their comparison to “snakes” watching their prey.

This goal is not driven by pure or even neutral intentions but rather death. This destructive event is induced by the glaciers, which share qualities with both Mont Blanc and the Ravine of Arve because they are a large mass mostly made up of ice. Thus, the glaciers are a combination of the “universe of things,” physicality, and the creative product. They are a “‘city of death’ or, since ‘city’ implies men, ‘not a city, but a flood of ruin,’ a region of death; and as the glaciers inexorably move into the ravine, they overthrow” everything around them (Wasserman 235).

This is evident in the following lines, as the flood continues down its path:

vast pines are strewing  
Its destin'd path, or in the mangled soil  
Branchless and shatter'd stand; (109–111)

The “vast pines” recall the pines that line the ravine in the second stanza. Though some of the pines are still intact, others are “shatter’d.” As they are originally used as indicators of the Arve’s antiquity, this shows not only a physical destruction of the ravine but also a collapse of time. The declaration that the avalanche follows its “destin’d path” indicates a sense of inevitability of this event.

The illustration of falling rocks further conveys this concept of the destruction of barriers:

the rocks, drawn down  
From yon remotest waste, have overthrown  
The limits of the dead and living world,

Never to be reclaim'd. (111–114)

This time, the barrier between life and death has been obliterated. There is no room for any life, whether it be for animals or for mankind:

The dwelling-place  
Of insects, beasts, and birds, becomes its spoil;  
Their food and their retreat for ever gone,  
So much of life and joy is lost. The race  
Of man flies far in dread; his work and dwelling  
Vanish, like smoke before the tempest's stream,  
And their place is not known. (114–120)

The comparison of this destructive force to a “stream” enforces the idea that the “universe of things” is partially embodied in these destructive glaciers. This could indicate that the universe of things—the external world—is responsible for death. It could also illustrate how the need for creation, as shown in how the glacier is partially a symbol for Mont Blanc, can easily shift into the need for destruction. This is shown through the “voices of the desert,” poets, eventually dying. The reason for destruction is the overwhelming nature of the “universe of things” flowing through the mind. When this flux can’t be fully translated into meaningful creative work, it will lead to a deep unfulfillment that will destroy poets.

In the midst of this chaos, the speaker directs his gaze to the Ravine of Arve “below”:

Below, vast caves  
Shine in the rushing torrents' restless gleam,  
Which from those secret chasms in tumult welling  
Meet in the vale, and one majestic River,  
The breath and blood of distant lands, for ever  
Rolls its loud waters to the ocean-waves,  
Breathes its swift vapours to the circling air.(120–126)

The river, a symbol of the “everlasting universe of things” which “rolls its rapid waves” through the human mind, has no more human minds to roll through. Therefore, it “[r]olls its loud waters

to the ocean-waves.” The river becomes part of the ocean, losing its identity. In its own way, this is the ravine’s death in the face of the mind’s death.

According to a letter sent to Thomas Love Peacock on July 22nd, 1816, Shelley witnessed an avalanche when he visited Mont Blanc in Chamouni. The way that Shelley describes the progression of the avalanche is similar to the avalanche that occurs in “Mont Blanc”:

We were travelling along the valley, when suddenly we heard a sound as of the burst of smothered thunder rolling above; yet there was something early in the sound, that told us it could not be thunder . . . . It was an avalanche. We saw the smoke of its path among the rocks, and continued to hear at intervals the bursting of its fall. It fell on the bed of a torrent, which it displaced, and presently we saw its tawny-coloured waters also spread themselves over the ravine (Shelley and Shelley 153)

It is consequently apparent that the present tense used in the catastrophic scene is meant to indicate that this event is occurring right before the speaker, rather than being a mere possibility or a future event. And it is true—death is an inevitable part of life. This is the reality that has finally arrived to “Mont Blanc.”

Despite the utter destruction of the previous stanza, Mont Blanc remains, unshaken, in its place: “Mont Blanc yet gleams on high” (127). Ferguson effectively conveys the reason behind this in her essay “Shelley's 'Mont-Blanc': What the Mountain Said”:

[Mont Blanc’s] power depends upon its never being able to move out of the world of death. Because it can never be alive it can never be subject to death; because it can never be conscious, it can never experience fear (181)

This presence of power is confirmed in the lines that follow:

the power is there,  
The still and solemn power of many sights,  
And many sounds, and much of life and death. (127–129)

The repetition of “power” emphasizes how Mont Blanc remains strong. It remains the strength of “many sights ... / many sounds, and much of life and death.” These three elements are essentially a summary of characteristics for both the Ravine of Arve and Shelley. It represents the connection between a world of dynamism and a world of mutability. Thus, Mont Blanc reasserts its own position as the product of the relationship between the “universe of things” and the mind.

The speaker suddenly ascends above the mountain to look at the snow on top:

In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,  
In the lone glare of day, the snows descend  
Upon that Mountain; none beholds them there,  
Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,  
Or the star-beams dart through them. (130–134)

This juxtaposition of the “nights” and a “day” reiterates the ability of Mont Blanc to transcend the constraints of death that have annihilated humankind. The snow is able to fall on the mountain regardless of the time, like how the mountain is able to remain in the landscape regardless of any catastrophic events. “None beholds” the snow on top of the mountain, as it is too tall to reach. Though this contributes to establishing the supremacy of the mountain, it also raises an important question: if none can behold the snows there, how does the speaker know that they are there? This question foreshadows the ending of the poem that is to arrive soon.

The speaker speaks in an apostrophe to Mont Blanc once more:

The secret Strength of things  
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome  
Of Heaven is as a law, inhabits thee! (139–141)

The “secret Strength of things / which governs thought” is almost directly repeated from the first stanza from the following description: “from secret springs / The source of human thought its tribute brings.” The primary difference is that the water imagery (“springs,” “source,” and

“tribute) has been replaced by “Strength,” further emphasizing the stillness of Mont Blanc. Because it is so powerful and removed from the flow of the world, Mont Blanc seems to be depicted in these lines as its own entity, independent from everything else. This, in combination with the mountain’s ability to not be overwhelmed by the avalanche through its power, should leave the mountain as the most powerful of all.

This climax is abruptly followed by an anticlimax. As “Mont Blanc” has steadily asserted its namesake mountain as the strongest figure in the poem, the ending lines come as a shock:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
If to the human mind's imaginings  
Silence and solitude were vacancy? (142–144)

As the Ravine’s depth is illustrated through showing the height of objects above it and its antiquity through a comparison to the much younger pines, Shelley ultimately conveys the sheer power of the imagination by contrasting it with Mont Blanc, an object that he has thoroughly explained to be almost infinitely powerful. Shelley illustrates how powerful the mountain is throughout the poem because it is easier to comprehend the strength of the highest mountain in the Alps than it is to comprehend the strength of the imagination. This is clear from the first stanza, in which the various abstractions make it difficult for the audience to fully understand them. Like the comparison of the “everlasting universe of things” to physical objects in the first stanza, the comparison between the respective strengths of the imagination and Mont Blanc is necessary in understanding the abstraction.

The final question of the poem returns to the previous strain between the figurative and material conceptualizations of the Ravine and Mont Blanc. The mountain cannot be all powerful if there is no conscious mind to perceive it as such. However, the mind also depends on the existence of these strong, sublime objects outside of itself in order to continue creating art. As

illustrated in the introductory stanza and in the “cave of the witch Poesy,” the mind does not create new material for it to think upon but is merely responsible for arranging the flow into writing.

But Shelley also understands that “[a]ll things exist as they are perceived; at least in relation to the percipient” (Shelley 51). As previously illustrated, only “the wise, and great, and good” understand the mountain because they are able to “[i]nterpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.” Thus, only people with the poetic imagination can understand the mountain’s power because they are the ones who give it power through rendering the mountain’s abilities as their imagination pleases. Mont Blanc’s dependence on the human mind to interpret it and its ability to last beyond the death of man, its creator, support the understanding of the mountain as a symbol of the creative product. The mountain is not destroyed in the fourth stanza’s apocalypse because the creative work of a poet is what creates their legacy so that they too can become a part of the flux of the universe. Like the thoughts in the “still cave of the witch Poesy,” the relationship to the mind is essential for Mont Blanc’s continued survival.

**“Ode to Psyche”:  
The Necessity of All Parts in the Process of Making**

The beginning of John Keats’s “Ode to Psyche” is deceptively simple with its traditional apostrophe to Psyche, the Greek goddess of the soul:

O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung  
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,  
And pardon that thy secrets should be sung  
Even into thine own soft-conched ear: (1–4)

In their assessment of the forthcoming poem, the first two lines progress from negative to positive descriptions. The speaker identifies his poem as “tuneless numbers” that have been “wrung” out of him, revealing the inadequacy of the poem despite the sheer effort that it has taken to compose it. As one of his impulses for writing the poem, “sweet enforcement” declines to label this as a positive or negative experience. There is an element of feeling unwillingly compelled, but the acknowledged delight of the act negates any potential misgivings into a neutral emotion. The second motivation for writing the poem, “remembrance dear,” is unabashed sentiment towards Psyche in spite of other unenthusiastic emotions regarding the poem. By demonstrating a progression from affliction to joy within its introductory lines, “Ode to Psyche” establishes the hope that Psyche gives him regardless of how dire his situation is. The speaker also apologizes to Psyche for telling her “secrets” that she already knows. Already evident from the poem’s title and apostrophe, Psyche is at the heart of “Ode to Psyche” because she is the muse who has inspired this poem.

The speaker expresses uncertainty regarding the specific conditions of his encounter with Psyche: “Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see / The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?” (5–6). The ambiguity between whether he saw Psyche in a dream or wakened state intimates the broader question of how Psyche exists relative to the speaker in the poem. Psyche is external to

him in one obvious way; that is, Psyche belongs externally to the speaker because she belongs to the world of mythology (Vendler 52). It is consequently not possible to see Psyche exist in the physical world. The speaker also understands this, using “[s]urely” to emphasize that he must have been asleep. However, the speaker would be able to see Psyche with “awaken’d eyes,” providing that “awaken’d” refers to the speaker’s renewed perspective after becoming changed by Psyche. Keats’s poetry often portrays a tension between visions and consciousness, such as in “Ode to a Nightingale” (“Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?” (79–80)). In his letter to Benjamin Bailey on November 22, 1817, Keats likens the imagination to “Adam’s dream—he awoke and found it truth” (68). It is thus understood that the speaker has figuratively witnessed Psyche as a burst of inspiration within his mind. But although this is the most feasible answer, “Ode to Psyche” still invites a suspension of belief to perceive this event as having occurred in the physical world. The speaker witnesses Psyche and Cupid “in a forest” (7), which clearly indicates that the speaker himself is contained within a larger space. The setting is meticulously detailed in describing the individual elements of nature, painting a picture so vivid that it truly seems as if the speaker had been physically present inside that material space. The speaker’s frequent use of sensory details, physiological description for perceiving the world outside of one’s body, also induces the feeling of physicality.

The speaker illustrates his situation moments before seeing Cupid and Psyche: “I wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly” (7). The use of past-tense verbs in this stanza indicates that this event occurred in the past, which correspondingly indicates that this is a description of a version of the speaker that existed prior to encountering and knowing Psyche. An important characteristic of this yet immature speaker is conveyed through the words “wander’d” and “thoughtlessly.” These both express a careless ignorance, the sense that the speaker had no

direction, purpose, nor mindfulness. Furthermore, they also express a lack of meaningful thought; this past version of the speaker has no ideas from his imagination. This is later contrasted by the final stanza's worshipful speaker who declares that he will build a temple for Psyche, an act that will require careful premeditation, immense willpower, and extensive creativity.

The speaker refrains from distinguishing Cupid and Psyche from each other while describing the moment he first sees them:

And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise  
Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side  
    In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof  
    Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran  
        A brooklet, scarce espied:  
Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,  
    Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,  
They lay calm-breathing, on the bedded grass;  
    Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,  
As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,  
And ready still past kisses to outnumber  
    At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love: (8–20)

The lack of distinction between Cupid and Psyche is emphasized by the repeated use of third-person plural pronouns: “[t]hey lay calm-breathing,” “[t]heir arms embraced, and their pinions too,” and “[t]heir lips touch'd not.” The unified lovers are contained as one unit within a single structured space, “couched side by side / [i]n deepest grass,” “beneath the whisp'ring roof / Of leaves and trembled blossoms,” and laying “on the bedded grass” (15). Though able to differentiate between them, the speaker sees Cupid and Psyche as having an inherent togetherness.

The reason for Cupid and Psyche's unity is conveyed through the illustration of their romantic passion as only half-realized. The speaker finds the lovers in a moment of “Keatsian intensity” in which they are “neither apart nor joined together” (Bloom 390). Their actions

initiated but not yet fully completed, Cupid and Psyche wait for dawn to awake and “outnumber” their “past kisses.” Cupid and Psyche thus appear to be in the middle of a process, both a literal one of love-making as well as a symbolic one to be further explored in the poem.

The past version of the speaker is not familiar with one member of the pair, Psyche:

The winged boy I knew;  
But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?  
His Psyche true! (21–23)

It makes intuitive sense that the speaker would know Cupid and not Psyche due to their differing levels of fame as mythological figures. But this recognition goes deeper than basic knowledge on classics—the speaker recognizes Cupid because he sees himself within the god of desire. As Bate argues, the poet’s situation parallels Cupid’s:

[H]e himself has been vagrant, if only through ignorance; he has been won over to the mind; he is ready to build a palace for this new subject, this new demand of conscience, as Cupid (in the tale by Apuleius) built one for Psyche. (491)

As a consequence of his familiarity with Cupid, the speaker identifies Psyche in connection to Cupid: “His Psyche true!” Since he initially thinks of her in terms of her relationship with Cupid, the speaker would have been conscious of the myth of how Psyche became a goddess, as it is prompted by her love for Cupid. According to mythology, Cupid only visited Psyche at night after they were married because she was forbidden to look at his face. Fearing that Cupid was hiding his true identity as a monster, Psyche disobeys him and looks at his face by candle-light, which prompts the betrayed Cupid to flee from her. Psyche endures several trials given by Aphrodite, Cupid’s mother, in order to be reunited with him. They are ultimately married, with Psyche having become a goddess.

The myth of Psyche, particularly her trials and resultant rewards, parallels Keats's metaphor of soul-making. The explanation of this process appears in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats on April 21, 1819 and prefaces several poems, including "Ode to Psyche":

I will call the *world* a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read—and I will call the *human heart* the *horn Book* used in that School—and I will call the *Child able to read*, the *Soul* made from that *school* and its *hornbook*. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! ("Letter to George and Georgiana Keats on 21 April 1819" 336)

Keats explains the necessity of suffering to shape the soul into an identity, which is essentially what happened to Psyche on her journey to becoming a goddess. The elucidation of "a World of Pains and Troubles" as a "Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways" emphasizes the necessity of a multitude of experiences. It is consequently related that this transformation occurs as a process rather than an instantaneous moment. Keats explores this concept of soul-making and self-improvement through process in "Ode to Psyche."

Keats openly admits that "Ode to Psyche" is "the first and the only [poem] with which [he has] taken even moderate pains" ("Letter to George and Georgiana Keats on 30 April 1819" 339). The word "pains" connects his effort in writing the poem to the "World of Pains and troubles" necessary to shaping a person's soul. This demonstrates that "Ode to Psyche" and his labor in composing it are parts of Keats's own soul-making process.

True to Keats's efforts, there is a progression of improvement through "Ode to Psyche." The stanzas move through a temporal progression from past to present to future, mirroring advancement through life. This directly corresponds with the poem's steadily increasing quality of writing. The lush prettiness of the first stanza is stylistically characteristic of Keats's earlier poems (Bush 131). This stanza has been criticized by numerous academics as being unpolished. Though the writing is not as clumsy as the first stanza, the middle stanzas are still reliant on

clichés and are inevitably unmemorable. But the vivid and complex final stanza is the poem's triumph.

Keats also uses "Ode to Psyche" as an opportunity to improve upon the sonnet form. At the time of writing the poem, Keats had been actively "endeavouring to discover a better Sonnet Stanza," as he believed traditional sonnet stanzas to be lacking ("Letter to George and Georgiana Keats on 30 April 1819" 342). "If By Dull Rhymes Our English Must Be Chained" is the last of Keats's three experimental sonnets ("To Sleep" and "How Fever'd is the Man" being the other two) and illustrates his conservative process in finding an improved sonnet stanza (Bate 497):

If by dull rhymes our English must be chaid  
And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet,  
Fetterd, in spite of pained Loveliness;  
Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,  
Sandals more interwoven and complete  
To fit the naked foot of poesy;  
("Letter to George and Georgiana Keats on 30 April 1819" 342)

Like this intention to convert Andromeda's constraints from torturous chains to form-fitting sandals, the goal is not to abandon preexisting forms but to adapt to and improve upon the poetic structures that already exist. Keats understands his pursuit of a better sonnet form as a process, much like that of soul-making. "Ode to Psyche" is another advancement in this experimentation, with its various stanzas incorporating structures from "How Fever'd is the Man"; the Shakespearean sonnet, whose structure is used twice, with and without the concluding couplet; "To Sleep"; and the Shakespearean quatrain (*a b a b*) (Bate 497). The complex form of the poem demonstrates the effort that Keats exerted in perfecting his stanza form. With hindsight, it is clear that Keats's labor has been rewarded. After "Ode to Psyche," Keats continued on to write his most acclaimed odes, "Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode to a Grecian Urn."

As implied by the poem's nature as an ode to Psyche and the reverent apostrophe in the beginning, the parallel between Psyche's myth and the process of soul-making has become an important source of creative inspiration for the speaker. Cupid and, more importantly, Psyche are consistently portrayed throughout the poem as having wings. Both of them are described as having "pinions"; Cupid as the "winged boy"; and Psyche as the "winged Psyche," "happy, happy dove," and having "lucent fans" (41). When personifying the imagination, Keats often describes the resulting figure as winged. This is true across a variety of his works, in both his poetry (such as "Ode to a Nightingale, in which the poet declares that he will "fly ... / on the viewless wings of Poesy" (31, 33)) and his letters (such as his description of "the Wings of Imagination" ("Letter to Benjamin Bailey on 22 Nov. 1817" 68). Psyche's role as a source of inspiration for the speaker is also shown through his heightened perspective of the forest. Before his surprise finding of Cupid and Psyche, the only description the speaker offers of his surroundings is that he is inside "a forest." After the surprise, the speaker nearly overflows in a profusion of description, noting everything from the easily visible grass to the "scarce espied" brook. Psyche inspires the speaker into not only perceiving the world in a new light but also translating these newfound thoughts into his art.

In the second and third stanza, "Ode to Psyche" transitions away from the past to the present, made clear by both the use of present-tense verbs and references to the speaker's ongoing reality. This is a step forward in the process of soul-making, improving the sonnet stanza, and everything else that this poem seeks to advance. The speaker praises Psyche for her incredible beauty:

O latest born and loveliest vision far  
Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!  
Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star,  
Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky;

Fairer than these, (24–28)

The speaker's immense awe for Psyche is clear from his reverent apostrophe, in which he declares Psyche unequalled in loveliness. Her magnificence is expressed by not only repeating the word "fairer" but also by comparing her to stars. Through boldly declaring her as more beautiful than even the moon and the evening star, both prominent fixtures that contribute much to the beauty of the night sky, the full extent of the speaker's adoration for Psyche becomes apparent. But rather than being the reason why Psyche has become the speaker's muse, the speaker's awe of her beauty seems to be a product of the speaker's adoration for her. He does not comment on her beauty when first seeing her in the forest. The strength of the speaker's love becomes evident through his insistence of her fairness.

But more pressing than her beauty is that Psyche lacks recognition and worshippers:

Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,  
Nor altar heap'd with flowers;  
Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan  
Upon the midnight hours;  
No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet  
From chain-swung censer teeming;  
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat  
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

O brightest! though too late for antique vows,  
Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,  
When holy were the haunted forest boughs,  
Holy the air, the water, and the fire;  
Yet even in these days so far retir'd  
From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,  
Fluttering among the faint Olympians, (28–42)

The use of negatives far outnumbers the use of adjectives to describe Psyche's beauty. The phrase "too late" is also repeated, with the second instance repeating the adverb "too" twice before "late," to emphasize her fatal belatedness in becoming a goddess. It is therefore implied that this is due to Psyche's status as the "latest born" Greek goddess—that is, she became a

goddess “[t]oo, too late” to gain recognition from worshippers before the Ancient Greek religious tradition declined.

The delay in Psyche’s transformation from human to goddess mirrors the speaker’s own belated awareness of Psyche. Furthermore, the speaker’s mourning of the fading relevancy of pagan gods reveals his anxiety of death. He twice refers to the Greek gods’ spectral nature with “Olympus’ faded hierarchy” and “the faint Olympians,” phrases that seem nearly paradoxical: these are immortals who have proven to not be immortal. As a poet who is famously preoccupied with the issue of mortality, the next question is almost inevitable for Keats: if even the gods can fade, how will mere humans last?

This picture of the speaker’s inferior world has much negativity, with the only point of hope being Psyche’s sheer magnificence. But the latter proves to be a sufficient source of strength: “Yet even in these days... / [...] / “I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir’d” (40, 43). The negatives, used to illustrate Psyche’s lack of a religious following, are transformed in an expression of the speaker’s own transformation through Psyche:

So let me be thy choir, and make a moan  
    Upon the midnight hours;  
Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet  
    From swung censer teeming;  
Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat  
    Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming. (44–49)

The final six lines of the second and third stanzas are corresponding segments with much of the same imagery and phrasing. The biggest difference between them is the speaker’s new commitment to being Psyche’s worshipper. The repetition of the newly added “thy” emphasizes his utter loyalty to Psyche. By reshaping himself into various religious tools dedicated solely to her, the speaker dedicates himself to becoming anything and everything that will exalt Psyche.

This revival of Psyche's power contrasts the banishment of pagan gods that occurs in Milton's "Nativity Ode," a poem from which "Ode to Psyche" consciously borrows imagery and diction. Vendler identifies the following segment of "Nativity Ode" as the section that has most influenced "Ode to Psyche," italicizing words that Keats utilizes in his own poem:

The *oracles* are dumb,  
No *voice* or hideous hum  
Runs thro' the arched *roof* in words deceiving.  
Apollo from his *shrine*  
Can no more divine,  
Will hollow shriek the *steep* of Delphos leaving.  
No *nightly* trance, or breathed spell,  
*Inspires* the *pale-eyed* priest from the *prophetic* cell.

The lonely *mountains* o'er,  
And the resounding shore,  
A *voice* of weeping heard and loud lament;  
From *haunted* spring, and dale  
Edg'd with poplar *pale*,  
The parting genius is with sighing sent;  
With *flow'r*-inwoven tresses torn  
The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn.

In consecrated earth,  
And on the *holy* hearth,  
The Lars, and lemures *moan* with *midnight* plaint;  
In urns, and *altars* round,  
A drear and dying sound  
Affrights the Flamens at their service quaint ...

Peor and Baälim  
Forsake their *temples* dim; ...  
And mooned Ashtaroth,  
Heav'n's queen and mother both,  
Now sits not girt with tapers' *holy* shine. (qtd. in Vendler 50–51)

As seen in this excerpt, Milton's "Nativity Ode" chronicles the displacement of the old with the new—that is, the displacement of pagan gods by Jesus Christ. Though the poem does express some melancholy for the closing of this era, it also recognizes this event as a triumph of Christianity. In "Ode to Psyche," Keats treats this displacement with deep sentimentality. The

speaker speaks longingly for the days “[w]hen holy were the haunted forest boughs, / [h]oly the air, the water, and the fire,” repeating the word “holy” to illustrate his reverence for earlier, simpler times. He clearly sees the Greco-Roman world as superior. He mourns the loss of deities who, like Psyche, are worthy for the imagination to worship because there are none in his current world.

But the banishment of Psyche and her fellow gods from the worlds and literary works of other poets is what ultimately creates a space for Keats to claim them as his own. Going against Milton and other literary figures who reject these pagan gods from their poetry, Keats softens the portrayal of the debased pagan gods by depicting them as fading rather than being completely overthrown. He later creates a consecrated temple for Psyche, thus making space for her not only within the poem but within the current world from which she had been cast away by Milton. Through this act, Keats supersedes Milton and other literary figures before him. Keats is no longer constrained by the influences of his eminent predecessors but has the freedom to discover and build as he desires.

The repetition of long segments of verse evokes the sensation of an incantation, giving the speaker’s words a mystical power. This supernatural ability belongs not to the speaker’s current, unimaginative time but an earlier time “[w]hen holy were the haunted forest boughs.” Through employing this newly acquired power, the speaker demonstrates the strength of Psyche’s inspirational influence upon him. In this way, the speaker makes progress in the process of improving his soul and himself.

“Ode to Psyche” shifts to a vision of the future as the speaker anticipates the transformation of his mind into a temple for Psyche:

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane  
In some untrodden region of my mind,

Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,  
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind: (50–53)

The building of this inner temple is the final and, arguably, most complex way in which space becomes ambiguous in this poem. In this envisioned advancement of his mind, the external world becomes internalized inside of the speaker. But it is also not quite the external world that the speaker lives in. There are mystical “Dryads” (57), which, like the incantatory chanting of the penultimate stanza, reveal the speaker’s return to the classical age. There are also objects blended from the material and mental worlds, such as “branched thoughts” and “the wreath'd trellis of a working brain” (60). This reintroduces the notion of spatial ambiguity, indicating that this final stanza will further the discussion of this issue.

Though he cannot change the world outside of him, the speaker can change the world inside of him, the world that he keeps Psyche in—the mind. He can choose to shape it into a reflection of the classical world that he desires. The motivation of changing this inner self is Psyche, but the source of the power to “build” the world within his mind is revealed in the description of the “branched thoughts [that are] new grown with pleasant pain.” Like a “[w]orld of Pains and troubles” is necessary to soul-making, “pleasant pain” is necessary to grow the branched thoughts that populate the speaker’s mind-temple. Although some may interpret this final stanza as Keats’s declaration that the mind reigns supreme, in tandem with Coleridge and Shelley, it is clear that the external world is essential to the creation of the mental world. When the world outside of the speaker brings him into suffering, the world inside of him will flourish. Thus, the mind-temple is a representation of intentional growth of the mind for the purpose of soul-making. The temporal reality of the stanza is placed in the future because, like soul-making, this is a process and must occur over time.

Keats describes the details of this temple inside his mind, including a sanctuary in the middle of the region:

Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees  
    Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;  
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,  
    The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;  
And in the midst of this wide quietness  
A rosy sanctuary will I dress  
    With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,  
    With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,  
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,  
    Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same: (54–63)

There are two sections to this fane: the overall region and the rosy sanctuary. The distinction between them is created by their contrasting attributes. The region is characterized by a sublime grandness. The word “region” is typically used for a larger geographic area, and the phrases “[f]ar, far around” and “wide quietness” both indicate how immensely large this space is. These details of its concrete expansiveness thus give the mind a sense of infiniteness. The speaker’s thoughts are then described as “dark-cluster'd trees / [that f]ledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep.” This description of the dark trees placed at a towering elevation is an ominous yet great picture. The essence of the sublime builds itself into the features of the landscape and then settles along the high mountains, which are huge topographical features of the landscape that are easily observable from any position within the region. This visibility allows for others to easily witness these sublime features, experience the greatness of the sheer darkness of the branches and largeness of the mountains, and have their comparative inadequacies manifest into the sublime.

The rosy sanctuary is characterized by a charming beauty. This is exemplified through the details of the garden. The anaphora beginning with “with” creates a layering effect of the various features within the garden, illustrating how lush and plentiful it is. The words “rosy,”

“wreath’d,” “buds,” and “flowers” all indicate the abundance of greenery within the garden. The “trellis” and “bells,” though not necessarily natural objects, lend to the overall sense of the garden’s delicate charm. Overall, the rosy sanctuary is a place that truly exudes beauty, especially in contrast with the strong sense of the sublime from the previous lines.

The distinction between these two areas in the mind exists because the driving forces behind their growth are different. “Pleasant pain” is responsible for trees, which exist in the region at large but not in the sanctuary; and “Fancy” is responsible for “breeding” the flowers, which exist only in the sanctuary. The personified Fancy, or imagination, is the only human figure besides Psyche existing within the mind. Fancy is also a creator figure, since it is a gardener of flowers. However, Fancy is far more powerful than any ordinary gardener; it is able to create an infinite variety of things. The rosy sanctuary’s nature as a place of creation is emphasized through the speaker’s declaration that it shall be decorated with “the wreath’d trellis of a working brain,” the only part of the mind that is described as exerting effort of its own. It becomes clear through the function of the imagination as well as aspects within this garden that this rosy sanctuary is meant to symbolize the mind writing poetry. Though the external world shapes the mind, including the imagination, the imagination is directly responsible for shaping the special, central part of the mind that is involved with poetic creation.

However, these two sections are still connected within the same mind. The sublime exists within the beautiful garden. The image of “stars without a name” is made sublime with the added detail that they are nameless. It suggests profusion without any method of categorization, yielding a sensation of the overwhelming, bright magnificence that triggers the sublime. The description of how “the gardener Fancy ... / [w]ho breeding flowers, will never breed the same”

(62–63) reveals the infinitely unique combinations of the garden’s flowers. Despite speaking of small, delicate objects, this sense of infinite, unmeasurable variety is a distinctly sublime quality.

But more importantly, the beautiful products of the imagination exist throughout the larger region of the mind. The region is populated with the smaller features of “zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees” that elicit a sense of the beautiful. The “dark cluster’d trees,” created by the sublime and now awakening it from others, are portrayed as “fledg[ing] the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep” (55). The words “fledge” and “steep by steep” have double meanings that also evoke the feathers on a bird. This gives a delicacy and, consequently, a beauty to this sublime image. There is also, as previously mentioned, a clear connection between wings and the imagination in “Ode to Psyche.” Albeit less intensified in some areas than others, as the overall region’s wings are “fledging” and thus immature, the speaker’s entire mind is connected to the imagination.

In this way, the purposeful growth of the creative mind is ultimately for the goal of creating poetry. The word “region” appears in one of Keats’s letters as an allegory for a reader’s immersion into a long poem:

I have heard Hunt say and <I> may be asked—why endeavour after a long Poem? To which I should answer—Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little Region to wander in where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second Reading: which may be food for a Week’s stroll in the Summer? ("Letter to Benjamin Bailey on 8 Oct. 1817" 52–53)

At the time of writing “Ode to Psyche,” Keats had been in the process of writing his epic *Hyperion*, whose unfinished state suggests the difficulty he had while writing it. Keats would have been preoccupied by the question of how he will be able to finish the poem. Through this connection between the “region” of a lengthy poem and the “region” in which his mind-temple is situated, it becomes evident that the speaker anticipates that Psyche, his muse, will bring him the

determination and inspiration necessary to not only grow his soul but to create poetry in the future.

Psyche returns in the final lines of the poem: “And there shall be for thee all soft delight / That shadowy thought can win” (64–65). When only relying on the vague “there” to situate Psyche within the mind-temple, there is uncertainty as to whether Psyche belongs inside the outer region or the “rosy sanctuary.” But since the garden is a “sanctuary,” the most holy part of a temple, and is where the imagination is most active, the goddess and muse Psyche will reside in the garden. As Black argues, Psyche’s placement within the “rosy sanctuary” of the imagination and the region of the mind overall indicates her adoption of her name’s modern meaning. The meaning of “psyche” has progressively shifted away from the soul towards the mind over the years. The soul and the mind are deeply interconnected in “Ode to Psyche.” The shaping of the mind through the suffering of the world is difficult, nearly impossible to distinguish from the making of the soul.

The transcendence of boundaries between the soul and the mind prompts a more interesting, more difficult question: does the imagination transcend the mind to affect the external world? In earlier stanzas, it seems like it does: the speaker’s projection of his mental encounter with Psyche into a physical forest suggests the imagination’s ability to transform the material world. The sensory details throughout the poem, as previously explored, also support this interpretation. But in the final stanza, the external world is brought into the mind to be changed. Fancy does not venture outside of the region but instead remains strictly inside the “rosy sanctuary” to bloom its flowers. Though perplexing, this conflict is key to this relationship between the speaker’s external and internal worlds. The truth is that the physical world and the growth of the mind are deeply intertwined. Like the ambiguous spatial relationships throughout

this poem, it is difficult to separate the world and the mind from each other because they are so connected.

The final lines of “Ode to Psyche” are open-ended but clearly hopeful:

And there shall be for thee all soft delight  
That shadowy thought can win,  
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,  
To let the warm Love in! (64–67)

The mention of “shadowy thought” casts a sudden bleakness on the otherwise joyful stanza. As shown through the “branched thoughts,” thoughts compose the greenery that shelters Psyche in the mind-temple. But these thoughts are “shadowy,” which reveals the limitations of the mind (Bloom 397s). These limitations include death, among other obstacles to the achievement of infinite power. But where the speaker’s thoughts are “shadowy,” Psyche brings hope through her brightness. The presence of the “bright torch” is a subversion of Psyche’s originating myth. The light that this torch provides will allow Psyche to see the “warm Love,” Cupid, when he comes to visit her. This contrasts the darkness that characterized their earlier relationship. That the lovers can openly be together indicates that her trials have been completed, and Psyche’s endurance through her suffering has led to great rewards.

Psyche and Cupid’s relationship parallels Keats’s explanation of the growth of the soul through the heart (“I will call the *human heart* the *horn Book* used in that School—and I will call the *Child able to read*, the *Soul* made from that *school* and its *hornbook*”). The “warm Love” in Psyche’s temple can be understood as being, apart from Cupid, the speaker’s heart due to parallels previously drawn between the speaker and Cupid. The entrance of the heart represents the strengthening union between the speaker and Psyche, or the speaker’s heart and soul, which will enable him to grow more powerful. Through everything that Psyche represents—inspiration as well as the soul’s growth—the speaker will be able to fight against the impending “night” of

death. Like Psyche, Keats will pass through the trials of his life successfully and be able to mature his soul to produce great poetry. The strengthening of the speaker's mind and soul will enable him to build a superior temple in his mind, which will in turn give the speaker the ability to protect himself "against the mutability inherent in human life" by producing poetry (Waldoff 417). Though death is inevitable for all humans, great works of art will allow the poet's presence to last in the world.

It is at the end of "Ode to Psyche" that its chiasmic structure is revealed. As Vendler describes, "[e]verything that appears on the left must reappear, in mirror image, on the right; or, in terms of the aesthetic of the ode, whatever has existed in 'life' must be, and can be, restored in art" (47). The poem's structure hints at the future restoration of objects in the world through art. Through both the suffering given by the outside world as well as the growth of his inner soul and mind, Keats aims to advance his writing ability to compose greater and greater poems. With hindsight, it is clear that Keats has succeeded in this goal: the improvements in his writing during and after "Ode to Psyche" empowered him to write several odes that have earned him a fame that transcends physical death.

## Conclusion

The conjuring up of physical regions establishes an awareness of spatial relations between the poet and the space in which he dwells, enabling a more vivid expression of the nonexistence of distinct divisions. For all of the poems considered, there has been a transcendence above definitive boundaries in favor for the ambiguous. Though there is a temptation to separate the internal mind from the external world to discover their joint meaning, these poems prove their relationship to be far too interconnected for that to occur. In “Kubla Khan,” unity is expressed through the synthesis of the pleasure-dome and chasm. This oneness simultaneously enables the speaker to gain powers exceeding that of Kubla Khan himself and humbles him into becoming a mere object in the minds of his readers, who in turn become poets in their own rights. “Mont Blanc” illustrates the interdependence of the “universe of things,” human mind, and the creative product through Shelley’s interactions with the Ravine of Arve and Mont Blanc. The anticlimactic question reveals that none of these parts is superior to each other, as all require the other to survive. In “Ode to Psyche,” the symbiotic relationship between the world, the mind, and “Fancy” illustrates a process of soul-making that is not dissimilar to the processes of self-improvement that the poem and Keats themselves undertake. The necessity of the process and, consequently, the inclusion and harmony of all parts—including the suffering given by the flawed world—must be embraced in order to grow.

These indistinct boundaries have taught us that ambiguity is an answer in itself. As Keats insists on the greatness of remaining “in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (“Letter to George and Thomas Keats on 21 Dec 1817” 72), attempts to dissect and systematize the physical landscapes within these poems eventually become futile. At a certain point, all that is left is vagueness. This is not to say, however, that

further exploration of these poems and others like them should be discouraged. Rather, we should learn to embrace these uncertainties as inherent to the work.

“Kubla Khan” and “Ode to Psyche” both end with declarations to build: “I would build that dome in air” (46) and “I will be thy priest, and build a fane” (50), respectively. In its final question of what the mountain would be “[i]f to the human mind’s imaginings / [s]ilence and solitude were vacancy” (143–144), “Mont Blanc” implies a continued survival of the speaker’s imagination through Mont Blanc. From our retrospective perspective on the Romantic era, we know that Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats all succeeded in continuing to “build” and improve their writing past these poems. But perhaps even more remarkable is the construction that has occurred outside of their lives. Past the physical deaths that they feared would cause them to become forever lost, we readers now keep Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats alive by inhabiting their processes and building more and more meaning on their poetry.

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