

# **The Trope of the Tortured Genius: An Examination of 19<sup>th</sup> Century British and American Poetry**

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## INTRODUCTION

“THERE IS NO GREAT GENIUS WITHOUT SOME TOUCH OF MADNESS” –ARISTOTLE

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze the trope of the tortured genius in the transatlantic nineteenth century landscape. For the purposes of this paper, a genius is an individual or position that affords perspective, power, everlasting life, or some designation that separates one entity from another in a meaningful way. I will be focusing on the figure of the reclusive, inventive, or dark genius. These traits are often synonymous with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic era genius. The Romantic genius pushes back against the established traits of both the epic hero and the traditional genius.

The characteristics of epic poetry and the epic hero are fairly consistent across authors and works. Scholar M.H. Abrams classifies epic poetry into two categories - traditional epics, original versions of oral poetry that were transcribed anywhere from the eighth century BC to the thirteenth century AD, and literary epics which were “deliberate imitations of the traditional form” and experimented with accepted conventions. The scope of this paper is limited to literary epics, and Abrams argues that “the literary epic is certainly the most ambitious of poetic enterprises, making immense demands on a poet’s knowledge, invention, and skill to sustain the scope, grandeur, and authority of a poem that tends to encompass the world of its day and a large portion of its learning” (110). Abrams defines epic poetry in a manner consistent with academic consensus. Each story must be told in a “grand style” – the ceremonial tone of the work mirrors the hero’s vast and often “cosmic” importance and their place in a natural setting equally as vast and often sublime and personified. There must be a battle or large-scale conflict of some kind, and the hero figure must prevail and distinguish himself (traditional and to some extent literary epics were only written with a male protagonist) and be recognized by what Abrams calls

“machinery”, a neoclassical term for the “supernatural agents...that were part of the literary contrivances of the epic” (110).

While the characteristics of an epic hero are overtly defined, classical understanding of genius remains dependent on author, culture, and era. However, there are some broadly accepted characteristics. William Wordsworth, in his 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* explains the traditional genius this way: “For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated.” Wordsworth suggests that the role of the traditional genius is to draw out the reader’s understanding of their surroundings and enhance it. The genius does this by coaxing the mortal reader to better understand their own personal history and limited perspective. Wordsworth also breaks the fourth wall of literature and requires a connection between the text itself and the reader, facilitated by the traditional genius.

With these constructs in mind, I chose to develop an author-dependent definition of Romantic era genius, a figure much more multifaceted than either the epic hero or traditional genius. I used British and American 19<sup>th</sup> century poetry as my textual framework because of period’s rich cannon of authors and the many poems that addressed genius in a manner that

pushed back against the accepted notions of genius and of the epic hero. While British Romantic movement (at its peak between 1800-1850) began twenty to thirty years earlier than American Romanticism (1820-1860), much of the literature is thematically similar, especially in the American Dark Romantic Movement. Mainly in response to the idealism and perfection of the Transcendental movement, dark romantics focus on individual torment and gothic sublimity. I used John Keats, Percy Shelley, and Edgar Allan Poe as three representative Romantic poets. These authors present both biographical and textual proximity to the concept of the tortured genius, facilitating the imbricated analysis of writer and protagonist. Taken together, they form a critical dialogue on the characteristics and outcomes of genius.

All three authors lived short and tumultuous lives and, like many poets of the Romantic era, considered themselves to be geniuses and as such gifted with a more perfect perspective than the unenlightened masses. This sentiment of their own genius appears in both their own theoretical writing as well as period and contemporary response to their poetry. In keeping with their personal lives, these three poets created tortured genius figures in their work. I selected Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) and Keats' *Hyperion* (1818) and its rewritten successor *The Fall of Hyperion* (1819) as emblematic of the movement and particularly relevant for my exploration of the trope of the tortured and recluse genius. Consistent with the accepted tenets of the British movement, each text focuses on the lone protagonist, offers a distinct treatment of anthropomorphized Nature, idealizes of beauty and knowledge, and emphasizes the intellect. Edgar Allan Poe is perhaps the most notorious writer of the American movement. While many works discuss the male protagonist's quest for greatness, three poems are especially emblematic: *Tamerlane* (1827), *Israfel* (1831) and *In Youth I Have Known One* (n/d). Each presents a gender-binary perception of genius. Similar to the British genius, the male genius figure in Poe is closely

tied to Nature. However, he is unconcerned with the ephemerality of his position, and instead effortlessly enjoys his reality. He is removed from the imperfections of common life – the closest social connection the reader is witness to is his disembodied appreciation for female qualities and love as a way to inspire his own greatness. Poe’s poetry is unnervingly idyllic. Each poem discussed in the ensuing thesis analyzes the specific way that the genius perceives himself and interacts with their surroundings – both natural and social. Poe’s genius is more consistent with the epic hero, though the idealized and highly gendered characterizations present flawed perceptions of genius. Ultimately, these authors define the characteristics of a genius and present the advantages and costs associated with this role.

This thesis begins with a summary of the period and contemporary critical landscape of the British Romantics, and moves through original analysis of *Prometheus Unbound* and then the *Hyperion* poems with a brief conclusion. This is followed by an overview of Poe’s critical and historical context, again followed by an analysis of *Tamerlane*, *Israfel* and *In Youth I Have Known One* and a conclusion. The British and American authors are considered together at the close of the thesis where common elements of genius are juxtaposed with author-dependent specifics. Common aspects include genius as driver of originality, their disregard of consensuses, divine-like agency, and the Poet as the penultimate representative of human agency. Keats, Shelley, and Poe present unique treatments of Nature, the role of men and women, societal response to genius, the viability of the role itself.

## THE BRITISH POETS

### Critical Introduction.

While the critical landscape for theory of genius in a nineteenth century British Romantic context is both vast and varied, this section aims to address the main prevailing theories through both contemporary analysis and period theory. The purpose of genius, its muse, and the balance between revision and creation differ between authors.

In his article “Romantic Poetry: why and wherefore” in the Cambridge Press, Stuart Curran puts forth a compelling argument that contextualizes the political and social climate that Shelley and Keats wrote in. He argues that epic poetry was a male-dominated elitist practice used to escape cultural turmoil caused by the ongoing Napoleonic Wars. At this time, the Wars were the longest conflicts in history. The complexity of Romantic, and more specifically epic, poetry offered a welcome relief. This often exclusionary, emergent style of writing experimented with the literary epic, and Shelley and Keats were forbearers of this new and complicated methodology. Curran writes, “There was a time when commentators of Romantic poetry mistook the atmosphere of artistic experimentation in the period, which is normal to all art, for an abandonment of tradition, which is now. The profusion of sonnets, odes, even epics, however, testifies to the opposite of that abandonment, an intense engagement with the possibilities of form opened up by, contained within, the new history of poetry in English...Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* [is a] prime example – [it bears] strong evidence of generic intermixture on a grand scale” (226). The “generic intermixture” is what allows Shelley’s and Keats’ creation of their genius figures, as they were no longer confined to single-genre characterization.

Further, according to Curran, political censorship of the era led poets to more subtle and underground modes of social commentary, though the inspiration for the allegory was not lost on the reader. Curran supports this claim by likening the overthrow of Jupiter in *Prometheus*

*Unbound* to the abdication of the French throne by Napoleon. Shelley's epic depicts a "tyrannical king of the gods, who keeps dissidents in chains and surround himself with unctuous lackeys" (229) and the unification of the multitude of faceless voices shouting "Our great Republic hears" (229), a reality which strikingly mirrors the War and class turmoil between the working and upper classes. Curran goes on to argue that though Keats was seen as less politically motivated than his contemporaries, *Hyperion's* central theme is a "dynastic shift, and to conceive its terms solely as an aesthetic formulation is to exclude connotations that could not but be in the mind of the contemporary reader" (229). Curran's work helps to contextualize the political and social climate of the period – stifling dissent pushed Keats and Shelley to create allegorical social commentary, but writing that could be passed off as purely fiction.

Tilottama Rajan advances the theory of how genius was created in the context of a literary tradition in "The Epigenesis of Genre: New Forms from Old." Rajan's argument is consistent with Curran's theory of generic intermixture. She argues that Romantics played with accepted genre. Romantic writers specifically "found classical perfection limiting, and [were] more interested in the 'idea's failure to articulate itself in the modes of art" (517). This is particularly poignant when examining Keats' and Shelley's sublime descriptions of the imperfect genius figure. Rajan goes on to say that "Symbolic art, in which the form and content fail to coalesce because the 'idea' is deficient, and romantic art, whose dis-integration results from the fact that external forms are insufficient to convey the idea, are two forms of incompleteness, like the regressive and progressive" (517). This dichotomy characterizes much of these epics, and works to conceptualize what Shelley and Keats practice. Her penultimate point is that "Romanticism's most important contributions to genre were metagenetic: they consist not only of adding genres but also rethinking the very limits of acceptable kinds of literature" (518).

Eva Schaper bridges the gap between cultural and literary genre evolution to the application of this theory in nineteenth century British poetry. She focuses on philosopher Immanuel Kant's theory of genius as a way of depicting the subjectivity of experience, as Curran and Rajan argue the subjectivity of genre. She argues that "The most subjective and private of human capabilities, that of feeling, far from being mute and inchoate, could, Kant now thought, yield the determining ground of the aesthetic judgment... That feeling also has a structure that can manifest itself as rational in the widest sense" (371). Schaper suggests that objective determination of the aesthetic is impossible, and instead focuses on intangible and subjective emotion and experience. Here, a theory of genius begins to take form. Schaper condenses Kant's theory of genius by using originality as the determinant of genius: "There must be a capacity or "natural endowment," a special gift that enables the artist to create artworks. It cannot be a making according to rules that are known in advance, though something like rules or concepts must be presupposed" (389). She continues, "Genius... is thus always original. Yet since there may also be no original nonsense, its products must at the same time be models, i.e. be exemplary; and consequently though not themselves derived from imitation, they must serve that purpose for others" (391). This balance between acknowledging the "rules and concepts" of previous forms while the seemingly painless creation of something original is what defines a genius according to Rajan.

Paul Hamilton's "Romanticism and Poetic Autonomy" continues the scholarly consensus by introducing the genius of both the poem as a literary form and the poet themselves. He argues that poetry redesigns literature and reworks its themes into something new: "The critical establishment, it appears, must rather guarantee the continuum of literary history. Only then may poetry creatively disrupt it. But the poetic autonomy the critics defend remains a discrete



narrative of poetic history, one discourse among many, rather than a law unto itself. In this the critical establishment is democratic, its *Reviews* treating poetry on par with other discourses and freeing criticism from the esoteric ruses of poetry itself” (439). Poetry as an art form utilizes its autonomy to subvert accepted practices – Hamilton’s therefore defines the Poet as the ultimate genius.

While contemporary criticism certainly has its place in exposing the theory of genius and its methods of creation, especially with the benefit of historical retrospect, period pieces provide a different perspective on what Romantic authors considered to be genius. William Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of works first published in 1798 and considered to be the beginning of the Romantic movement, is particularly revealing, along with Shelley’s own “Defense of Poetry.”

Wordsworth focuses in on something the previous authors discussed have failed to address – the focus of the genius themselves. He writes, “The subject is indeed important! For the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know, that one being is elevated above another, in proportion as he possesses this capability. It has therefore appeared to me, that to endeavor to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged; but this service, excellent at all times, is especially so at the present day.” Wordsworth’s emphasis on subtly is something Shelley and Keats employ in multitudes, in both character development and plot. His emphasis on human intellectual agency, in both the ability to understand and appreciate the “faint perception of beauty and dignity” and its capability to “enlarge it”. The preface assigns the Poet the most heightened awareness and broadest perspective, and thus most capable of

producing genius work. Despite the unrivaled position of the poet, Wordsworth addresses a caveat to this role that is instrumental to understanding Shelley and Keats's treatment of genius. He writes, "However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a Poet, it is obvious, that, while he describes and imitates passions, his situation is altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. So that it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him, by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure." Despite the capability and agency of the Poet, he is unable to capture the ephemeral and ineffable of daily life. The perfection of "action and suffering" cannot be replicated. Perhaps this explains the flawed genius figures that the Poet creates in *Prometheus Unbound* and the *Hyperion* poems, the limited genius of the author reflects and illuminates the characters in the work.

And perhaps the most relevant to this discussion, Shelley's own "Defense of Poetry" bridges the gap between removed literary theory about the structure and role of metageneric poetry and a discussion of what defines genius within a poem. Paul Hamilton writes that Shelley is committed to a "'cyclic poem', repeatedly historicized, never self-identical, rejuvenated by the poetic additions and critical reinterpretations of successive ages" (431), a claim in keeping with the critical consensus of easy creation while not forgetting preceding genius. Shelley builds on Wordsworth's idea of Poetry's means of presenting genius and higher thinking, introducing "mimetic representation" as a way of effectively conveying both new and old ideas. While Shelley focuses more on new perspectives on imitation of accepted forms than Wordsworth, both

are productive for understanding the role of the Poet as creator of genius as well as its limitations and freedoms. However, Shelley challenges the perception of the Poet as a moral compass for man, that this is a “misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man.” Instead, “poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It 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; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists.” This expansion of the mind and knowledge of one’s surroundings is emblematic of the genius discussed throughout this work. While Wordsworth would suggest that this unveiling of the “hidden beauty of the world” is imperfect, Shelley ascribes more agency, and argues that the Poet can totally capture the surrounding world. In this theory, the flawed geniuses of Shelley and Keats’ own epics suggest something else entirely – the authors uninhibited commentary on the pursuit of greatness. Both perspectives are illuminating to understanding the subtleties of the texts. Even this coexistence of conflicting theories supports British Romanticism at its core – its foundation and reliance in evolution, and creation.

While these authors are not concerned with the figures of genius within the actual verse of the poem (the focus of the next section) their collective theory of genius is productive to begin actual textual analysis. They develop the role as one enormous power and responsibility, yet one that demands discretion and introspection to grasp the subtleties of both historical place and literary traditions. Genius, especially in the Romantic period, evokes extended allegory and metaphor to offer poignant cultural and political criticism, and uses a variety of muses to convey

their multigeneric message. While the overarching concepts are consistent between authors, there is some discrepancy between the power of the Poet in effectively revealing the perfection of the surrounding world and the mutability of form and function. Ultimately, this literature sets up a framework through which the view the following in-depth textual analysis of *Prometheus Unbound* and both *Hyperion* poems.

### **John Keats' Definition of Genius.**

“True genius resides in the capacity for evaluation of uncertain, hazardous, and conflicting information” –Winston Churchill

John Keats (1795-1821) is accepted as one of the most celebrated English authors, and his work addresses a vast subject matter. This chapter seeks to address how Keats defines genius, and analyze the mediums and methods he uses to develop and support this theory. A comparison of *Hyperion* (1818) and *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* (1819) together develop a compelling argument for the characteristics and details of genius according to John Keats, and his 1816 biographical *Epistle to My Brother George* provokes a discussion of the role of mortal man in these realms. The use of Greek gods, and immortal and celestial beings elevates the texts beyond common day occurrences and people to disassociate the reader enough from the themes and overall message of the work. This creation of a different reality increases the likelihood that the reader is removed enough from the world of the plot and to think critically. However, the poems are couched in familiar religious references and natural imagery so the reader is not totally alienated. Keats structures his poems this way to create the most effective conveyance of his theory of genius.

The two unfinished epics, *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, depict the mystical world of gods which contain the rise and fall of the Olympians, the Titans, and the emerging pantheon. As a complication that will be addressed following an analysis of the qualities of a genius, the

appearance of the mortal man in *Epistle to my Brother George* contrasts the *Hyperion* poems' lack of mortal presence. This introduction illuminates Keats' perspective on mortality, immortality and genius.

First, a foundational understanding of what Keats perceives as genius must be developed, and can be found in *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*. Both poems depict once-supreme figures that are now haunted and tormented, though not discredited. These geniuses are unable to escape these torments with death, only sleep. Genius itself is an ephemeral position in these poems.

In these two works, Keats ultimately suggests that genius is tormented by perspective and is a heavily flawed figure subject to ephemeral sovereignty and immortality without reprieve. These works do not encourage pursuit of genius – while the isolated position of genius is appealing, the existence on the fringes of this fickle throne leads to an eternal and haunted damnation.

#### *The Position of Genius as Damnation*

Keats' genius, while powerful and in command of divine knowledge, is damned throughout the *Hyperion* poems. This distinction is seen in the new and old pantheons of Titans: they appear to command (or once have commanded) enormous amounts of power, their position torments and haunts them. While *Hyperion* in its totality can be read as the torture of genius and the simultaneous struggle to power by the new order, the gods of this poem provide poignant moments that expose the depth of the pain felt as a result of their position.

*Hyperion* struggles with the position of genius throughout the work. However, it is culminated in Mnemosyne's bestowal of knowledge on Apollo of the new order. The language at the beginning of the transformation is marked with a positive and expectant tone as Apollo sees “A wondrous lesson in thy silent face: / Knowledge enormous makes a God of me. / Names,

deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions, / Majesties, sovereign voices, agonies, / Creations and destroyings, all at once” (20). And yet, as Apollo beings the transference of knowledge, the language of the text changes dramatically:

Most like the struggle at the gate of death;  
Or liker still to one who should take leave  
Of pale immortal death, and with a pang  
As hot as death’s is chill, with fierce convulse  
Die into life: so young Apollo anguish’d. (20)

Now, Apollo is marked with “struggle” and lacks a solid sense of place, as the narrator writes “liker still to one who should take leave” neither allowing him to exist in one reality or another. The lack of belonging and conflict between internal and external realities continues with the “pang / as hot as death’s is chill” and the ultimate dichotomy – Apollo’s dying “into life.” Prior to receiving divine knowledge from Mnemosyne, there was no such contradiction. Though the poem ends shortly after, Keats records enough of this moment to convey the disunity and erode any evidence of internal harmony that Apollo exhibits prior to obtaining his position of genius. However literary scholar John D. Margolis argues that this position gives Apollo the genius that he is in the process of obtaining when the poem abruptly ends. In 1818, Keats writes in a personal letter: “The only means of strengthening one’s intellect is to make up one’s mind about nothing – to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts” (1342). The release of searching for meaning ostensibly allows Apollo to exist in the liminal state at the end of the unfinished work. Instead of it being damaging as the isolated close reading of the text suggests, Apollo in fact completes his acquisition of divine knowledge, though the text would suggest that this

transformation is incomplete. Though the language of this scene marks a dramatic turn, the sentiment conveyed remains surprisingly consistent, arguing that the pain of genius and the separation from one perceptive or another is what defines the role itself, not necessarily the perfect transcendence of one individual into divine capability.

*The Fall of Hyperion* uses more severe language to convey a similar perspective on the pain of genius. While this torment occurs in pockets throughout the poem, the severity of Moneta's outcry in the first canto is vital in developing the overall tone of the work. Moneta declares:

'My power, which to me is still a curse,  
'Shall be to thee a wonder; for the scenes  
'Still swooning vivid through my globed brain  
'With an electral changing misery  
'Thou shalt with those dull mortal eyes behold,  
'Free from all pain, if wonder pain thee not.'  
As near as an immortal's sphered words  
Could to a mother's soften, were these last:  
And yet I had a terror of her robes,  
And chiefly of the veils, that from her brow  
Hung pale, and curtain'd her in mysteries  
That made my heart too small to hold its blood. (6)

The distinction between the “dull mortal eyes” and the curse of her “globed brain” distinguishes Moneta from those who consider her power a “wonder; for the scenes/ still swooning vivid” though she considers it an “electral changing misery.” The use of shape to convey her torment is

significant – the immortal perspective is spherical, suggesting knowledge and understanding beyond the flat mortal perspective. Instead of being illuminating, this perspective is a “curse.” Additionally, the juxtaposition of Moneta’s reference to maternal comfort and the “terror of her robes” robs her of a basic comfort and furthers the claim that genius is not a position to be envied in Keats’ *The Fall of Hyperion*. In fact, due to her position even a mother’s robes become “terror,” resulting in Moneta’s heart being “too small to hold its blood.” The finality of this scene begins and, to an extent ends, the poem’s stance on genius. There is no apparent upside to the position of genius. Lilach Lachman of *Poetics Today* Publication suggests that the “tension between the impression of a timeless and ‘naive’ mode of existence and the repressed temporality that it conveys” (107) is the cause of the inescapable torment of the gods. “The lack of development gradually reveals itself as a negation of health, light, heat, music, speech, and youth. Its frozen aspects are identified negatively in relation to a former identity” (107). Moneta is frozen by her sight of the mother figure and while representative of a “former identity,” her heightened immortal perspective villainizes a traditionally comforting image.

### *Relief Through Sleep*

Despite the torment, escape and relief through death – arguably a mortal privilege – is not possible. In fact, relief for the geniuses comes only with sleep. In *The Fall of Hyperion*, the inability of Saturn to escape torment or even receive comfort is exposed through Moneta, the mysterious yet oracle-like woman that appears near the beginning of the poem. The narrator writes:

By an immortal sickness which kills not;  
It works a constant change, which happy death  
Can put no end to; deathwards progressing



To no death was that visage; it had pass'd  
The lily and the snow; and beyond these  
I must not think now, though I saw that face  
But for her eyes I should have fled away. (6)

Even to the narrator of the poem, the sight of Moneta's face and the "immortal sickness which kills not" compelled him to flee. Though he refers to her as "sad Moneta" later in the work, this passage creates a sense of unease and highlights the unnaturalness of her being. The contradiction of "deathwards progressing" but her face was "to no death" passing is unnerving to the narrator – so much so that he invokes the images of "lily" and "snow" to note that her "visage" "had pass'd" these elements. While it is unclear to what exactly her being had passed to, the ramifications of her immortality are effectively conveyed by the narrator. While Moneta is not one of the most prominent figures in this poem, the narrator's initial interaction with her at the onset of his dream or vision creates a precedence for the behavior of Hyperion, Saturn, and the other Titans throughout the rest of the work by suggesting that immortality can be damaging. In this passage, immortality harms the narrator as he is exposed to a haunting juxtaposition of "sickness" and "change" without the hope of "happy death."

Keats furthers his comment on immortality and the danger of genius when Moneta comes to comfort the ruined Saturn. The tenderness of her behavior, as she levels herself with him, as well as the seemingly helpless grief she feels humanizes her and exposes the weakness of the genius, Saturn.

Where beats the human heart, as if just there,  
Though an immortal, she felt cruel pain;

The other upon Saturn's bended neck  
She laid, and to the level of his hollow ear  
Leaning with parted lips, some words she spake  
In solemn tenor and deep organ tune;  
Some mourning words, which in our feeble tongue  
Would come in this like accenting; how frail  
To that large utterance of the early Gods!  
  
'Saturn! look up and for what, poor lost King?  
'I have no comfort for thee; no not one;  
'I cannot cry, Wherefore thus sleepest thou?  
'For Heaven is parted from thee, and the Earth  
'Knows thee not, so afflicted, for a God. (8)

While Saturn's destroyed the mortal "feeble tongue[ 's]" inability to capture the full weight of Moneta's "solemn tenor and deep organ tune" regarding Saturn's destroyed glory serves as a blunt reminder of his preserved superiority. However, his immortality prevents Moneta from offering any comfort to him. Moneta is plagued with the "cruel pain" found in the beating of "the human heart, as if just there" though immortality and a comprehensive understanding of the details surrounding Saturn's fall from power arguably. The physical position of Saturn, as he "sat / When he had lost his realms" coupled with the language of the text exposes the grief of ruin and his lack of relief. According to author Richard Fogle, "Great Saturn, Lord of Titans and Father of the Gods, is realmless: and this is of enormous, cosmic consequence. But these immensities of meaning are contracted to a physical point" (161). This realmlessness yet centering in Saturn's body becomes evident and only furthers this torturous

dichotomy and Saturn's inability to escape.

Moneta questions "wherefore thus sleepest thou?" in her desperate attempts at finding comfort for Saturn, though if the earlier *Hyperion* analysis applies to Keats' revision of this work, this unexplained sleep is Saturn's only relief. Moneta realizes this later in the canto, as she laments, "Saturn! sleep on: Me thoughtless, why should I / 'Thus violate thy slumberous solitude? / 'Why should I open thy melancholy eyes? / 'Saturn, sleep on, while at thy feet I weep.'" The narrator's earlier unsettling discovery of immortality in Moneta's eyes is continued into this passage, with Saturn's "melancholy eyes" exposing his truth. The "slumberous solitude" is his escape from the pain and dejection that causes Moneta to weep at his feet, and she laments her violation of this peace.

Keats reused much of this text from *Hyperion*, though the original epic contained passages that were not rewritten yet shed light on Keats' perception of genius. At the close of *Hyperion* Keats revisits this theme, yet now with Apollo – one of the new gods who has supplanted Hyperion and his pantheon. While this text has already been analyzed earlier in the work, a second look at the passage through a different lens illuminates Keats' perspective on the role of genius itself. He writes:

Soon wild commotions shook him, and made flush

All the immortal fairness of his limbs;

Most like the struggle at the gate of death;

Or liker still to one who should take leave

Of pale immortal death, and with a pang

As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse

Die into life: so young Apollo anguish'd;  
His very hair, his golden tresses famed  
Kept undulation round his eager neck. (20)

Prior to this scene, Apollo is tormented by his inability to realize his potential for genius. When he is granted divine knowledge by Mnemosyne, the reaction is death-like though the poem thus far would suggest that knowledge would heighten his power. Though it can be argued that this violent reaction is due him being instilled with omnipotent divinity, the use of death language suggests a more subtle message. While death has been unavailable to the gods, Keats extends the possibility of death to Apollo. The language used in the text only verifies the immortal's inability to use death as an escape from their torment because in death Apollo loses his immortality and "with fierce convulse / Die into life" which suggests he is now mortal. The contrasting coloring of "pale immortal death" and the power of "his golden tresses famed / Kept undulation round his eager neck" as he struggles "at the gate of death" would suggest that the power in *Hyperion* is held by the world on the other side of the gate of death, though it is unclear if this is Heaven or Earth. Ultimately, Keats furthers his message of the danger of knowledge, as well as the inability of peace of immortals, as seen in both the old and new gods. Any comfort or security Apollo finds is due to his transformation in death. For the rest of the gods there is no such comfort nor hope of death, only the possibility of undisturbed but not lasting sleep.

### *The Ephemeral Genius*

Keats further exposes the flaws of the genius figure by emphasizing the fleeting nature of a position of supremacy by having both *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* address the ruin of the old pantheon in contrast to the introduction of the new gods. While the perspective of genius may be eternal, or at least the ego of those who once were superior, the individuals who occupy

the position itself change. The ephemeral nature undermines the torment that genius is subjected to throughout these works and precipitates a question of whether the damage of ruin is offset by the temporary supremacy. In *Hyperion*, the old order bemoans its loss of the position of genius, though *The Fall of Hyperion* suggests that the Titans in this revision are not as generously relinquishing their power to the next pantheon.

In the original epic, the Titans remember the days of glory and unsubverted power, yet equate the passage of their position onto the new gods to the cultivation of the Earth. While this image references their connectedness to the Earth, it suggests a graceful relinquishment of power. Though this is not totally supported in the language of the poem, it does suggest the somewhat temporary position of genius in Keats' work. At one point, "The Heavens and the Earth, were manifest: / Then thou first-born, and we the giant-race, / Found ourselves ruling new and beauteous realms / Now comes the pain of truth, to whom 'tis pain; / O folly! for to bear all naked truths, / And to envisage circumstance, all calm, That is the top of sovereignty. Mark well!" The use of the phrases "first-born" and "giant-race" establish the Titans as "top of sovereignty" rulers, though the Olympians predated them and ostensibly occupied the same role. However, the omniscient "naked truths" and aerial perspective on all life is the ultimate benefit of genius. That era has come to a close, however, and yet in light of their ruin, named as "Chaos and blank Darkness" these Titans look forward to a new age:

So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,  
A power more strong in beauty, born of us  
And fated to excel us, as we pass  
In glory that old Darkness: nor are we

Thereby more conquer'd, than by us the rule  
Of shapeless Chaos. Say, doth the dull soil  
Quarrel with the proud forests it hath fed,  
And feedeth still, more comely than itself?  
Can it deny the chieftdom of green groves? (13)

While this perspective is one of resigned grace, the underlying reality is their power and sovereignty has been subverted and this pantheon will in time be cast into the ruin that is developing over the course of this epic. The Titans admission that the “dull soil / Quarrel with the proud forests it hath fed” suggests both their reduced position as well as confirming their relation to the gods coming into power. Additionally, the use of vegetation imagery evokes qualities of power and longevity which adds to the temporal nature of superiority.

In contrast, the Titans of *The Fall of Hyperion* fight for their supremacy after ostensibly hearing Enceladus' unheard call to force in *Hyperion*, though no mention of him is made in the revision. The direction of perspective is backwards in this poem, as the “The Titans fierce, self hid or prison bound, / 'Groan for the old allegiance once more, / 'Listening in their doom for Saturn's voice.” These god's “old allegiance” has already been subverted, and they meekly await their king for direction. However, the only remaining god with power is Hyperion, and he is described with animal imagery and power, though at the close of the passage the effect of this strain is evident:

'But one of our whole eagle brood still keeps  
'His sov'reignty, and rule, and majesty;  
'Blazing Hyperion on his orb'd fire

'Still sits, still snuffs the incense teeming up  
'From man to the sun's God: yet unsecure,  
'For as upon the earth dire prodigies  
'Fright and perplex, so also shudders he:  
'Nor at dog's howl or gloom bird's Even screech,  
'Or the familiar visitings of one  
'Upon the first toll of his passing bell:  
'But horrors, portioned to a giant nerve,  
'Make great Hyperion ache. (11)

Describing Hyperion as the last remaining member of the “eagle brood [who] still keeps / His sov'reignty” yet even his “orbed fire / Still sits still snuffs” and appears to wait for instructions. Hyperion lacks place in this scene, and yet the use of natural imagery suggests he is still irrevocably linked to the world around him. This trend is perhaps a theme in *The Fall of Hyperion* – Crawford writes that “Naturally; and in the *Second Hyperion* he is still as sensuous as ever, but also he is much more – the artist is beginning to be the whole man, but none less the artist” (56). In *Hyperion*, while there is imagery that certainly ties the gods to each other, and to the world around them, the deliberate connectedness of Hyperion and his surroundings suggests ephemerality. Though he is surrounded by “familiar visitings” they are still “horrors, portioned to a giant nerve.” And yet, even in the brief mention of this torment, Keats uses “nerve” and “ache” to describe the physical manifestations of the torture of genius. While Hyperion’s suffering is prevalent throughout this work, this passage suggests that the genius – whose position is just as fleeting as it is in *Hyperion* – remains a more cognizant part of a larger whole.

*Keats' Evolving Definition of Genius – A Close Reading*

Over the course of *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats develops a concept of what genius is and how this role is realized. A comparative analysis suggests that the role of genius should not be desired, and inevitably results in torment and the erosion of place. However, digital humanities analysis reveals that Keats' theory of genius may not be stagnant between the two unfinished epics.<sup>1</sup>

While there is common language between these two unfinished epics, the opening of *Hyperion* is closely repeated in the middle of *The Fall of Hyperion* though these passages differ in ways that suggests Keats' evolving theory of genius. The digital platform comparison illuminates the differences of these two texts. Spatial placement and addition of two passages in *The Fall of Hyperion* and the exclusion of one that appears in *Hyperion* suggests Keats' evolving theory of genius, even in the year that separates the creation of these two works. *Hyperion* opens with Saturn and immediately he becomes the sole focus of the text. Though now a genius-in-ruins, the extent of his power becomes immediately apparent, and the opening of the poem reveals that the ensuing plot will be focused around this figure. In comparison, this text does not appear in *The Fall of Hyperion* until the end of the first canto, and the Poet has already been introduced. In fact, the opening of this poem leaves substantial ambiguity – even if the events even occurred in reality or if the narrator had dreamed it all – and while there are common tropes, there is no one figure that commands total attention. Even before the actual language is analyzed, the spatial change of this passage in Keats' rewrite introduces the Poet and other gods as mediums to convey the perspective that genius offers, rather than the solitary genius of *Hyperion*. Keats' critical theory of genius illuminates the position of Poet substantiates this claim

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<sup>1</sup> The link to the interactive JuxtaCommons site can be found at (<http://juxtacommons.org/shares/vgoHs6?>).



that genius is not dependent on an individual, but rather the presence of genius is what is necessary to obtain divine perspective. Margolis' essay "Keats' Men of Genius and Men of Power" suggests that "the poet endowed with power of imagination rather than the power of ego – that is, the man of genius – could project himself into a variety of characters, situations and scenes. Then, without imposing on his materials his own emotions or thoughts, he could capture the material with the gusto and power of art" (134). Essentially, the Poet becomes a vessel for the representation of genius, not the literal embodiment of the divine position. Keats extends this perspective to his treatment of the gods.

Textual differences support the claim that Keats places a reduced importance of Saturn as the genius in *The Fall of Hyperion*, though the language retains reverence for the role of genius. In the first major discrepancy, Keats uses Moneta and the Poet to describe Saturn, rather than offering a direct description as *Hyperion* offers:

Onward I look'd beneath the gloomy boughs,  
And saw, what first I thought an image huge,  
Like to the image pedestal'd so high  
In Saturn's temple. Then Moneta's voice  
Came brief upon mine ear 'So Saturn sat  
When he had lost his realms ' whereon there grew  
A power within me of enormous ken  
To see as a god sees, and take the depth  
Of things as nimbly as the outward eye  
Can size and shape pervade. The lofty theme  
At those few words hung vast before my mind,

With half unravel'd web. I set myself  
Upon an eagle's watch, that I might see,  
And seeing ne'er forget. (7)

The physical stature of Saturn, though seen through the “gloomy boughs,” is unfathomable to the Poet. Before Moneta’s insight, he is unable to even identify the god. But when Moneta offers “So Saturn sat / When he had lost his realms” the Poet’s own perspective and knowledge increases “to see as a god sees, and take the depth / Of things as nimbly as the outward eye.” In this moment, Keats simultaneously discounts Saturn’s power and increases it – by having the Poet able to view and appreciate – and even gain from – Saturn’s genius Keats suggests that mortal forces can begin to comprehend “what a god sees” but the transformation comes as a result of watching Saturn even as he sits in ruins. Ultimately, the Poet undermines Saturn’s solitary place as genius as the Poet’s perspective remains “With half unravel'd web” to watch and retain the elements of Saturn’s greatness, though the height of Saturn’s power has passed.

The second and third major discrepancies between these two epics occur at spatially overlapping areas and describe torment of the genius as seen from a female perspective, from Thea in *Hyperion* and Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion*. Thea is described as a “Goddess of the infant world” and while small in comparison to Saturn, “she would have ta'en / Achilles by the hair and bent his neck; Or with a finger stay'd Ixion's wheel” suggesting that Thea herself conveys enormous power yet is described as gentle and tormented mourning for the loss of Saturn’s power. Her sorrow is so pure that she is described as “How beautiful, if sorrow had not made / Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty's self.” In comparison, Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion* is mentioned only in comparison to Mnemosyne and Thea. The Poet writes, “I mark'd the Goddess in fair statuary, Surpassing wan Moneta by the head.” The use of “wan”

underscores Moneta's classical beauty and is not revered by the Poet, which could perhaps be the result of Moneta's significantly more dominating presence in *The Fall of Hyperion*. While a full reading on dual gender standards is undoubtedly rife with illuminating textual significance, this author concludes the analysis by suggesting that Keats' perspective on gods and geniuses is changes between the two works. However, the introduction of the mortal man complicates this assertion.

In the two epics Keats develops the characterization of a genius persona without also determining who is the genius as well as allows for an unguarded reading and assessment due to the distance of the reader from the subject matter. The mysticism of each work separates the poem's characters from mundane daily mortal life. However, a re-reading of the epics indeed reveals the subtle presence of mortals. To begin, Keats' *Epistle to my Brother George* provides a direct inclusion of mortal perspective and names the Poet outright and extensively, *The Fall of Hyperion* also identifies a Poet, and though *Hyperion* has no mention of a Poet or any mention of a mortal, there are brief references to "us mortal men" which suggests that a mortal is narrating the poem in some way. The development of the mortal Poet as genius, and as a bridge between the two realms, complicates Keats' genius figure, suggesting that the sole figure of genius is not a necessary requirement to unveiling the insight of the genius perspective.

In *Epistle to my Brother George*, the narrator – presumed to be Keats himself – focuses on the struggle to think divinely while absorbing external stimuli of the world around him. This is seen early on in the work, as the dimness of the "blue dome" inhibits the narrator's struggle to "think divinely" (2). He bemoans his inability to access classical representations of transcendence, Apollo, the "bright glance from beauty's eyelids slanting" or the "golden lyre

itself were dimly seen” (2). Keats uses sight imagery to underline his compromised ability to appreciate the divine aspects of the world around him.

The second stanza marks a change in the tone of the work, with increased perfection imagery. However, the Poet here is able to thrive in this “trance,” though his position is tenuous. Keats writes: “And what we, ignorantly, sheet-lightning call, / Is the swift opening of their wide portal, / When the bright warder blows his trumpet clear, / Whose tones reach nought on earth but Poet's ear” (3). His admission of human ignorance juxtaposed with the “swift opening of their portal” undermines human’s awareness of the totality of the world around them. Yet, Keats gives this perspective to the Poet, ostensibly allowing him a heightened knowledge of “the wine from each bright jar / Pours with the lustre of a falling star” (3) and other such images.

Once the tenuous position of the Poet as connector between the tangible world and “such tales as needs must with amazement spell you,” the struggle with mortality and death begins to become the dominant narrative theme. While the first half the work is character by a passive descriptive tone, once the impending death of the narrator becomes obvious the tone of the poem becomes more panicked. The “film of death” once again champions over his thoughts of other things, and again uses the perfection of the world around him as a haunting reality rather than a comfort. He warns of this dichotomy, “Ah, my dear friend and brother, / Could I, at once, my mad ambition smother, / For tasting joys like these, sure I should be/ Happier, and dearer to society”. And yet, though he is “E'en now I'm pillowed on a bed of flowers” he turns his “eyes to the west ... Why westward turn? 'Twas but to say adieu! / 'Twas but to kiss my hand, dear George, to you!” (5).

Ultimately, this poem provides commentary on what happens when not all of humanity, but one Poet only, is privy to the wonders of the realm beyond the physical world. Throughout,

he struggles with his exposure to this divinity and perfection and ultimately dies in a more tortured manner due to his heightened awareness of the world around him. For the narrator of *Epistle to my Brother George*, there is no benefit as he ends his life tortured rather than inspired.

The mortal man plays substantially less of a role in *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, though influences are still present. Lachman, of *Poetics Today*, suggests that that human perspective is deliberately limited and manipulated through spacial confinement: “We note that in the depiction of Saturn’s bower, in Hyperion’s palace, or in the temple of art in *The Fall of Hyperion*, horizontal and subterranean spaces threaten the “splendour and symmetry” of the vertical space. Moreover, in contrast to the superhuman perspective of Saturn and Hyperion, Keats’s division of space into its separate elements directs the reader’s human perspective, which is limited to the here and now and is realized in the movement from one point in space to another” (112). If taken as true, this theory potentially subverts the influence of the mortal man as vessels of genius as presented in *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*. Despite Lachman’s claim that a mortal is fabricated by the gods themselves and inherently lacks merit, the mortal perspective does further Keats’ theory of genius.

As seen in earlier analysis, and certainly through the narrower analysis of mortal man’s influence on the poem, *The Fall of Hyperion* uses the Poet as genius to convey this unique perspective. It is an important distinction, however, to note the text’s delineation between the genius and the dreamer – the dreamer does not ground his intellectual pursuits in anything consistent or tangible while the poet is a “sage” and a “humanist” and one who must separate out the false poets from the true diviners. Crawford writes, “The poet was now passing from the stage of the youthful poet and lover of Beauty to the philosophic age in which he could be satisfied with nothing short of Truth. He was no longer content merely to enjoy and glory in the

fullness of life and the unimpaired beauty of the world as seen through his poetic imagination” (108). The full title: “*The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*” discredits the poet and while Crawford identifies this discord with being “no longer content,” Keats perhaps alludes to a more intense phenomenon. While the text argues that the plot is an illuminating and revealing vision by the divine Poet as the medium between the immortal gods and sheltered humanity, the entire experience is a dream according to the title of the poem. This perplexity dichotomy is representative of Keats’ larger message of mortal man’s limited ability to convey divine perspective. This is seen poignantly in the opening of *The Fall of Hyperion*:

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave  
A paradise for a sect; the savage too  
From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep  
Guesses at Heaven; pity these have not  
Trac'd upon vellum or wild Indian leaf  
The shadows of melodious utterance.  
But bare of laurel they live, dream, and die;  
For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,  
With the fine spell of words alone can save  
Imagination from the sable charm  
And dumb enchantment. Who alive can say,  
'Thou art no Poet may'st not tell thy dreams?'  
Since every man whose soul is not a clod  
Hath visions, and would speak, if he had loved  
And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.

Whether the dream now purpos'd to rehearse  
Be poet's or fanatic's will be known  
When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave. (1)

Though the presence of Nature of the middle of this text suggests that the position of the Poet is of a similar ilk with the gods described throughout the poem, though the opening and the conclusion complicate this position of power and connectedness. Keats writes that “fanatics” – whose more specific identity will not be revealed until after the natural imagery is presented – inevitably “weave / A paradise for a sect” and in the “loftiest fashion of his sleep / Guesses at Heaven.” While the “fanatic” of this scene certainly exists in proximity to genius, there is still a degree of separation from the unsheltered divinity. However, after the fanatic has “Trac'd upon vellum or wild Indian leaf” and come into the laurel [to] live, dream, and die” Keats posits: “Who alive can say, / Thou art no Poet may'st not tell thy dreams? This transformation from fanatic to Poet is precipitated by Nature. However, Keats does limit the position of the Poet to just a subset of humanity, he writes that all “alive” and “every man whose soul is not a clod / Hath visions.” The perspective of genius is not confined to a limited subset of mortal beings, but contained in every man, and “been well nurtured in his mother tongue.” Yet, Keats offers one final complication, that the ultimate answer of whether the ensuing poem is told by a Poet or fanatic will only come when the author’s “hand is in the grave.” This can be read that true perspective only comes after mortality has been conquered, which undermines the mortal perspective that is so prevalent in this work. Ultimately, while the mortal Poet plays a central role in the opening of *The Fall of Hyperion*, it is a damned position – there is no hope, even from the opening, of a simple and unchallenged perspective.

The influence of mortal man is significantly less prevalent, and more damning in

*Hyperion*. Each mention of “mortal” in *Hyperion* suggests inadequacy and the inability to fully comprehend a situation, which in this poem is consistently the god’s power or their ruin. In earlier analysis, the description of “Blazing Hyperion on his orb’d fire/Still sat, still snuff’d the incense, teeming up From man to the sun’s God; yet unsecure” is of ruin though the remaining power and genius of Hyperion is still evident. However, the following line “For as among us mortals omens drear /Fright and perplex” subtly introduces the mortal man, and perhaps even identifies him as the narrator of the poem. Though to Hyperion this reality offers its own set of complications, they are real to the Titan and do not exist as an omen to “fright and perplex.” The limitations of understanding occur throughout the poem. Later, when describing the ruin of the gods, the poem argues that “Too huge for mortal tongue or pen of scribe: / The Titans fierce, self hid, or prison-bound, / Groan’d for the old allegiance once more.” Even the groan of the ruined Titans is “too huge” for the limiting constraints of “tongue or pen” that even the Poet must use to convey his sentiments. Though in Richard Harter Fogle’s “The Imagery of Keats and Shelley” he argues that “In Keats the tactual services strengthen and round out other types of sense-imagery. It merges and blends so closely with other sensations that it is often difficult to abstract for imagination. The firmness and three-dimensional quality of Keats’ human figures and personifications is to some degree to be accounted for by his power of reinforcing the impressions of the eye by other senses; very frequently by tactual imagery.” However, abstraction and three-dimensionality is what the mortals of Keats’ poems routinely suffer from. Within the confines of the poem, the Poet is deliberately inadequate and two-dimensional even in the face of a dejected and subverted immortal.

Ultimately, these three works shed light on Keats’ perspective on the mortal as vessel of



genius and conveyer of the immortal world. While the influence and capability of the mortal, specifically the Poet, varies in each of the three works, in none of them is the mortal equalized to even a god in ruin, or even privy to the same intellectual power and scope of perspective. The assumption of genius varies in degrees between limiting and damning.

While Keats offers a specific approach on what genius means, who occupies this role, and what it affords those who are privy to the perspective of genius, common thematic uses of torment, the lack of relief through death despite the immortals seeming coveting death, as well as the constant challenging of this power and perspective reveals that genius is not necessarily a net positive position. This is seen in the transformation of mortal men, including the Poet, when they are even selectively exposed to genius. The introduction of knowledge and a heightened awareness results in a haunted perspective and the awareness of the limitations of mortality. The instability of the immortal world, coupled with the limitations and imperfections of the mortal one, suggests that the genius is a damaging factor. Without a vessel, this divine perspective would suggest a positive and illuminating force. However, for Keats, either the insufficiency of the vessel – both mortal and immortal – or the flaws of the position of genius itself, leads to damnation and suffering. The momentary naked eyeball moment is couched in torment, and serves as an effective warning to the reader, and arguably a deterrent, against the pursuit of genius.

### **Percy Shelley's Definition of Genius.**

“The distance between insanity and genius is measured only by success”

–Bruce Feirstein

*Prometheus Unbound* by Percy Bysshe Shelley charts the progression of Prometheus, a Greek Titan, who gives the gift of fire to humanity and is subjected to eternal torture at the hands

of the other gods, especially Jupiter. While Prometheus is certainly the hero of the work, as outlined in the accepted conventions of epic poetry, his position as genius is not as obvious. Prometheus' proximity to Nature, immortality, and power challenges our immediate acceptance of him as the supreme hero figure. Instead, Shelley uses the flawed genius figure and his surroundings as a thinly veiled allegory for social commentary on the costs of pursuing greatness. Shelley defines genius as an individual who is powerful, subservient to know one, and offers both the other characters in the epic and the reader an unparalleled illumination about the treacherous and tenuous position of power.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first discusses Prometheus' proximity to personified Nature as well as natural elements. The second addresses conflict due to his awareness of immortality and his subsequent treatment of death. The third outlines Prometheus power and his place in the divine hierarchy; despite the notion of the genius in a vacuum, he is highly influenced by those around him.

While the subtleties and complications of this position of genius are revealed in the ensuing epic, Shelley's preface exposes his likely personal but certainly professional concept of genius. Shelley describes the exiled god as "the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motivation to the best and noblest ends" (121). Despite the superlative, Shelley further defends Prometheus' unrivaled position: "The only imaginary being resembling in any degree Prometheus, is Satan; and Prometheus is, in my judgement, a more poetical character than Satan, in addition to courage, and majesty, and firm and patient opposition to omnipotent force, he is susceptible of being described as exempt from the taints of ambition, envy, and revenge and a desire for personal aggrandizement, which, in the Hero of Paradise Lost, interfere with the interest" (120). Shelley introduces some themes that

dominate his work in the preface – namely the subtle struggle of Prometheus’ omnipotence and his suffering and ultimate release at the hands of other gods. Shelley’s mention of Satan provides fodder for further analysis on Prometheus’ proximity to Christian figures, and is addressed later in the chapter.

Shelley’s creation of Prometheus as one of the most influential genius figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century suggests the trope of genius is an individual uniquely connected to and in communication with nature. The genius is conflicted by the epic hero role of unsubverted power and the reality of confinement and hierarchy. The genius has unhindered knowledge and perspective, but often suffers torture that results from his immortality. While the genius himself does not benefit from this position, those surrounding him certainly do; Shelley suggests the genius a necessary evil—the role is a method to advance society, but not one to strive for.

### *The Role of Nature and Mother Earth*

While Keats’ work definitively suggests the supremacy and beauty of nature, *Prometheus Unbound* uses Nature to cause Prometheus excessive pain, but over the course of the work Nature becomes the embodiment of protection and beauty. Despite this contrast, in the preface Shelley one-dimensionally asserts the power of nature as inspiration for the epic: “The bright blue sky of Rome, and the effect of the vigorous awakening spring in that divinest climate, and the new life with which it drenches the spirits even to intoxication, were the inspiration of this drama” (Preface, 121). Shelley himself draws inspiration from his natural surroundings, identifying renewal and even “intoxication” as powerful motivators for the crafting of his timeless epic. However, the application of this inspiration is increasingly complicated as the epic develops.

In *Prometheus Unbound*, Earth is represented as both natural elements and direct personification, acting as setting and prominent characters throughout the Act 1. Shelley's contextualization of Prometheus within a natural landscape at the opening of the epic qualifies his proclaimed genius. At the opening of the epic, Prometheus is "discovered bound to the precipice" on a "ravine of icy rocks in the Indian Caucasus" (131). This scene comes immediately following Shelley's bold claims of unparalleled epic genius and appeal to high minded readership; this juxtaposition immediately suggests that Prometheus is not as omnipotent as suggested as he is unable to escape his torture and imprisonment at the hands of other gods. This complication is introduced spatially and is supported textually. The reader's first introduction to the genius figure is later in Act 1 as Prometheus calls out the injustices done to him by the forces of Nature while demanding that his curse upon Jupiter be repeated. The language of the opening scene suggests that while Prometheus has endured thousands of years of torture – indicating strength and power of will – he has had no success in ending the punishment for his gift of fire and refinement to mortal man. The power and definitive tone of Nature's wrath on Prometheus contextualizes his steadfast rejection of mental and physical torture. Though the "ghastly people of the realm of dream" mock Prometheus, and the "Earthquake-fiends are charged / To wrench the rivets from my quivering wounds/ When the rocks split and close again behind" (133), Prometheus does not renounce his choice to give humanity fire and many other advances in civilized life. He sustains the "Heaven's wingèd hound, polluting from thy lips / His beak in poison not his own" as they "Eat with their burning cold into [his] bones" and pierce him with "moon-freezing crystals" and spears of the "crawling glaciers." The language of this scene portrays Nature as menacing and torturous. Nature presents a seemingly unsurmountable and endless trauma, one which Prometheus endures and rejects.

While more analysis into Shelley's perception of Nature is certainly merited, this scene is important to contextualize Nature's role in the epic. Prometheus is powerful and his rejection of established hierarchies to give fire to humanity attracts the fury of Nature. Yet, his unique ability to not succumb to this undying torment separates Prometheus, and Shelley subtly begins to develop his case for being read as a genius. The scene begins to reveal Nature's role as exposition, character, and scene in the poem as well as Prometheus' role as genius.

Nature again facilitates connection and character development in Act II as Asia and Panthea reconnect deep in the forest and Asia describes her love for Prometheus. While these two gods do not speak in the opening of the act, the Semichorus and Fauns work to advance the plot with rich natural descriptions. By silencing the gods in Scene II, despite their prominent roles in Scenes I and III, Shelley effectively illuminates the god's dependency on the power of Nature, and its ability to exist and entice the reader without the gods, and certainly without Prometheus. While these passages are long and artfully constructed, two segments are particularly revealing. Each emphasizes the ephemerality of Nature's moments and yet simultaneously its unchanging role as inspiration and unifier. The first Semichorus of Spirits, with an almost chant-like cadence, illuminates the harmonious detail of the inanimate natural world:

The path through which that lovely twain  
Have passed, by cedar, pine, and yew,  
And each dark tree that ever grew,  
Is curtained out from Heaven's wide blue  
Nor sun, nor moon, nor wind, nor rain,  
...

By the swift Heavens that cannot stay,  
It scatters drops of golden light,  
Like lines of rain that ne'er unite:  
And the gloom divine is all around,  
And underneath is the mossy ground. (194)

This language stands in direct contrast to the unwavering torture of Prometheus' imprisonment on the mountains. The close rhyming in these passages creates a cadence which mirrors the tranquil and harmonious content of this passage. Instead of "Heaven's wingèd hound" in Act 1, now Heaven "scatters drops of golden light, / Like lines of rain that ne'er unite". While the reader has not forgotten the intensity of Prometheus' torture, Prometheus finds place in the distant and gentle beauty of nature. Nature in this scene is not capitalized because its main function is to support Prometheus' peace and love with Asia. Shelley uses Nature and nature to expose Prometheus' variable position throughout the poem.

Ultimately, Nature is a supporting role to Prometheus' character development. Shelley artfully ties together two tenets of his concept of genius – proximity to nature (as exposed through Prometheus' relationship to abstract nature and personified Nature) as well as the genius as powerful and in command. While Prometheus' relationship to Nature evolves over the course of the poem and culminates with his retreat with Asia, so too does his power and influence. Literary scholar Eva Schaper explains the power of nature as a way to realize our own agency. She writes "The dynamically sublime we confront when nature is experienced as a might so powerful that we feel threatened and crushed, until another idea of reason, the idea of our moral agency, lifts us beyond the sensory to the heights of our own superiority to nature as moral beings" (383). Taken with Shelley's writing, this supports the notion that Prometheus' force,

though he is unable to escape from Nature's torture, is actually heightened because the reader sees him refusing to succumb to seemingly insurmountable trauma. If Prometheus existed in isolation at the opening of the epic, the reader could infer his power through language, but Shelley instead decides a much more powerful tactic – to show. Philosopher Immanuel Kant, via Schaper's article, explains the distinction this way: "A beauty of nature is a *beautiful thing*; beauty of art is a *beautiful representation of a thing*." Schaper writes that "This is one of Kant's memorable formulations of the contrast between nature and art, and it allows him, in a brief but important aside, to comment on the power of the art of genius [is] to present as beautiful what is actually ugly in nature" (392). Prometheus presents his power through the ugly torture the reader witnesses throughout Act 1. Shelley uses the power of nature to show Prometheus' power instead of crafting an artful exposition that would be a representation of his power. Prometheus' standing as a genius is attributed to his suffering, not undermined by his suffering.

### *Power and Hierarchy*

As analyzed in the previous section, Prometheus exists in a complicated proximity to Nature. While his trauma by the personified natural forces suggests a high level of agency and power, Prometheus' inability to demand Nature repeat his curse upon Jupiter suggests an underlying hierarchy – Prometheus' power is not absolute, and this distinction complicates his position as genius. While this becomes apparent later in the epic as well, then conclusion of Prometheus first monologue immediately following his recount of the injustices he has suffered at the hands of Nature serves as a poignant first exposure to this phenomenon. He cries out:

...The curse

Once breathed on thee I would recall. Ye Mountains,

Whose many-voicèd Echoes, through the mist  
Of cataracts, flung the thunder of that spell!  
Ye icy Springs, stagnant with wrinkling frost,  
Which vibrated to hear me, and then crept  
Shuddering through India! Thou serenest Air,  
Through which the Sun walks burning without beams!  
And ye swift Whirlwinds, who on poisèd wings  
Hung mute and moveless o'er yon hushed abyss,  
As thunder, louder than your own, made rock  
The orbèd world! If then my words had power,  
Though I am changed so that aught evil wish  
Is dead within; although no memory be  
Of what is hate, let them not lose it now!  
What was that curse? for ye all heard me speak. (134-135)

Again, Nature here is vast and relentless, and Shelley continues to use “poisèd wings,” air and sunlight to convey the extent of Nature’s power. Personified Nature pays little regard to Prometheus’ demands to hear his curse repeated. And yet, Prometheus is capable of separating himself from its chaos and breadth and transcends hate: “If then my words had power, / Though I am changed so that aught evil wish / Is dead within; although no memory be / Of what is hate, let them not lose it now!” While Nature is dominant in this scene, Prometheus shows growth and development. Ultimately, the decision of who has the most agency lies with the reader and in this author’s position, this moment supports Nature as the most powerful force in the epic.



Shelley's exclusion of a central part of the epic poem challenges Prometheus' role as an epic hero as well. As outlined by M.H. Abrams, one of the main aspects of epic poetry is extraordinary feats in either physical or intellectual war. These actions and outcomes often dictate the plot of the poem, and become central to developing the hero figure and illuminating the "machinery." However, Shelley's choice to begin the poem after Prometheus has given fire to humanity, and further to open the work while he is being tortured on the ravine, suggests that while Prometheus attracts the fury of personified Nature and spiritual Earth forces, his power and influence is not sufficient to free him. Further, the reader is never shown the battle scenes or even the transfer of knowledge from god to human, which both formally and functionally undermines Prometheus' position. Shelley's choice to omit a central feature of the traditional epic reduces the potency of his genius by undermining the larger validity of *Prometheus Unbound's* position in the epic cannon. In addition, the reader is left to imagine the intensity and grandeur of the events before the poem begins. While Shelley's decision to not write these scenes could stem from a multitude of reasons, and the exact rationale is likely lost to history, the reader subliminally notes that there were more important scenes and interactions to depict over the course of the poem.

Prometheus' mother does reveal his curse later in the first Act, and his success hints towards power and influence. However, close analysis of Prometheus' curse reveals a more subtle power structure amongst the gods – one that does not necessarily support the notion of Prometheus as the all-powerful Titan who suffers temporary injustice at the hands of a god from a previous Pantheon. Each word of this expulsion appears carefully chosen and delicately woven together to form a commanding revolt against Jupiter and to establish dominance, in turn furthering Shelley's concept of genius. Prometheus uses mortal strife as a means of illustrating

the intensity of Jupiter's wrath he is demanding, calling out "Rain then thy plagues upon me here, / Ghastly disease, and frenzying fear" (147). Despite Prometheus' alleged power, the most effective torture he can fathom is one of human disease and emotion. Perhaps, as an immortal being these factors would truly evoke fear and caution, but for the mortal reader these are comprehensible and even familiar aspects. Prometheus calls Jupiter to expose him to harsh nature, "And let alternate frost and fire / Eat into me, and be thine ire / Lightning, and cutting hail, and legioned forms / Of furies, driving by upon the wounding storms" (147). Prometheus uses exposure to the elements as a means of proving his strength, which is consistent with the tone throughout the epic that suggests the power of the Earth. The emphasis paid to Jupiter's omnipotence is perhaps the most frequently used term of the curse, and Prometheus' consistent acknowledgement and refusal suggests that Shelley considers this a pillar of genius. Similarly, though likely mockery, Prometheus identifies Jupiter as supreme but Prometheus asserts he is unfazed by this position: "But thou, who art the God and Lord: O, thou, / Who fillest with thy soul this world of woe, / To whom all things of Earth and Heaven do bow / In fear and worship: all-prevailing foe!" (147). In both cases, Prometheus arguably focuses on Jupiter's most characteristically genius traits in order to effectively rebuke them. While the reveal of the former's curse on the latter is a dramatic plot point, it also illuminates what Shelley considers to be the essence of a genius, and therefore what must be discounted so Prometheus can prove himself superior.

However, Prometheus' use of language and direct address to Jupiter stands in contrast to his reality of being chained to the Caucasus mountains as the poem opens. This contrast suggests that while his position of genius allowed him to give fire to humanity, it is not sufficient to free him from the wrath of Jupiter. To which side victory is afforded is certainly debatable, and

Shelley's complication of having neither Prometheus nor Jupiter as the unrivaled supreme force weakens Prometheus' role as sole genius, and perhaps this is deliberate.

Perhaps a more overt proxy for characterizing Prometheus as a genius is his heightened knowledge and awareness, as well as his ability to share that with mortal man. While each god ostensibly gives some form of knowledge or enlightenment to mortal man, not all are imprisoned or tortured for it. This is the result of Prometheus' theft of the fire, a detail which Shelley uses to highlight the importance of means and methods. Should Prometheus have given humanity fire in the proper manner, it is likely he would not have been punished. However, the message that Shelley puts forth is consistent independent of stipulation about the specific outcomes – Prometheus' behavior is closely observed by the other gods, and he is held accountable through an unofficial jury of his peers. Prometheus, despite his exclamations of power and might and his gift of fire, is slave to consensus.

### *Knowledge and Knowledge as Power*

While the previous section illuminates that Prometheus does not occupy the lone figure of the Romantic genius as is classically considered, Prometheus does give the gift of knowledge and intellectual advancement and refinement. The ability to harness knowledge which surpasses the mortal condition and bestow it upon humanity is a form of power. Shelley addresses this in his preface when he writes: "Thus a number of writers possess the form, whilst they want the spirit of those whom, it is alleged, they imitate; because the former is the endowment of the age in which they live, and the latter must be the uncommunicated lightning of their own mind" (123). He argues that the genius is beyond the realm of imitation and surpasses into what is not yet conceived, and this is what Prometheus does for humanity.

The text idealizes knowledge and addresses this threshold between imitation and creation in more detail. However, much of the related text for this proving of genius surrounds the Demogorgon's arrival in Act II, which precipitates a dialogue between the demon and Asia as to whether contributions of Jupiter or Prometheus are more valuable. While there are more inferable moments where Prometheus' gift of knowledge to humanity is discussed, the most overt and revealing is the direct comparison. It is significant that the case for the supreme position is not made by either Prometheus or Jupiter, but rather Prometheus' wife. A larger analysis of the gender tropes and Shelley's choice to use a woman to settle the epic-long dispute among men is certainly merited, but beyond the scope of this section which deals more narrowly with the implications of vast knowledge on those who bestow it but also those who receive it. Shelley's choice indicates that neither god is fit for this role of presenting both sides, and in the process subverts their roles as stand-alone epic heroes. Returning to M.H. Abrahams, the epic hero is capable of completing any feat with ease, and commands a high degree of autonomy. Here, Shelley suggests that genius is not an isolated role – while the language of this section is rich with cues that Prometheus and Jupiter certainly command more knowledge and power than the expansive majority left out of this comparison of titans, there is no indication of an unrivaled position of power. Shelley presents a qualified role – that the transfer and bestowal of knowledge is highly interdependent on immortal beings and mortal ones. Asia mirrors this form in function. In her exchange with Demogorgon, she says:

...Then Prometheus  
Gave wisdom, which is strength, to Jupiter,  
And with this law alone, "Let man be free,"  
Clothed him with the dominion of wide Heaven.

To know nor faith, nor love, nor law; to be  
Omnipotent but friendless is to reign;  
And Jove now reigned; for on the race of man  
First famine, and then toil, and then disease,  
Strife, wounds, and ghastly death unseen before,  
Fell; and the unseasonable seasons drove  
With alternating shafts of frost and fire,  
Their shelterless, pale tribes to mountain caves:  
And in their desert hearts fierce wants he sent,  
And mad disquietudes, and shadows idle  
Of unreal good, which levied mutual war,  
So ruining the lair wherein they raged.  
Prometheus saw, and waked the legioned hopes  
Which sleep within folded Elysian flowers,  
Nepenthe, Moly, Amaranth, fadeless blooms,  
That they might hide with thin and rainbow wings  
The shape of Death; and Love he sent to bind  
The disunited tendrils of that vine  
Which bears the wine of life, the human heart;  
And he tamed fire which, like some beast of prey,  
Most terrible, but lovely, played beneath  
The frown of man; and tortured to his will  
Iron and gold, the slaves and signs of power,

And gems and poisons, and all subtlest forms  
Hidden beneath the mountains and the waves.  
He gave man speech, and speech created thought,  
Which is the measure of the universe;  
And Science struck the thrones of earth and heaven,  
Which shook, but fell not; and the harmonious mind  
Poured itself forth in all-prophetic song. (211)

Over the course of the passage, Asia establishes the relationship between wisdom and strength, and places Prometheus as the more powerful because he “gave wisdom, which is strength, to Jupiter” and did not “reign” with “friendless” omnipotence as Jupiter does (written as Jove). Asia argues that this wisdom affords mortal man with freedom and dominion – agency that was previously only held by the gods. Prometheus’ seemingly effortless and subliminal gift of this agency without the strife that accompanies Jupiter’s contributions. Jupiter does not know “faith, nor love, nor law” and causes strife and turmoil to the mortals he supposedly protects and cares for. Reign is used as a homograph in the first section, as Asia uses it to denote his power over the mortals, and then to bring down the “famine,” “toil” and “disease” upon them. This tactic subtly suggests that Asia sees no difference in this cool and distant kingly reign and the hardship it brings to Jupiter’s inferiors. Instead, she presents Prometheus’ proximity to humanity as the superior way to bestow knowledge. In a similar manner, Asia uses the fire of Jupiter’s world in comparison to Prometheus’ fire. As a way to contextualize Jupiter’s wrath, she compares Jupiter’s “alternating shafts of frost and fire” to the “lovely” fire that “played beneath the frown of man” to illuminate higher level thinking and cultural development. For Prometheus, who defies earlier Pantheons and reaches out directly to mortals (though we do not see this actual

transfer of knowledge), his position of power aids humanity not causes suffering. There is no “reign” – in either meaning – of Prometheus, instead “Love he sent to bind “The disunited tendrils of that vine / Which bears the wine of life, the human heart; / And he tamed fire.” Prometheus acts as unifier and established the “measure of the universe.” While he is incapable of dominating Jupiter or Nature and freeing himself from torture, and therefore is inconsistent with the epic hero, Prometheus’ manner of bestowing the “harmonious mind” with an “all-prophetic song” qualifies him as a genius, a distinction which was discussed in the earlier literature review. While Jupiter is arguably more powerful than Prometheus, the latter’s ability to gracefully bestow knowledge and with perspective not afforded to the former secures his role as the epic’s genius.

In 1816, Shelley wrote *Mont Blanc*, a work centered on knowledge and the narrator’s travel through Nature. Shelley wrote of this poem: "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 untamable wildness and inaccessible solemnity from which those feelings sprang" (Mt. Holyoke Online). This reflection sheds light on Asia’s comparison of Prometheus and Jupiter, and mirrors Shelley himself and Prometheus as genius figures. Prometheus, as is written both explicitly and implicitly, gives this gift of attempt at a more perfect understanding and depiction of humanity’s surroundings, just as Shelley writes *Prometheus Unbound* to expand the reader’s understanding of genius and the role’s relationship to humanity and other immortal beings. Especially in this passage, and certainly throughout the text, Prometheus is depicted as a divine being but not all powerful, and one constrained by other gods but freed because of his ability to give the gifts of knowledge, fire, and refined advancement to humanity. Shelley wrote

*Monc Blanc* as an attempt to more fully understand the world around him and give that advancement to his reader, so too does Prometheus give that gift to the unseen mortals in the poem. However, ultimately both suffer enormously from this burden which precipitates a larger commentary on the benefits of genius, either to the individual or those who are benefited from the fruits of their suffering. The manner in which knowledge is given – with ease and with a focus on the benefits to the recipients – is the mark of a genius in Shelley’s work.

### **Conclusion of Section**

Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* offers a different definition of genius. While distinctive from the epic hero, Shelley’s genius is both tormented and finds peace in Nature and nature – respectively. He struggles with tenuous power and mutable hierarchy, and is ultimately accepted as genius due to the manner in which they bestow knowledge upon those less intellectually endowed. Shelley’s genius, Prometheus, does not exist in a vacuum and is not immune from pain and suffering, though the details of his challenges are certainly unlike even monumental mortal struggles. Prometheus is the “patient opposition to omnipotent force” (Shelley’s preface, 20), and instead selflessly suffers to protect his gift of fire and refinement to humanity.

A superficial reading of the work places Prometheus as the clear genius figure, and perhaps an epic hero as well as he commands the majority of attention and wields power and has given unfathomable gifts to mortality without effort. However, as shown, closer analysis subverts this quick assumption and challenges the idea that Prometheus is a genius at all. This juxtaposition creates the reader as leader, not bystander. The perfection of Prometheus’ gift and his active defense of his bestowal in contrast with the vivid depictions of his immortal hell transforms the one-dimensional epic hero and villain into a multi-dimensional genius. For Shelley, a genius is not someone who is gifted a throne that sits above the masses, but rather



someone who removes himself from his throne and descends into the depths of mortality in an attempt to peel back layers of blurred vision. Heroes are sometimes forgotten to history or lore, but the torment and sacrifice of a genius are rarely forgotten and often revisited.

In the Preface to *Prometheus Unbound* Shelley writes in his own voice of his concern with oblivion and his obsession with leaving a mark: "If his attempt be ineffectual, let the punishment of an unaccomplished purpose have been sufficient; let none trouble themselves to heap the dust of oblivion upon his efforts; the pile they raise will betray his grave which might otherwise have been unknown" (128). This sentiment was much in keeping with other British Romantic poets, and is rampant throughout his character development of Prometheus and other characters in the epic. Shelley does not create his genius figure to be omnipotent or even omniscient, as he cannot free himself nor recall his curse on Jupiter. Instead, Prometheus is capable of bettering mortality with grace and transcendence unparalleled by gods who seem to have more control over Prometheus as an individual. Shelley suggests that genius is not necessarily about personal autonomy, but rather agency to bestow knowledge and wisdom on those not capable of supplying it themselves. Prometheus' suffering and growth has paved the way for a better life for man, who is absent for the majority of the work. Shelley is working towards Prometheus as the Christ figure that allows man to pursue divinity and transcendence. Though not discussed in this analysis, Act IV begins to take on an escapist tone, urging unified man to escape the turmoil of this reality and pursue the perfect nature of another world. But, Prometheus has already disappeared from the poem. Prometheus has perhaps opened the door to a more perfect world, though he himself does not reap the benefits of his labor and suffering. The Demogorgon speaks the final words of the poem, perhaps suggesting that there is no hope for humanity to pass into this ideal world. Shelley leaves the verdict for debate, ultimately resting

his work of genius at the feet of the reader. There is hope in wondering and intellectual expansion that stems from debate and the suspension of disbelief, and this too is a mark of genius in and of itself.

## AMERICAN POETS

### **Critical Introduction.**

Perhaps the most compelling point to begin an overview of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American Romantic poetic landscape is with an analysis of Poe's two main essays "The Poetic Principle" (1850) and "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846). Though written after *Tamerlane*, *In Youth I Have Known One*, and *Israfel*, Poe's theory enlightens a close reading of his poetry. After, some contributions from both period and contemporary critics are presented to develop a representative sampling of the consensus on Poe's writing within the context of the American Romantic movement.

Poe's "The Poetic Principle" develops a framework of the literary elements that constitute a poem, and his methodology of ascribing value. A revolutionary aspect of this essay was Poe's emphasis on the accessibility of the poem, in both its length and treatment of the subject. While there is certainly a precedent for canonical authors to complicate writing and create extraordinarily long poems for the sake of intellectual gymnastics for the reader, the three poems discussed in the next chapter are significantly shorter than the *Hyperion* poems or *Prometheus Unbound*. Similarly, while Poe's poems evoke Islamic references, the three poems analyzed are not soaked in Greek and Roman mythology as Keats and Shelley's works are. Poe writes "The poem, on the whole, however, is chiefly to be admired for the graceful *insouciance* of its metre, so well in accordance with the character of the sentiments, and especially for the *ease* of the general manner" (2). This agreement between form and function is apparent throughout Poe's poetry and central to understanding his theory of genius.

Another requirement of masterful poetry is the poet's ability to produce excellence with limited intellectual consternation. Poe writes that "Excellence, in a poem especially, may be considered in the light of an axiom, which need only be properly *put*, to become self-evident. It is *not* excellence if it require to be demonstrated as such: — and thus, to point out too particularly the merits of a work of Art, is to admit that they are *not* merits altogether" (3). Similar to the importance of ease of form, Poe argues that the creation by genius comes without effort, and the writing should not strain to be Art. Instead, "The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement. But all excitements are, through a physical necessity, transient. That degree of excitement which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length" (4). For Poe, a superior poem is one written without hesitation or consideration, reads with ease, and is short in length. Each of the three works analyzed in the next section inherently adopt the last qualification, though the palpable ease of creation and clarity of perception are debatable.

"The Philosophy of Composition" continues Poe's focus on ease and accessibility of the text, but now in content as well. This essay is focused on the pursuit of Truth in the poetical form and its close relationship to originality. Good poetry engages both the reader's mind and emotion — Poe writes that the effect of "Truth, or the satisfaction of the intellect, and the object Passion, or the excitement of the heart" is a challenge in poetry. This combination is what requires Poe's male genius to have both a conquest or rise to power as well as an idealized love affair — both of these are requirements for Poe's concept of genius.

The central element to Poe's poetical philosophy, and the focus of the next chapter, is his highly gendered perception of male and female roles. Implicitly in his poems and explicitly at the conclusion of "The Poetic Principle" and throughout "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe

established the prevailing binary of male as genius and female as muse. Poe uses the female as tool to awaken the male recognition of “true Poetry”: “He feels it in the beauty of woman — in the grace of her step — in the lustre of her eye — in the melody of her voice — in her soft laughter — in her sigh — in the harmony of the rustling of her robes. He deeply feels it in her winning endearments — in her burning enthusiasms — in her gentle charities — in her meek and devotional endurances — but above all — ah, far above all — he kneels to it — he worships it in the faith, in the purity, in the strength, in the altogether divine majesty — of her *love*” (3). Here, the female’s seemingly mystical individual traits of the woman spur on the male. The disembodiment of the above passage highlights Poe’s emphasis on the supremacy of the male and his use of the female’s individual traits – even her love – rather than the totality of her being.

This overt gender divide is expressly considered in Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition.” He writes: “When it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world — and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover” (2) The obsession with feminine submission – Poe’s ideal woman is a dead woman – and its synonymous relationship to (capitalized) *Beauty* creates a theoretical framework that is supported across Poe’s writing. While women are the “most poetical topic in the world” and necessary for the efficacy of Poe’s work, women continue to be useful only in their elements. Similar to above, Poe writes in this essay that “When, indeed, men speak of *Beauty*, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect — they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of *soul* — *not* of intellect, or of heart — upon which I have commented, and which is experienced in consequence of contemplating the beautiful” (5). While Poe’s emphasis is not on the ethereal female sensibilities and rather the effect of these characterizations, the focus still remains on the

male. The woman is never presented as a central or protagonist figure – but rather a necessity of the “soul” rather than the “intellect” or the “heart.” As Poe states elsewhere in “The Philosophy of Composition,” truth comes from the ratification of the intellect and heart. Therefore, women can never occupy the Truth, and instead are confined to solely aid in the male intellectual and emotional transcendence and assent.

While Poe’s own literary philosophy is multifaceted, and occasionally contradictory, and revealing when read in tandem with his poetry, it is also illuminating to briefly examine the larger cultural and literary climate of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his Cambridge Press article “The Emergence of Romantic Traditions” literary scholar Alfred Bendixen argues that the “raw sexuality and voluptuous description with a remarkable psychological portrayal of the tragic queen” that is frequent across Poe’s work – though the in-text descriptions Poe uses are subtler than Bendixen’s language – was in keeping with 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic Poetry, and the Southern Gothic cannon in particular (of which Poe was a main figure). He continues that the dramatization of “passions and intrigues of the classical past, particularly in the form of verse drama” (186). This argument helps explain Poe’s focus on the classic poetic hero and the diminutive female of antiquity, as well as his intent focus on anthropomorphized nature and questions of temporality.

Bendixen uses Poe’s geographic identify as a method to enlighten Poe’s thematic choices: “In general, southern writers tended to place more emphasis on polished, graceful form, on the musicality of the verse, and less on abstracting some grand philosophical truth from nature... Authors are much more likely to produce nature poems or fashion Romantic ballads about other times and other lands than to deal with slavery or the unpleasant reality of racism” (186). This cultural idealization perhaps explains Poe’s binary presentation of gender. The

idealized and disassociated female traits that the male genius uses to advance his status – and Poe’s ratification of this element in his own critical essays – is also explained by his place in the Southern Gothic canon.

Eliza Richards in her article “Edgar Allan Poe’s Lost Worlds” continues the critical consensus of Poe’s writing as artful “Romantic ballads” rather than other conceptually challenging or caveated poems of the Era, and argues that Poe’s use of disembodied women and infallible male genius figures coupled with the close rhyme schemes and couplet structure of many of his works creates a mystical and trance-like poem. Further, “using spatial and temporal terminology to describe a place “out of Space – out of Time,” the speaker forces language to evoke something that is beyond its ability to signify. The speaker’s description is therefore a translation or approximation that dramatizes its limitations” (225). While thematically and structural elements certainly evoke an otherworldly tone to Poe’s writing, this inadvertent “translation or approximation” does not dramatizes the limitations to engage the reader, but rather dramatizes the limitation of female agency in the selected poems. Richard’s writing privileges a male perspective and male reader, one where the establishment of the male power allows the vague language to signify mystical representation and power of the poem rather than a further reduction of agency and importance as it does to the female reader and character. Instead, women are further reduced to essence and characteristics rather than the divine creation of the whole as males are in Poe’s formal tactic.

In summary, a brief exploration into Poe’s two main critical essays and relevant criticism builds a foundational landscape which enriches the following analyses of binary gender, the role of Nature and temporality in establishing Poe’s theory of genius. Poe’s essays indicate what he values in poetry – brevity in both writing and reading, intellectual ease of the subject matter, the

ability of the poem to transport the reader into a mystical realm due to the linguistic limitations of the poetry itself. And, for the purpose of the ensuing chapter, Poe uses disembodied female characterizations as inspiration for male success and prefers emotionally masked classical constructions of gender roles to advance his theory of the male genius.

### **Poe's Definition of Genius.**

“A man of genius makes no mistakes; his errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery” –James Joyce

Keats and Shelley clearly defined and developed the epic hero and Romantic genius in their poetry. The American Dark Romantic Poetry – especially in response to the idealistic Transcendentalist movement – creates a subtler genius, and one with fewer epic hero traits. Edgar Allen Poe's poetry represents genius as a highly gendered male connected to Nature and dependent on women for inspiration and mortal love, though often women are discarded in favor of conquest and ambition. This becomes especially evident across his poetry, but perhaps most prominently in *Tamerlane* (1827), *In Youth I Have Known One* (unknown) and *Israfel* (1831). Taken together, these three works each contain many of the same aspects, though Poe's treatment varies. Nature and seasons play a prominent role in each poem – the frequency of anthropomorphization and proximity to natural elements defends the position of genius by contextualizing power and influence. Each work also emphasizes the genius's acceptance of movement of time and place which leads to a peace amongst genius figures that is not present in British Romantic poetry.

The following analysis will be divided by examining Poe's male genius then considering the role of women across the three poems. *Tamerlane* is a poem focused on the quest for greatness, but one where the narrator is also aware of its consequences. Nature becomes a method for the narrator to discover Truth, and exposes the role of the narrator's love for a

woman. Nature facilitates the subversion of the narrator's love by his ambition for greatness. *In Youth I Have Known One* presents a narrator looking upon genius and identifies the distinction between faith and godliness. *Israfel* tells the story of the angel Israfel and his love affair with the Moon and the wild passion and beauty of his interactions with personified Nature. While the plots of these three poems are distinct, each expose the ways Poe develops his theory of genius. Poe's genius is highly gendered – males and females play distinct roles and there is little cross-gender assumption of traits. However, both males and females exist in close connection with both anthropomorphized Nature and inanimate natural elements. Unlike British Romantic genius figures, Poe's male genius finds comfort in movement and evolution of time and place and females assume timeless roles in his works. The following writing presents a binary comparison of male and female roles in the three poems cited above as a way to understand Poe's theory of genius.

Poe's Male Genius.

#### *Defining Genius*

While Shelley and Keats' work certainly contain both male and female forces, Poe offers a much more gendered perception of genius, and woman as both individual genius and supporter of male genius. While genius is highly gendered and solely male in Keats and Shelley's work, there women in those poems garner much more agency than Poe's females. This section will discuss male genius.

In *Tamerlane*, the male narrator is one that struggles with divine Nature and the tyranny of man, though the narrator ultimately rises above the rest due to his ability to concede his womanly weakness rather than an infallible "iron heart." In this subtlety, Poe argues that true and unsubverted power is found in the voluntary relinquishment of the façade of omnipotence. This



becomes especially obvious in the juxtaposition of selected lines in the stanzas in the first half of the poem. After his reckoning in the Taglay Mountains, he receives a call from Heaven “with the touch of hell” and feels compelled to answer it:

“And the deep trumpet-thunder’s roar  
Came hurriedly unto me, telling  
Of human battle, where my voice,  
My own voice, silly child! – was swelling  
(Oh! How my spirit would rejoice,  
And leap within me at the cry)  
The battle cry of Victory!” (828)

However, even in the moment of his ascension into the limitlessness of genius, he retains a sense of his own limitations by noting that despite the powerful “swelling” of his “own voice” to the human “battle cry of Victory” he recognizes his “own voice, silly child” despite his visceral strengthening due the unseen masses behind him. This acknowledgement of his own shortcomings does not undermine the power of the moment, but rather prevents the dramatic torture that the genius figures of British Romantic poetry suffered due to their inability to remember their shortcomings in the moment of transcendence.

The narrator goes on to reestablish his role as genius in the following stanzas. The mental faculty that allows him to remember his mortality is the one that enables him to free man of tyranny. In an address to his “father” – though the exact identify of this male figure remains undisclosed throughout the poem – he proclaims “My passions, from that hapless hour, / Usurp’d a tyranny which men / Have deem’d, since I have reached to power, / My innate nature – be it so” (828). Despite, and perhaps because of, the admission of his shortfalls, he is able to free

mankind from prolonged tyranny. His “innate nature” of “power” does not diminish. However, this stanza reveals that there was another who in the narrator’s “boyhood” ...E’ven *then* who knew this iron heart / In woman’s weakness had a part” (828). While the narrator certainly embodies this distinction and uses it to succeed in his role as genius in *Tamerlane*, his admission that another boy arrived at this understanding of agency not necessarily being consistent with omnipotence furthers Poe’s definition of male genius as autonomous yet not all-powerful.

As further textual proof, in *Tamerlane* the male narrator can admit the effect of love and yet is not confined to the demands of retaining a contrived position of power. After the narrator feels human love, not anthropomorphized effects, he admits that it “leav’st the heart a wilderness!” and yet exclaims in the next line “Idea! Which bindest life around / With music of so strange a sound, / And beauty of so wild a birth, - / Farewell! For I have won the Earth” (831). This juxtaposition of his relinquishment of control over his heart and the confidence of his statement that he has “won the Earth” is a central element to Poe’s male genius. Further, the frequent use of exclamation points exposes emotion from the narrator, which breaks down an isolating barrier between narrator and reader. Emotionally vulnerable punctuation pushes back against the notion of the isolated genius and instead finds the male genius intertwined with his audience in a matter somewhat consistent with Shelley and Keats.

Another central aspect of Poe’s male genius is being unfazed by temporality. In *Tamerlane*, the narrator uses gender as a way to describe his fallibility in contrast to his position of intellectual power in the poem. After the narrator equates the unnamed woman in the poem to the moon, he compares boyhood to “a summer sun / Whose waning is the dreariest one- / For all we live to know is known / Let life, then, as the day-flower, fall / With the noon-day beauty – which is all” (832). While he mourns the passing of youth, his evocation of the passing of days

and seasons provides a way to contextualize the loss of the idealized “day-flower” “whose waning is the dreariest one.” Further, the male genius asserts that at the setting of the metaphorical sun is emblematic of the end of knowledge. This is a privileged position – though the male genius may not be able to control the closing of an era, he is at least totally aware of its passing and can make claims as to its implications. While the male genius in *Tamerlane* may not be omnipotent, he is omniscient.

*In Youth I Have Known One* provides a different perspective on the male genius, namely because the vague boy genius is not complemented, rivaled, or contextualized by any female at all. He relies on another male to realize his greatness, however, which furthers Poe’s development of the dependent genius rather than the isolated and removed figure. Poe argues in this poem that genius is a gift endowed at birth, and one that that is fostered through men and brought to a point by one musical note:

“In youth I have known one with whom the Earth

In secret communing held – as he with it,

In daylight, and in beauty, from his birth” (841).

...

“...As th’ expanding eye

To the loved object – so the tear to the lid

Will start, which lately slept in apathy?

And yet it need not be – that object – hid

From us in life, but common – which doth lie

Each hour before us – but then only bed

With a strange sound, as of a harp-string broken,

T'awake us – 'Tis a symbol and a token." (841)

The "daylight" and "beauty" that accompanies his birth – though it remains unclear whether this is the birth of his genius or the birth of his person, though the distinction is likely not important – are translated into the "expanding eye" that has previously "slept in apathy." The appearance of genius moves the narrator to greatness. Before genius, "that object" of inspiration was "hid / From us in life" despite its seeming regularity. The role of the genius here is to expose what distracted or incapable average human mind will fail to see in their quotidian existence. It is the genius' job to sing the "strange sound, as of a harp-string broken" to awake the masses. The last line's distinction of this reveal being both a "symbol" and a "token" indicates that it is for the ones who witness this expulsion of knowledge and something that is meant to be transferred and shared, respectively.

An element unique to *In Youth I Have Known* is the direct attribution of God as the giver of genius and beauty, not man. While the individual mortal(s) in this poem are certainly capable of harnessing this divine inspiration, Poe's acknowledgement that God is the source of this gift works in a manner similar to his treatment of Nature – it checks the free reign the genius can garner and simultaneously strengthens the claim for the narrator as genius since he is able to attract the interest of God. He writes:

"Of what other worlds shall be – and given

In beauty by our God, to those alone

Who otherwise would fall from life and Heaven,

Drawn by their heart's passion, and that tone,

That high tone of the spirit, which hath striven

Though not with Faith – with godliness – whose throne

With desperate energy 't hath beaten down;  
Wearing its own deep feeling as a crown." (841-2)

This comes at the end, which would make it seem like the above passages were earlier reflections, and the narrator finds some truth in this new revelation at the close of the work. The noticeable reduction in punctuation and dash marks in this stanza subconsciously indicates that the narrator is more confident in the writing as it takes on a more streamlined form. God gives "in beauty" the geniuses that are "drawn from their heart's passions" that stem from God and Heaven. The male genius is not necessarily dependent on Heaven for the execution of genius, but is dependent on Heaven for the initial bestowal of enlightenment. However, genius is not continually dependent on Heaven for the agency to create. The narrator writes that the tone unheard by many, "that high tone of the spirit" retains its elusiveness and power "not with Faith – with godliness". The capitalization of "Faith" indicates that it is not to be overlooked, but rather that the genius is concerned with something beyond the average scope. Even father, the narrator insinuates that his own "deep feeling as a crown" supersedes the throne of "godliness" and beats it down with a "desperate energy." Poe's trope of genius develops the role as highly dependent and lacking autonomy, though one endowed with greatness beyond the average mortal capability, and perhaps beyond godliness as well.

*Israfel* develops male genius as the creator of something unique. The angel *Israfel* is known throughout Heaven as the creator and facilitator of divine music. The narrator writes:

"And they say (the starry choir  
And the other listening things)  
That *Israfeli's* fire  
Is owing to that lyre

By which he sits and sings –  
The trembling living wire  
Of those unusual strings.” (799)

Poe’s choice to have the “starry choir / And the other listening things” report “Israfeli’s fire” is a result of that “lyre” is significant because it indicates that Israfel’s genius is closely linked to the divine Heavens above. The narrator finds the music objectively enchanting, and Poe’s clarification of the “they” contextualizes Israfel’s high standing in the power dynamics of the poem. The narrator’s description of Israfel’s song furthers his genius. The “unusual” strings of the lyre, the “trembling living wire[s],” is what separates Israfel from other angels of figures in Heaven. His physical position in this stanza is also emblematic of Israfel’s genius. Despite the intensity and power of Israfel’s song, he “sits and sings” instead of occupying a dramatic or spatially significant place. The subtlety of his physical position does not undermine his genius but rather heightens it because it creates Israfel as an established genius rather than a dramatic individual vying for attention. He is quiet and understated while he creates his perfection.

#### *Relationship to Nature*

While Nature plays varying roles in these three poems, the overarching commonalities include the character’s reverence for Nature, the genius’ dependencies on Nature for inspiration and nature for context, as well as the peace found in its circadian rhythms.

In the second stanza of *Tamerlane*, the narrator establishes his desire for the simplicity and beauty of Nature while noting its infinite characteristics. He writes: “O craving heart, for the lost flowers/ And sunshine of my dying hours! The undying voice of that dead time, / With its interminable chime, / Rings, in the spirit of a spell, / Upon thy emptiness – a knell” (827). The nondescript pronouns of these lines indicate either that the narrator is unable to clearly

distinguish who the sentiments are intended for, or is intentionally leaving it vague for the reader to engage with the text and assign the pronouns as interpreted. In either case, the agency of the poem rests outside of the narrator and either in the reader or in Nature.

Later in the poem, Poe secures Nature as the divining force for the narrator as It simultaneously catalyzes the narrator's power and contextualizes it. He writes, "On mountain soil I first drew life: The mists of the Taglay have shed / Nightly their dews upon my head, And I believe, the wingèd strife / And tumult of the headlong air / Have nestled in my very hair" (828). Poe's evocation of the Taglay Mountains draws on a deep literary history of mysticism and power associated with the large tract of relatively undefined land near the Caspian Sea. The Taglay Mountains held this name from the Middle Ages until the 19<sup>th</sup> century and were often used to emphasize the sublime power of vast underdeveloped landscapes (Eapoe.com). While Poe's contemporary readership of this poem would be more familiar with this mountain range than the contemporary reader, it does not undermine the effect of Poe's use of this region of isolated wilderness. The narrator's ability to throw off the "mists" of this mountain range in particular indicates the narrator's strength and mental agency as a result of the "mountain soil" where he "first drew life." Much like the concept of genius developed in Keats and Shelley's work, this genius recognizes the "wingèd strife / And tumult of the headlong air" that threatens to overtake him. Nature is both an empowering and reductive force. Poe's use of air as the force of Nature is significant because air is totally encompassing yet unseen. Unlike other natural forces which can be contained and manipulated for human use, wind – even today – remains largely unmanipulable. The wind "nestled in [the narrator's] very hair" establishes the narrator to be at the whim of Nature, while simultaneously able to use its power for individual advancement.

*In Youth I Have Known One* provides a unique perspective on both anthropomorphized Nature and inanimate nature, both contextualizing the power of the genius and questioning where the genius actually rests in the poem. The premise of the work is the narrator's reflection on the beginning life of the boy genius, and his unrealized power. However, over the course of the poem the assignment of genius is called into question. While in the first lines of the poem the narrator identifies that the young boy he knew in his "youth" was one that "with whom the Earth / In secret communing held" (841), he quickly emphasizes that "And yet that spirit knew not, in the hour / Of its own fevour, what had o'er it power" (841). Even in the moment of his transcendence into a sovereign state, he is unaware his own power. While unrealized genius does not necessarily discount the genius itself, this subtlety does introduce a new genius – the narrator of the poem.

The ability to identify what another is incapable of realizing is a privileged perspective in and of itself. Poe continues to develop this dual-genius by the narrator's continued reflection on this boy genius of his youth. When he writes that "Perhaps it may be that my mind is wrought / To a fever by the moonbeam that hangs o'er" (841) he not only fails to dilute his own genius but ratifies his own place in the work by evoking natural imagery to contextualize his agency. The "moonbeam" that sparks the fever of his mind has "more sovereignty than ancient lore / Hath ever told" (841). In the last two lines of the stanza the narrator offers the rhetorical question "That with a quickening spell doth o'er us pass / As dew of the night-time o'er the summer grass?" (841). The "unembodied essence of genius" mentioned earlier is as fleeting yet as enchanting as the night time dew. The use of rhetorical question transfers the agency of the poem onto the reader, and away from the boy genius. However, nature provides a framework and imagery to understand the boy genius.



### *Relationship to Temporality*

Poe's male genius does not fight progression and the rising and falling of greatness as British Romantic epic heroes do. Instead, graceful acceptance discourages immortal torment that comes from striving for eternal supremacy. In *Tamerlane*, the narrator does not cling to stagnant situations as a means of securing his position of power within the poem. Instead, he finds peace in progression, especially when likening it to the rising and setting sun – a prevalent image throughout the poem. The narrator finds peace in the movement of time and place, both his own and of those around him – especially the woman he loves.

Even in the face of missed opportunity, of faded ambition and world control – all things central to the omnipotent genius – the male narrator of *Tamerlane* identifies his previous greatness, and yet accepts his loss of his position of power with grace. He writes:

“Of half the world as my own,  
    And murmur'd at such lowly lot –  
But, just like any other dream,  
    Upon the vapor of the dew,  
“My own had past, did not the beam  
    Of beauty which did while it thro'  
The minute – the hour – the day oppress  
My mind with double loveliness.” (830)

Though once able to lay claim to “half the world” his era of ambition and domination has passed as ephemerally as “the vapor of the dew.” He evokes both sun and clock imagery to mark the passing of this era, and this quiet acceptance is consistent with other tenets of Poe's theory of

what defines a genius. While once the “beam / Of beauty which did while it thro’” and saturated every part of the narrator’s world, “just like any other dream” so too does this moment of supremacy vanish. His reflection on the intensity of his own ambition – one that “murmur’d at such lowly lot” when reflecting on his domination of only half the world does not cloud his ability to see the beauty of this passing of an era. With grace that escapes the British Romantic geniuses, Poe’s narrator remarks that in “the minute – the hour – the day” that his role on the throne ceased, the beauty in this relinquishment oppressed his “mind with double loveliness.” Poe’s genius finds peace and power in the rise and fall of greatness, even his own.

*Israfil* suggest Poe’s male genius has a similar treatment of temporality, though the narrator accepts the passage of power in a unique way. The point of view of this poem – the narrator looking upon the heavenly male angel who enchants all who listen with the sound of his lyre – subliminally creates the angel Israfil as one not completely autonomous – he does not write his own story nor is he given any lines. The reader’s perception of this idealized figure is generated by the narrator, though this does not discount Israfil’s genius. Instead, the narrator’s magnetic draw to Israfil defends his position as genius. This becomes clear in the last stanza of the poem when the narrator admits that “If I could dwell / Where Israfil / Hath dwelt, and he where I, He might not sing so wildly well / A mortal melody, / While a bolder note than this might swell / From my lyre within the sky” (799). The narrator possesses enough awareness and knowledge to recognize Israfil’s song as something beyond a “mortal melody” but is not himself capable of recreating this note “from [his] lyre within the sky.” His suggestion that “If I could dwell / Where Israfil / Hath dwelt” advances the concept that Poe’s male genius is a role that can, even theoretically, be switched and different role assumed. There is no apparent power struggle, but rather a peaceful assumption and relinquishment of genius.

While Poe's male genius varies slightly in each work, the main of his theory expose the male genius' transcendence into greatness with ease.

### **Female Roles.**

#### *Defining the Role*

Women play a variable role in Poe's poetry. While they do not occupy the traditional roles of genius, females are prevalent throughout *Tamerlane*, *In Youth I Have Known One*, and *Israfel*. Women play a vital role in supporting the male genius in their poems, and while they are valued and often revered due to their feminine mystique and sublimity, Poe's poetry does not develop a female genius, though women are given more agency than in the British Romantic's work.

In *Tamerlane*, the unnamed woman consistently plays a supporting role for the male narrator in his quest for greatness. Spatially in the text, the woman either precedes or follows the man's pivotal moments, after the end of his boyhood summer, and even after his life. Though the woman never occupies an autonomous role, the female figure appears throughout the poem and is consistently associated with permanent imagery – namely, the moon. While the protagonist is certainly not a female genius, Poe does give women a place in his poem, and her influence is not ephemeral like the male genius of *Tamerlane*.

The woman comes alive when the narrator talks about plans of greatness:

“...In her eyes,

I read, perhaps too carelessly,

A mingled feeling with my own;

The flush of her bright cheek to me

Seem'd to become a queenly throne

Too well that I should let it be

Light in the wilderness alone.” (830)

Poe develops the male narrator’s perfect love for the woman as a method to excite his emotion and pursuit of this ideal. While the woman on the surface meets all of his criteria for satisfaction, mortal love is actually not enough for the male narrator. While Poe assigns agency to the female in the poem, it is as a supporting role only. The subtlety becomes obvious in one line toward the beginning of the work when the narrator remarks that: “And she would mark the opening skies, / *I* saw no Heaven – but in her eyes” (829). While an initial read would, correctly, suggest that the woman is capable of facilitating the “opening skies” which indicates power, the male narrator is the one that must see the “Heaven” in her eyes to validate this. The italics of “*I*” places increased emphasis on this caveat to her agency. Further effusion comes immediately preceding this line, and further develops the poems distinction of the necessity for women and their role as independent genius. He says:

“Oh, she was worthy of all love!

Love, as in infancy, was mine –

‘Twas such as angel minds above

Might envy; her young heart the shrine

On which my every hope and thought

Were incense – then a goodly gift,

For they were childish and upright –

Pure, as her young example taught;

Why did I leave it, and adrift,

Trust to the fire within for light?” (829)

While the narrator admits that she was “worthy of all love” he acknowledges that this mortal love he feels was from “infancy”. This dichotomy continues throughout the poem, as he likens her to an angel which the “minds above / Might envy” and yet the “goodly gift” of her love was “childish and upright.” While he recognizes perfection of his love for her, he still identifies her being with juvenile and innocent language. While appealing, it is not compatible with his quest for genius. However, the last two lines of this stanza are revealing in developing the poem’s approach to women. The narrator does exhibit some regret in leaving the ease of his love, and questions “Why did I leave it, and adrift, / Trust to the fire within for light”. When he leaves on his pursuit of greatness, he must rely solely on his internal genius – “the fire within” for clarity and direction. Though he ultimately does choose personal advancement over his love with the woman, he is not blind to the costs. The woman in *Tamerlane* sparks the male genius’ call to greatness, but when it is time for him to transcend, he leaves her.

Despite Poe’s consistent development of the woman as dependent on male genius to both spark her own genius and serve as a catalyst for the fleeting male genius, Poe does evoke enduring imagery when describing females. While their active influence may not be as pointedly powerful as males, the breadth of their role is far more extensive. *Tamerlane* emphasizes this by likening the women to the personified moon:

“What tho’ the moon – the white moon –  
Shed all the splendor of her noon,  
*Her* smile is chilly, and *her* beam  
In that time of dreariness, will seem  
(So like you gather in your breath)

A portrait taken after death.” (832)

The seamless transition of pronouns and the vagueness of the “her” in this stanza suggests that the moon does not just represent the woman in *Tamerlane* but all women. While strikingly different from the romantic language of the British poets, Poe evokes indirect comparisons to the sun of the “boyhood summer” to the shed “splendor of her noon” in favor for sublime and “chilly” moonbeams. While initially the narrator’s comparison of femininity to “A portrait taken after death” is not favorable or inspiring, the narrator – who he takes care to establish as beacons of childish love and joy in the rest of *Tamerlane* – suggests this comparison during a “time of dreariness.” This distinction allows the portrait to be a reminder of a moment before the dreariness or “death” of the moment before the reader (who is directly called out) exhales his “breath” and accepts the dreariness of the moment they find themselves in. *Tamerlane* does not strip women of their agency, in fact it argues that men’s genius is dependent on female inspiration and longevity to sustain their comparatively short-lived bouts of excellence. The narrator does not allow autonomy for women, but he does clarify their essential role.

The female does not appear at all in *In Youth I Have Known One*, as mentioned in the section addressing male genius. While analysis would be more revealing were if there were women in the poem, their absence is significant as well. In much of Poe’s other works, the female was synonymous with the moon and evoked eternal and sublime emotional landscapes. However, in this poem the moon is simply a moon whose beams shine proverbial light into the male genius. While intention is nearly impossible to prove, the contrast between a frequent element of Poe’s poetry and its deliberate exclusion in *In Youth I Have Known One* reminds the reader that women are not necessary to the production of male genius.

However, Poe's connection of the moon and women returns in *Israfel*, and is consistent with *Tamerlane* and *In Youth I Have Known One*. The second stanza begins:

“Tottering above  
In her highest noon,  
The enamored moon,  
Blushes, with love,  
While, to listen, the red levin  
(With the rapid Pleiads, even,  
Which were seven)  
Pauses in Heaven. (798)

The physical position of the moon in this section of the poem represents Poe's defense of women's importance. However, he immediately qualifies this superior position by describing the moon as “tottering” – not a stable and easy reign that characterizes Poe's male genius. The close rhyme scheme of this poem sonically ties together the moon, the unspecified lover, and the mystical Pleiads and natural elements. The feminine force acts as a unifier for the many aspects in this stanza, though the “enamored moon” is shown to be susceptible to her love of Israfel. Though the moon is not capitalized as it is in other poems, the emotions and properties of the moon are certainly female. Specifically, the moon “blushes, with love” and is unable to be an active force in this stanza but rather just observe the intensity of her surroundings.

Poe emphasizes the lack of female agency through his use of the “red levin” and the seven “Pleiads.” While the moon is capable of appreciating the beauty of Israfel's music, the “levin” (an archaic word for lightning) refrains from striking and hovers in “Heaven,” and Pleiads, the seven daughters of Atlas, stop to listen (Wikipedia). The moon, “in her highest

noon” is tied closely with these powerful anthropomorphized and mythical elements. However, they stop to listen to Israfel not her, furthering Poe’s perception of the role of the female as a necessary support for the male genius.

Females are closely linked to natural elements throughout the poem, specifically the Moon. While feminine agency is subverted when in the presence of the male genius, the female’s alignment with Nature

Despite the emphasis on love in *Tamerlane*, Nature trumps the narrator’s quest for mortal love with the unnamed and rather elusive female. The gendered and anthropomorphized elements of the poem are significant, though Poe undermines their significance when the narrator finds his true sense of self with the earth, and love is not enough. He exudes:

“Yet more than worthy of the love  
My spirit struggled with, and strove,  
When, on the mountain peak, alone,  
Ambition lent it a new tone –  
I had no being, but in thee:

The world, and all it did contain  
In the earth – the air – the sea –

Its join – its little lot of pain” (829-830)

Perhaps most striking in this passage is the shift in pronouns, with the narrator moving from talking about Nature to talking *to* Nature, as seen with the first use of “thee”. The narrator establishes that the love he feels to the woman is insufficient, and writes that his “spirit struggled with” the world only on the “mountain peak, alone” where he feels emboldened enough to address Nature as “thee” while simultaneously relinquishing his own “being.” The introduction



of ambition leads the narrator to disregard “the world, and all it did contain.” Nature awakens the genius, but the new traits of this emboldened man make him forget what sparked the heightened agency.

*Women as the anti-temporality*

Women’s power and identity are derived from Nature. Though this can be found in other poems, Poe reintroduction East and Central Asia cultural and geographic symbols in *Tamerlane* conveys women’s eternal influence and quiet power. Following a series of powerful nature imagery, the narrator continues:

“Look ‘round thee now on Samarcand!  
Is she not queen of Earth? Her pride  
Above all cities? In her hand  
Their destinies? In all beside  
Of glory which the world hath known,  
Stands she not nobly and alone?  
Falling, her veriest stepping-stone  
Shall form the pedestal of a throne –  
And who her sovereign? Timour – he  
Whom the astonished people saw  
Striding o’ver empires haughtily  
A diadem’d outlaw!” (831)

Samarcand is one of the oldest cities of habitation, with signs of primitive human life over 10,000 years ago (Wikipedia) and is known for being both the center of Islamic study and the birthplace of many finer tactile arts, like embroidery. The narrator pushes the reader’s vision onto this

ancient city known for its higher level thinking even in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, and anthropomorphizes the city as “her.” In a way similar to Prometheus’ gift of fire to humanity, Poe’s narrator argues that Samarcand has bestowed humanity, “above all other cities” with finery and even further, holds “in her hand / Their destinies.” The narrator challenges “And who her sovereign?” and answers the rhetorical question with a failure – Timur. Historically, Timur was the first king in a long Persian dynasty in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. His military career was distinguished and his army was feared and continues to live on in legend. The narrator’s disdain of this male in particular and his attempts to control the autonomous female city decisively reverses the tropes of male and female genius that Poe develops elsewhere in the poem. Poe’s choice to make this Samarcand’s foe strengthens her role as “queen of the Earth.” The paradigm shift sees the feminized city “stand[ing] ... nobly and alone” and the male who strides “o’ver empires haughtily” now becomes the “diadem’d outlaw.” The only recognition he receives while trying to subvert her power is becoming a crowned king of the ostracized. While in totality, *Tamerlane* still favors the male as the main genius figure, this moment is important in reminding the reader that the narrator is comfortable with a change in power, and in fact champions the unlikely figure – the anthropomorphized female Islamic city.

While Poe does not develop a female parallel to the male genius, women are not absent from these works. In these three poems, women are not powerful and are not given independent agency, but they are not insignificant.

### **Conclusion of Section.**

*Tamerlane*, *In Youth I Have Known One* and *Israfel* work to reveal Poe’s perception of genius. In comparison to British Romantics of the same era, Poe’s poetry gives significantly less agency to women, though males solely occupy the position of genius.

Male genius is unable to achieve omnipotence, the male genius is omniscient in knowledge and retains the mental capacity to balance conflicting desires – mainly for greatness and for mortal love with women – and not be blinded by the weight of his choices. While Nature and nature is the supreme provider of knowledge, man harnesses this sublime power with grace. Poe's male genius is unfazed by the inevitable decline of his supremacy.

Women's role is to support and facilitate the greatness of the male genius. While they are restricted from being supreme, women are eternal and the antithesis of temporality. While the male genius is in proximity to Nature, women are synonymous with Nature – specifically the moon. Women are not geniuses in Poe's poems, but women play a significant role.

Anthropomorphized Nature as well as natural elements are established as integral to defining male genius and the role of the female. The narrators of each poems routinely use physical nature to cue the reader to the sublimity of the genius, and anthropomorphized nature to contextualize the necessity of women.

While many other aspects of Poe's poetry thrive on subtlety, these three works seem fairly consistent in their treatment of the temporarily of time and place. While unlike the geniuses of the British Romantic period, Poe's male genius figures do not fight change, but rather embrace it. This acknowledgement of the inevitable prevents the torture that Prometheus, as an example, feels as he pushes back against the passing of the pantheons. Here, there is peace and even relief in allowing moments of supremacy to rise and fall.

Ultimately, a textual analysis of these three poems begins to craft an understanding of Poe's genius: a male capable of great power and one who is unconcerned with the superficial accolades of genius. Instead, his smooth relationship with nature and experience with mortal love

creates a foundation of effortless success and unchallenged adoration by the respective narrator and characters of each poem.

## CONCLUSION

“The principle mark of genius is not perfection but originality, the opening of new frontiers” –Arthur Koestler

My thesis seeks to disprove the misconception of the solitary, perfect genius. A close examination of Percy Shelley, John Keats, and Edgar Allan Poe, and their poems, revises the traditional concept of genius. For Keats, genius is costly but can be realized. For Shelley, genius is damning. For Poe, it is gracefully idealized. While the characteristics of genius vary substantially between author, some tropes remain consistent throughout: namely an emphasis on Nature, the transference of knowledge, and the notion that genius is a zero-sum game. Ultimately, these three authors – among a much larger cannon of Romantic poets – present three unique theories of genius. While the details of these complexities have been discussed in the preceding pages, the final implication of this analysis is the mutability of what characterizes a genius and who occupies that role. The perception of genius changes across authors, continents and time, though the pursuit of genius and our obsession with perfection lives on.

The British writers focus on the distinction between sleep and death and the damnation of genius. *Prometheus Unbound* and both *Hyperion* poems center around the epic hero and his (each genius in these three poems is male) moment or the aftermath of his transcendence to greatness and benevolent divinity. Both Shelley and Keats systematically create Prometheus and Hyperion, respectively, to be capable of being omniscient and omnipotent transcended powers, though both remain unable to realize the full potential of their roles. Keats presents the reader

with the rising and falling of whole pantheons of gods. There are multiple genius figures in his poetry and each warn the reader of the unavoidability of the torture of knowledge and ultimate loss of power. However, Keats allows his geniuses to transcend mortal strife into a divine world of perfect and complete knowledge. Shelley's treatment of Prometheus supports the notion that genius is unattainable. His choice to center the reader's focus on his protagonist role as hero and genius provides a commentary on the dangers of the autonomous genius.

Poe's poetry is not as overtly epic as the British authors, though many of the same aspects are present in his poems. While Keats and Shelley's protagonists are gendered as well, individual agency and influence are reserved for males only. The male genius is dependent on feminine love to realize his greatness, but men alone sit at the top of Poe's proverbial summit. Drawing from the idealization of the American Transcendentalist movement, he creates male geniuses that are perfect and separate from the mortal fray around them. Poe warns of the unviability of genius by removing the reader from genius by two frames of perspective – the narrators and the authors. Poe's genius is alone in the poem and isolated from the reader themselves. While Poe's genius realizes his role and grasps his divine perfection, he hyperaware of his own ephemerality of his position of genius. Poe expresses the detriment of this role in subtler ways than his British counterparts – there are no overly dramatic moments of transcendence or proclamations of curses. Poe's genius is an idealized man far removed from any social connection; he is alone as society stands in awe.

These three authors challenge the accepted tenets of epic poetry and traditional genius and instead create heavily flawed characters that have certain elements of genius, though no one individual is flawless. This tactic is more effective than having perfect genius figures because it allows the reader to identify the shortcomings of each protagonist and imagine a more perfect

figure. Even if each author created what they define as a perfect character, the works would undoubtedly be met with dissent and would be confined to a very narrow definition of genius. In contrast, the flawed genius allows the individual reader to craft the perfect genius figure out of the characters of the epic, and facilitate a personal and variable definition of genius. Each reader prioritizes certain elements over another, and so each time the poem is read another individual picks up the pieces artfully developed by the author and creates what they determine to be a genius from the ruins of the one in the poem. Rather than depicting what a genius is, these authors allow the reader to construct the genius.

Taken together, these three authors suggest that while the surrounding societies and characters certainly benefit from their presence, the geniuses themselves suffer. Keats and Shelley overtly present this suffering as internal and external torture. They provide a cautionary tale for those in pursuit of the divine transcendence, though the problematic elements of genius differ between authors. In contrast, the cost of Poe's genius is inferred by the reader – the emotional death that results from isolation due to the sole pursuit of perfection no matter the costs. By highlighting both the successes and flaws of genius, the works graduate from nineteenth century perceptions of genius and instead facilitate intertemporal and cross-cultural interpretations. However, in the process, these authors also challenge the validity of a perfect figure by not creating one themselves. Each work suggests something different about genius. The consensus ultimately rests in the reader, though Keats, Shelley, and Poe each effectively subvert the viability of genius in and of itself.

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