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# ‘From Steep to Steep’:<sup>1</sup> Poetic Indebtedness in Coleridge and Shelley

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Poetic strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the greatest of the dead and from an even more triumphant solipsism.

(Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 1975)

**A**FTER COLERIDGE’S DEATH on 25 July, 1834, Thomas De Quincey made this point about ‘Hymn before Sun-Rise, in the Vale of Chamouny’ in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*—in the first of four ‘reminiscences’ on the life of Coleridge published in September, October, and November 1834, and in January 1835:

The *Hymn to Chamouni* is an expansion of a short poem in stanzas, upon the same subject, by Frederica Brun... In mere logic, therefore, and even as to the choice of circumstances, Coleridge’s poem is a translation. On the other hand, by a judicious amplification of some topics, and by its far deeper tone of lyrical enthusiasm, the dry bones of the German outline have been awakened by Coleridge into the fulness of life. It is not, therefore, a paraphrase, but a re-cast of the original.<sup>2</sup>

In 1807, interestingly, De Quincey had given Coleridge the sum of 300 pounds intended as a gift that Coleridge perceived to be a loan. For Coleridge, here, indebtedness, whether in an economic or literary sense, is riddled with the ambivalence of ‘aching gratitude’.<sup>3</sup> Even though Coleridge’s *Hymn* is indebted to Brun’s ‘Chamonix beym Sonnenaufgange’, De Quincey’s view of the *Hymn* as a ‘translation’ on one hand as well as a ‘judicious amplification’ and ‘re-cast of the original’ on the other hand indicates that De Quincey recognizes how Coleridge has moved from ‘translation’ to improvement of Brun’s lyric through extension, which perhaps justified borrowing.<sup>4</sup> For De Quincey states in a note:

Well I knew that, from the direction in which English philosophic

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express a debt of gratitude to Fred Burwick for his kind and considerate feedback on the previous draft of this typescript entitled ‘Poetic Double-Cross’.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey* edited by David Masson 14 Volumes (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1889-1890) 2:143. See also, Elinor S. Shaffer, ‘Coleridge’s Swiss Voice: Friederike Brun and the Vale of Chamouny’ in *Essays in Memory of Michael Parkinson and Janine Dakyns* edited by Christopher Smith (Norwich: The School of Modern Languages and European Studies, 1996): 71-73.

<sup>3</sup> Earl Leslie Griggs, ‘Coleridge, De Quincey, and Nineteenth Century Editing’ *Modern Language Notes* 47.2 (February 1932): 88-90.

<sup>4</sup> Tilar J. Mazzeo, *Plagiarism and Literary Property in the Romantic Period* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). According to Mazzeo, ‘De Quincey outlines three possible circumstances in which appropriation from the text of another writer cannot be said to constitute culpable plagiarism: (1) when the author has improved upon the original work; (2) when the author has borrowed from a work so well known that a well-versed reader may be expected to credit the original source; and (3) when the borrowing has been unconscious’ (19).

studies were now travelling, sooner or later these appropriations of Coleridge must be detected; and I felt that it would break the force of the discovery, as an unmitigated sort of police detection, if first of all it had been announced by one who, in the same breath, was professing an unshaken faith in Coleridge's philosophic power.

(De Quincey 1889, Volume 2:227)

Despite Coleridge's tendency to make 'appropriations' from various authors including Brun, De Quincey professes here 'an unshaken faith' in Coleridge and tries to justify his own announcement to 'break the force of the discovery'. The 'police detection' that De Quincey discusses has appeared posthumously in reviews. McFarland has characterized Coleridge as a second-hand thinker who is inclined to intellectual kleptomania.<sup>5</sup> More recently, a host of scholars have likewise probed the question of Coleridge's plagiarism of German source material;<sup>6</sup> specifically, these scholars have considered the degree to which Coleridge's 'translation' is an adaptation of Brun's poem that extends and modifies it. In as much as current critics have already marshaled evidence about Coleridge's borrowing, I think it is important to reconsider the value of his *Hymn* in light of its direct influence on Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, which, at once, crosses over terrain much travelled—as Brun, Coleridge, and Wordsworth each wrote poetry about the Swiss Alps—and repudiates the religious overtones in Coleridge's *Hymn*. Harold Bloom's famous book discusses the *Hymn* mainly to foreground a critical analysis of Shelley's *Mont Blanc*.<sup>7</sup> Charles Robinson's article offers background mostly about the significance of Coleridge's *The Friend* in Shelley's thoughts without much interpretive analysis of the poetry.<sup>8</sup> Rather than retrace the question of Coleridge's 'appropriations' from Brun's lyric or how Coleridge's *Hymn* marks an entry point into discussing *Mont Blanc*, my intertextual thematic analysis of the *Hymn* and *Mont Blanc* will present a case for Shelley's poetic indebtedness to Coleridge.

For Coleridge, the power of the imagination enables him to transcend the temporal and ascend into the domain of the eternal. Nicholas Roe asserts that

<sup>5</sup> Thomas McFarland, *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969). McFarland identifies a catalogue of scathing reviewers of Coleridge's work—J. T. Ferrier 1840, J. H. Stirling 1865, C. M. Ingleby 1870, J. M. Robertson 1897, Rene Wellek 1931 and 1950 (McFarland, 3-13)—except for J. C. Hare 1835 who cautions De Quincey for his 'casual and inaccurate charges' and Coleridge's daughter Sara who published an introduction to the second edition of *Biographia Literaria* (1847) entitled 'Mr. Coleridge's obligations to Schelling and the unfair view of the subject presented in *Blackwood's Magazine*'. R. W. King, *The Review of English Studies* Volume 21 No. 81 (January 1945): 75-76. King states in defense of Coleridge: 'Whatever may be thought of the *Hymn* in comparison with Coleridge's better-known poems, there can be no doubt of its great superiority to the German original' (75).

<sup>6</sup> Norman Fruman, *Coleridge, The Damaged Archangel* (New York: George Braziller, 1971). Rupert Christiansen, *Romantic Affinities: Portraits from an Age, 1780-1830* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1988). Angela Esterhammer, "Coleridge's 'Hymn before Sun-rise'" *Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Sciences of Life* edited by Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Morton D. Paley, "'This Valley of Wonders': Coleridge's *Hymn before Sun-rise in the Vale of Chamouni*?" *European Romantic Review* 12 (Summer 2001): 351-380.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Bloom, 'The 1816 Hymns' in *Shelley's Mythmaking* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> Charles Robinson, 'The Shelley Circle and Coleridge's *The Friend*' in *English Language Notes* Volume 8 (1971): 269-274. Robinson explains, "But because Shelley did read *The Friend*, he probably read the 'Hymn Before Sun-rise'; and because either Shelley or Byron may have possessed and brought to Geneva a copy of *The Friend* [No. 11] . . . I submit that one of Coleridge's poems 'in [Shelley's] thought' on July 17, 1816 (less than a week before 'Mont Blanc' was written) was 'Hymn Before Sun-rise'" (273).

Coleridge's *Lecture on the Slave Trade* on 16 June, 1795 anticipates Coleridge's theory of the primary and secondary imagination in *Biographia* XIII twenty years later. Here, Coleridge identifies and defines the imagination, according to Roe, as the "progressive and God-given power that 'stimulates' to excellence through 'contemplation of splendid Possibilities'... to progress 'up the ascent of being' to reveal—in the end—"the eternal form of universal beauty'".<sup>9</sup> For Coleridge, the progress of the mind—"the ascent of being"—is associated with a physical movement of traversing towards and ascending the summit, which is analogous to the move from the finite mind to the infinite I AM. Clearly, there is here an association between the imagination and climbing a mountain. The mention of Coleridge's *Hymn* first appears in a letter to William Sotheby on 10 September, 1802: "That this is deep in our Nature, I felt when I was on Sca' fell—. I involuntarily poured forth a *Hymn* in the manner of the *Psalms*, tho' afterwards I thought the Ideas &c disproportionate to our humble mountains—& accidentally lighting on a short Note in some swiss Poems, concerning the Vale of Chamouny, & its Mountain, I transferred myself thither, in the Spirit, & adapted my former feelings to these grander external objects'.<sup>10</sup> The grandeur of Coleridge's feeling is not represented in the inspiring object, Scafell, and so he transfers this emotion to the physical grandeur of the Swiss Alps, which he had never seen, by using the secondary imagination, or perhaps the fancy, to conjure up images of 'the Vale of Chamouny, & its Mountain'—an allusion to Brun's poem. That Coleridge 'involuntarily poured forth' his *Hymn* while on Sca' fell indicates a moment of poetic inspiration before 'accidentally' happening upon the 'short Note'. In addition, as early as 8 June, 1802, Coleridge recorded descriptions of Sca' fell in his *Notebooks*. He literally depicts the 'Esk' (i.e. a body of water) flowing between 'Sca' fell and Bowfell' that merges with 'two fountains' and another 'feeder', which are reflected in the *Hymn* through the Arve and Arveiron;<sup>11</sup> curiously, his description in the *Notebooks* anticipates Shelley's opening lines in *Mont Blanc*: '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' (Shelley, ll. 7-11 emphasis mine). Even though Shelley, of course, never read the *Notebooks*, it is quite amazingly evident that Shelley's lines, especially the 'feeble brook', are similar to Coleridge's description of 'Esk'.

However, Shelley did have a copy of Coleridge's poem in hand during his

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1988), p. 216. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* Bollingen Series LXXV Volume 7 *Biographia Literaria* edited by James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* Volume II 1801-1806 edited by Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 864-865. The *Hymn* was first published in the *Morning Post* on 11 September, 1802, again in *The Friend* 1809 and 1812, and in *Sybilline Leaves* 1817.

<sup>11</sup> CN I 1205

visit to the Swiss Alps on 23 July, 1816.<sup>12</sup> Shelley probably was not ecstatic about the lyric poem as a direct revelation of the Judeo-Christian God that glorified the religious sublime. By contrast with Coleridge's *Hymn*, Shelley's *Mont Blanc* steers clear of Coleridge's theology. Angela Leighton's *Shelley and the Sublime* notes Shelley's resistance to Coleridge's influence: 'If Shelley acknowledges Coleridge as his precursor as a poet of the sublime, he does so in a spirit of opposition'.<sup>13</sup> Shelley doubted the existence of God and renounced institutionalized Christianity. In corroboration, Christopher Hitt's "Shelley's Unwriting of 'Mont Blanc'" (2005) contends here that, "If, as seems likely, Shelley saw Coleridge's 'Hymn' as exemplifying the 'conventional Christian response to viewing Mont Blanc', then it seems certain he saw his own poem as offering an alternative response".<sup>14</sup> This is consistent with Shelley who signed his name along with the terms 'democrat', 'great lover of humanity', and 'atheist' on the hotel register at Chamouny.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it reminds us of Shelley's initial attack on Christianity, *The Necessity of Atheism*. Yet the head note of the *Hymn* in *The Morning Post* reads, 'who would be, who could be an Atheist in this vale of wonders?'<sup>16</sup> Michael O'Neill argues, "This is a signature of Shelley's response to Coleridge. The *locus classicus* for studying this response is 'Mont Blanc', evidently written with Coleridge's 'Hymn before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouny' in mind".<sup>17</sup> Here, Shelley's 'signature' marks an atheist's response to a lyric about the natural realm exalting the Almighty. Cian Duffy argues, 'Shelley's revision of the discourse on the sublime turned precisely upon a rejection of the kind of religious, anthropomorphic response to natural processes embodied in Coleridge's *Hymn*' (Duffy 2005, 113). Even though I acknowledge Duffy's point, I differ from Duffy in that I believe that Shelley's poem is not just a repudiation of Coleridge's religious response to 'natural processes', but appears to constitute an ontological move indicating the self's incessant search for purposeful existence, distinct from the traditional purposes associated with the idea of God. Shelley struggles with the question of his place in a godless universe where the natural world is reconfigured and reordered according to the poetic mind in creation. Shelley depicts this as a 'fading coal' dissipating from the very start as writing marks the end of

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth, 'The Secret Strength of Things,' *The Wordsworth Circle*. 18 (1986): 99-107. Wordsworth states that 'Shelley had with him in Switzerland a copy of Coleridge's *Friend*, containing the ecstatic *Hymn Before Sun-rise in the Vale of Chamouny*' (Wordsworth 1987, 99).

<sup>13</sup> Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984). Cian Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (Cambridge: CUP 2005). Duffy responds to Leighton's work in his opening chapter 'From Religion to Revolution: 1810-1813' regarding the imagination, religion, and natural sublime (pp. 2 and 22).

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Hitt, "Shelley's Unwriting of 'Mont Blanc'" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 47.2 (2005):139-166. Joseph Raben, 'Coleridge as a Prototype of the Poet in Shelley's *Alastor*' *The Review of English Studies* Volume 17 Number 67 (August, 1966): 278-292. Raben argues, "By the large number of verbal and thematic correspondences with Coleridge's 'Hymn before Sun-rise in the Vale of Chamouny', as well as by their common subject-matter, Shelley is clearly rebutting the conventional religiosity of the older man" (Raben 1966, 286).

<sup>15</sup> Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 377n. Cian Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), p. 112.

<sup>17</sup> Michael O'Neill, 'The Gleam of Those Words: Coleridge and Shelley,' *The Keats-Shelley Review* 19 (2005): 76-96, p78.

inspiration virtually and the beginning of revision where the lyric in the *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817) is a refined version of the Scrope Davies fair copy, which has been crafted with the *Hymn* in mind.<sup>18</sup>

Shelley not only revises his own lyric, but *Mont Blanc* is an 'echo' of Coleridge's *Hymn* evoking a power that 'dissolves, diffuses, [and] dissipates in order to re-create' in accordance to Shelley's skeptical vision:

Hast thou a charm to stay the Morning-Star  
 In his steep course? So long he seems to pause  
 On thy bald awful head, O sovran BLANC!  
 The Arve and Arveiron at thy base  
 Rave ceaselessly; but thou most awful Form!  
 Risest from forth thy silent Sea of Pines,  
 How silently!

(*Hymn*, ll. 1-7)<sup>19</sup>

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.

(*Mont Blanc*, ll. 1-11)<sup>20</sup>

The 'secret springs' must be read in two ways. The 'springs' refer to a natural body of water—which becomes a metaphor for the 'source of human thought'—Shelley's thought, emanating from a 'secret' source, Coleridge's *Hymn*. Shelley's lyric voice, thus, is a 'sound but half its own' that indicates tension existing between poetic influence and subsequent composition: 'now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom'. Shelley's poem reflects his belief that the mind coalesces with the 'universe of things', just as a 'feeble brook' eventually conjoins with a 'vast river'. Shelley creates a vision of the

<sup>18</sup> Michael O'Neill, *Fair-Copy Manuscripts of Shelley's Poems in European and American Libraries*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Michael O'Neill (New York: Garland Press, 1997). Michael O'Neill, 'Shelley's Lyric Art' in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002). O'Neill states: 'The point to stress is that we are given a rare opportunity of watching one of our greatest poets writing one of his greatest poems twice' (619).

<sup>19</sup> *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* Bollingen Series LXXV Volume 16 Part 1 *Hymn before Sun-rise in the Vale of Chamouny* edited by J. C. C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Mays indicates, 'The most profound engagement with the values of the poem [Coleridge's *Hymn*] is P. B. Shelley's, in *Mont Blanc* (1816)' (719). Quotes from the *Hymn* hereafter will be from this edition.

<sup>20</sup> *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* Second Edition edited by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002). Quotes from *Mont Blanc* hereafter will be from this edition.

self based upon his poetic imaginative power, which envisions the self as a pseudo-religious force recalling creation in the book of Genesis and echoing Coleridge's *Hymn*. The movement of Shelley's mind rather than the mind of God is compared to the shifting waves below. Shelley's gaze atop the bridge looking into the blackness and infinite depth of the ravine evokes the natural sublime that signifies a moment of privation; loss of sight and sound arouses terror. The magnitude in depth, darkness, and silence of the ravine stretches the imagination beyond its limits, and its failure to measure the magnitude suggests fear in the poetic mind of losing itself in an abyss of indeterminacy. For Coleridge, 'sovrán BLANC' and its 'sky pointing peaks' call attention to the 'awful Form' that evokes a sense of the awe-inspiring religious sublime and directs his gaze to the 'steep course' of the 'Morning-Star' hovering above the 'bald [treeless] awful head'. The 'Morning-Star' or greater light in its steepness or height serves as a contrast to the moon or lesser light depicted in Coleridge's 'Dejection: An Ode' (April 1802). In as much as *Dejection* has been considered a wedding verse for Wordsworth's marriage to Mary Hutchinson, Reeve Parker has argued that Coleridge's *Hymn* can be viewed as an epithalamium too. Coleridge's gaze, therefore, reflects an act of worship as the mountain directs his inward vision upwards in reverence toward the Almighty—"Thou, the meanwhile, wast blending with my Thought, / Yea, with my Life and Life's own secret Joy" (*Hymn*, ll. 19-20).<sup>21</sup> Here, the 'blending' that takes place is not the poetic mind with the natural world evident in Shelley's lyric; rather, for Coleridge, the 'blending' concerns a mingling of the finite mind's own thoughts in communion with the mind of the infinite I AM.

In the case of Coleridge's *Hymn*, the natural world reflects the Almighty; whereas, in Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, the natural world mirrors the poet's solipsism, as in these two contrasting passages:

Ye Ice-falls! ye that from the Mountain's brow  
 Adown enormous Ravines slope amain—  
 Torrents, methinks, that heard a mighty Voice,  
 And stopp'd at once amid their maddest plunge!  
 Motionless Torrents! silent Cataracts!  
 Who made you glorious as the Gates of Heaven  
 Beneath the keen full Moon? Who bade the Sun  
 Clothe you with Rainbows? Who, with living flowers  
 Of loveliest blue, spread garlands at your feet?—  
 God! Let the Torrents, like a Shout of Nations,  
 Answer! and let the Ice-plains echo, God!

(*Hymn*, ll. 49-59)

Thy caverns echoing to the Arve's commotion,

<sup>21</sup> Reeve Parker, *Coleridge's Meditative Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975). Parker elucidates, 'In all versions of the *Hymn* that experience of entranced self-projection and blending with the mountain's huge shape serves as a transition leading the poet from the blank, awed sense of darkness and silence associated with the dread of the sublime to the sense of a joyous, mediated participation in the fully uttered worship of the natural universe' (164).

A loud, lone sound no other sound can tame;  
 Thou art pervaded with the ceaseless motion,  
 Thou art the path of that unresting sound—  
 Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee  
 I seem as in a trance sublime and strange  
 To muse on my own separate phantasy,  
 My own, my human mind, which passively  
 Now renders and receives fast influencings,  
 Holding an unremitting interchange  
 With the clear universe of things around;

(*Mont Blanc*, ll. 30-40)<sup>22</sup>

In the *Hymn*, the 'Ice-plains', 'Motionless Torrents', and 'silent Cataracts', which clearly indicate suspension, suddenly are animated to exalt God. The static natural figures shift where 'torrents' and 'Ice-plains' praise the Almighty. The answering and echoing now reflect an interchange between nature and God observed by the poet who records the exchange. However, for Shelley, 'caverns' echo the 'Arve's commotion'. Arguably, this is an important moment in the lyric where Shelley asserts directly the displacement of the voice of the Almighty by the distinctive 'lone sound' that 'no other sound can tame' emanating from the caverns. Likewise, this mountain metaphor can be read as Shelley's own 'unresting sound' feverishly at odds with itself in the process of revision—*History of a Six Weeks' Tour* and *Scrope Davies Notebook*. The 'Dizzy Ravine' does not mirror the Almighty; Shelley sees his 'own separate phantasy' and his own 'human mind' at work as the poet inscribes his thoughts upon the white mountain or blank slate. The reader has to wonder whether these 'fast influencings' are only from the natural world or, perhaps, from Coleridge's *Hymn*—'an old and solemn harmony' (*Mont Blanc*, line 24)—echoing through the interiority of Shelley's mind in an 'unremitting interchange'.

Shelley's look downward into the 'Dizzy Ravine' reflecting a vision of the self is an important contrast to his gaze upward. Shelley's look downward suggests looking inward while the look upward activates the imagination:

—I look on high;  
 Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled  
 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!

<sup>22</sup> Earl Wasserman, *The Subtler Language: Critical Readings of Neoclassic and Romantic Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1959). Wasserman explains: "Since each human mind is also one of the 'things' of the universe, it too pours its tributary stream into the universal river of One Mind" (223). Harold Bloom, 'The 1816 Hymns' in *Shelley's Mythmaking* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969). Bloom perceives 'the relationship of an individual I to a universal Thou' (25).



Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,  
 Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy, and serene—  
 (*Mont Blanc*, ll. 52-61, emphasis mine)

Thou too again, stupendous Mountain! thou  
 That as I raise my head, awhile bow'd low  
 In adoration, upward from thy Base  
 Slow-travelling with dim eyes suffus'd with tears,  
 Solemnly seemest, like a *vapoury cloud*,  
 To rise before me—Rise, O ever rise,  
 Rise like a *cloud of Incense*, from the Earth!  
 (*Hymn*, ll. 74-80, emphasis mine)

Unlike Coleridge, as Shelley 'look[s] on high', he perceives an 'unknown omnipotence', which Shelley will not acknowledge as God. Shelley's question suggests skepticism as his gesture shifts from looking upward to lying down indicating alternating states of consciousness—waking and dreaming, conscious and unconscious, life and death. For Shelley, the gaze upward triggers contemplation about the natural sublime as he imagines what the peak of Mont Blanc 'piercing the infinite sky' might be like '—still, snowy, and serene—', which, uncannily, turns to meditation on the self. The simile that compares the Shelleyan 'spirit', in this case, to a 'homeless cloud' anticipates 'To a Skylark' (June 1820). Shelley confesses in *Mont Blanc* though that this 'very spirit fails' like the 'homeless cloud' adrift from 'steep to steep'—each 'steep' as one of the strong poets who precede him, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge.<sup>23</sup> The 'steep' signifies Shelley's recognition of the immense difficulty of rising above the pinnacle and exceeding his precursors. If there are limitations to Shelley's lyric, then it comes in the form of echoes alluding to the lines of his predecessors—whether literary or biblical—as sources of inspiration. His concern about that which 'vanishes' offers insight into his consciousness, preoccupied with its own fleeting existence in contrast with the permanence of Mont Blanc: 'Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe' (*Mont Blanc*, ll. 80-81). As opposed to the voice of Yahweh dispensing commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, Shelley privileges the 'voice' of Mont Blanc displacing Judeo-Christian commandments. On the contrary, as Coleridge raises his head upward, this is from a posture of prayer in humble adoration of the Almighty. Self-contemplation becomes enveloped by exaltation of God. The 'vapoury cloud' rising before Coleridge from the imagined 'Base' of Mont Blanc is compared to 'Incense' as an act of sacrifice and praise akin to a religious rite. Here, the cloud is not 'homeless' as in Shelley's lyric; rather, the 'vapoury cloud' leads Coleridge to

<sup>23</sup> Shelley describes Coleridge to Gisborne: 'You will see Coleridge—he who sits obscure / In the exceeding lustre and the pure / Intense irradiation of a mind / Which, with its own internal lightning blind, / Flaps wearily through darkness and despair—/ A *cloud-encircled* meteor of the air, / A hooded eagle among blinking owls—' (Shelley, ll. 202-208, emphasis mine).

meditate on his eternal home in the everlasting after-life. In contrast, Shelley writes: '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' (ll. 117-120). The simile of 'work' and 'dwelling' like 'smoke' reminds the reader of the 'spirit' like the 'homeless cloud', which 'vanish' into nothingness leaving no trace of their place of being.

After all, if Coleridge's *Hymn* has been punctuated by a series of exclamations that praise the Almighty, then Shelley's work is a counterpoint evident in the final question:

Thou kingly Spirit throned among the hills,  
 Thou dread Ambassador from Earth to Heaven,  
 Great Hierarch! tell thou the silent Sky,  
 And tell the Stars, and tell yon rising Sun,  
 Earth, with her thousand voice, praises God.

(*Hymn*, ll. 81-85)

The secret strength of things  
 Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome  
 Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!  
 And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,  
 If to the human mind's imaginings  
 Silence and solitude were vacancy?

(*Mont Blanc*, ll. 139-144)

From Coleridge's perspective, Mont Blanc, 'among the hills', is the 'kingly Spirit', 'dread Ambassador', and 'Great Hierarch' charged with telling the cosmos that the Earth praises God. The 'silent Sky', 'Stars', and 'rising Sun' listen and seem to be admonished to join in the cacophony of praise to the Almighty. Even though Shelley acknowledges some sort of 'secret strength' that 'governs thought' and 'inhabits' Mont Blanc, he still refuses to admit how this might proceed from the God. For Shelley, the 'human mind's imaginings' stand opposed to Yahweh's mind. The human mind can distinguish 'silence' and 'solitude' from 'vacancy' too and imbue Mont Blanc, the earth, stars, and sea with animated force due to the 'mind's imaginings'; outward phenomena reflect the dynamics of inward power, which infuses meaning within the natural realm. Shelley's mind then reigns supreme as that which gives life to inanimate objects. Stuart Curran writes, 'Shelley's concluding question is subtler in its extensions, but otherwise is essentially the same as that with which Coleridge began his hymn. Both mountains and morning-stars are accorded their charms by poets' imaginations'.<sup>24</sup>

If Coleridge's *Hymn* is indebted to Brun's lyric, then I argue that Shelley's *Mont Blanc* is likewise indebted to Coleridge's *Hymn*. Coleridge and Shelley each modify and extend the prior lyric for the sake of the poet's own purposes.

<sup>24</sup> Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 62.

The *Hymn* reflects shadows of the divine within the natural world. *Mont Blanc* displaces the divine with the natural world. Essentially, rivers, mountain steeps, and clouds each have significance because the poetic imagination activates and animates the natural figures that I believe offer inroads into matters about poetic influence and indebtedness. For Coleridge and Shelley, the act of developing an existing poem reflects the impetus behind poetic inspiration, and subsequent composition leads to an extension, adaptation, or modification of the preceding poem.