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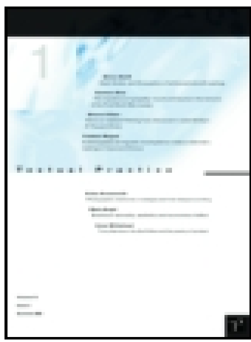

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What can the romantic lyric do?

Madeleine Callaghan

The School of English, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT
The Romantic fascination with lyric is only matched by the poets' relentless drive to experiment with and individualise the genre. Lyric's limits test the creative and critical intelligence of the Romantic poet who asks what poetry can know and how it can know it, and what lyric can do and how it can do it. This article considers the ways in which each poet asks the question of what can lyric do and show how they react with and against a genre that imagines transhistorical existence even as it lives in the loss of the specific moment it would record. Focusing upon Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, I discuss the ways in which the Romantic poets responsible for this idea of 'the ideal form of "the Romantic lyric"' manipulated, challenged, and shaped the idea of lyric that we have inherited.

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The Romantic lyric has laboured under the sign of its own notoriety for a long time. The lyric itself has drawn praise and censure for its indefiniteness, with Eva Müller-Zettelmann and Margarete Rubik writing, 'there is neither a generally accepted and comprehensive definition nor a differentiated toolkit for analysis',[1] where Hegel glories in the lyric poet's freedom when finding no 'poetic bibles' for writing lyric poetry.[2] If the poet finds liberty in the lyric's openness, critics gnash their collective teeth. It seems the Romantic lyric is to blame. Mary Poovey refers to 'the lyricization of literary criticism' as critics come to rely on 'the genre of the romantic lyric'.[3] In terms of this interpretation of the Romantic lyric, its apparently exemplary quality becomes tyrannical, forcing critics to reify the structures they inherit or to reject them wholesale. But is the Romantic lyric so fixed a category? Can we understand it as half in love with its own procedures? Are there key values held in common across all the lyric poetry of the period? I claim that what Virginia Jackson calls 'the large abstraction of the Romantic

CONTACT Madeleine Callaghan m.callaghan@sheffield.ac.uk

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lyric' seems to exist more in the critical imagination than in the poetry.[4] The Romantic lyrics considered in this article aim to question, to test what they can uniquely do with the lyric, and ask, above all, what can this poem do with 'this thing called lyric?'[5] This article focuses upon four lyrics by Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, and Shelley. None of the four poems discussed bears a title distinct from its first line, making them a kind of 'unnamable', even unknowable, form of lyric. In these 'unnamable' lyrics, I will observe the ways in which each poet asks the question of what can lyric do and show how they react with and against a genre that imagines transhistorical existence even as it lives in the loss of the specific moment it would record.[6]

Aristotle didn't have much to say about lyric poetry in *Poetics*, claiming 'what is meant by "lyric poetry" is self-evident',[7] and likewise, the British Romantic poets had a loose sense of what it might mean without theorising its mechanisms in prose. Joseph Trapp, in the mid-eighteenth century, writes 'As to the Nature of the Lyric Poem, it is, of all Kinds of Poetry, the most poetical; and is as distinct, both in Style, and Thought, from the rest, as Poetry in general is from Prose'.[8] Lyric is more than exemplary. Here, lyric is the essence of poetry, distinct and unique, imprecise but obviously itself. Trapp praises the boldness of lyric poetry, and finds an ally in Anna Laetitia Barbauld, who describes the lyric as 'pure Poetry or poetry in the abstract' and as a species of 'bold fiction'.[9] Her praise of lyric's boldness speaks to Jonathan Culler's sense of 'the characteristic extravagance of lyric'.[10] Such extravagance of lyric can link to extravagance of feeling. In the 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads', Wordsworth does not provide any definition of lyric, but his emphasis on the poet as a man of feeling, 'endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul' speaks to the encroachment of lyric as a branch of feeling onto the idea of poetry in general. But these definitions and assumptions could not and did not find consensus in the Romantic period or in today's critical debates. Clifford Siskin refers to the Romantic lyric as 'as an experimental form' but the discussion of what it means to experiment with the lyric in the Romantic period is long overdue.[11] If experimentation is a form of generic marker rather than challenge to generic norms, the procedures adopted by each lyric become not only worthy of scrutiny, but proof of the poem's status as lyric. Lyric must ask what it can do and what it can refuse to do in order to be what it is.

Jonathan Culler's point that 'it is crucial to stress that interpretation of individual works is not the goal of poetics, which seeks to understand how systems of literary discourse work', is important, but poetics cannot afford to discard the individual work, particularly in the case of the lyric.[12] The particular, in this case, can be a way to understand the larger patterns of how lyric exemplarity was conceptualised or even constructed in its aftermath. Lyric experimentation could mean a freedom from the demands of plot,

sanction brevity, and allow the voice, either oral or written, to shape the poem. But it could also enforce a mode founded upon what Hegel referred to as 'the language of the *poetic* inner life' that must draw upon the poet's unique experience and feeling even as they 'possess a universal validity'.[13] Hawking their feelings as wares, the poet has to be both one individual and every person, plumbing their own subjective depths even as they transform the 'I' into a cipher capable of standing in for their readers. Any marker for the 'I'—speaker, the poet, or the voice—reveals itself as inadequate. On the idea of the 'subject', Jacques Derrida says, 'I would keep the name provisionally as an index for discussion',[14] and this sense of the provisional or the makeshift subject can be usefully transposed to the lyric 'I' and its instability in the Romantic lyrics discussed in this article. I will use the term 'lyric "I"' and, occasionally, 'the speaker' as markers even as I acknowledge the difficulty of allowing even these to stand; though these terms might be problematic, they are also what we have to speak of the 'I' at all.

The Romantic poets thrived on and pushed against the contradictions implied by so hard a task. But each of the poets featured here would do so differently, using or denying their singularity as a means of getting past genre. They estrange themselves from lyric's standard while they obey its strictures to be individual; such rebellion is a type of conformity in the lyric's paradoxical realm. Post-Romantic poets like W. B. Yeats and J. H. Prynne give voice to what Romantic poetry suggests but does not fully articulate in its poetics. For Yeats, 'A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it may be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria'.[15] Prynne claims 'the writing of a poem calls into action a more or less distinct and separate poet-self, whom I shall speculatively designate as the poet's other self, or the poet's *imaginary*' even as he questions 'this fanciful construction'.[16] Both of these formulations conjure a supraself, a poet writ rather than a person born, a self not quite self but not entirely other, living (as far as such living is possible) within words. It might be observed that we have not travelled so far away from Philip Sidney's gnomic but plaintive imperative, 'I am not I; pity the tale of me'.[17] Alex Houen's remark, 'a poetic "speaker" can be what we might call an *impersona*; one that relates selfhood and otherness as the result of imaginary projections, introjections, and identifications that intermix first-, second-, and third-person voices' suits the Romantic lyric's jostling between selves and others, voices contained both within and beyond the poet.[18] It particularly suits the fascination with what the lyric can do that compelled the poets of the Romantic period. Focusing upon Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, I will consider the ways in which the Romantic poets responsible for this idea of 'the ideal form of "the Romantic lyric"' manipulated, challenged, and shaped the idea of lyric that we have inherited.[19]

Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal' is an *ur*-lyric of a sort, and has been a testing ground for critics to battle for control of the poem's meaning. Marc Redfield discusses the dialogue between J. Hillis Miller and M. H. Abrams, along with the clashing interpretations of Cleanth Brooks and F. W. Bateson. Redfield notes that E. D. Hirsch claimed that the interpreter was forced to choose between these diverging ways of reading.[20] Redfield's parenthetical remark, '(both of these critics offer coherent accounts of the poem, but both cannot be right; interpreters must choose)', cuts to the quick of what is at stake when we read criticism on this lyric poem. But what we lose in these critical spats is a sense of the poem itself, as Abrams intimates when he places the full text of 'A slumber did my spirit seal' at the end of his account of the poem.[21] Further, we neglect Wordsworth's conscious manipulation of lyric's boundaries and tropes. For Wordsworth makes his poem riddling without being playful, emotionally charged without hyperbole, concentrated on self without any clear self being fashioned. The problem of Lucy's fictive or real identity mirrors the problem of who speaks the words of the poem. Though 'A slumber did my spirit seal' refuses to construct 'a fictional world or a fictional spokesman',[22] it also does not relax into any simple biographical account of the poet Wordsworth losing his Lucy. The problem of the fictive versus the actual comes to the fore. Eliding categorisation, Wordsworth's enchanting yet estranging 'A slumber did my spirit seal' deals in difficulty even as it parades its simplicity.

We have become used to seeking and finding drama in lyric poetry. In 1957, W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks wrote that 'even the tiniest lyric reveals itself as drama',[23] and in 2006, Lisa Lai-ming Wong views the emotional charge of lyric as coming from 'its performative nature'.[24] Yet Wordsworth's evasion of performance or verbal extravagance within 'A slumber did my spirit seal' strips the lyric down to its parts. It forces its readers into a recalibration of the idea of the genre. Whether or not this lyric can even be read alone and outside of the other Lucy poems is disputed, as James G. Taaffe discovers 'a meaningful lyric progression' in their grouping,[25] and there is no easy answer to the relative (in)significance of Lucy's unknown identity or fictiveness.[26] Across the group of poems, Wordsworth gives us an identifiable 'I' that speaks, but in 'A slumber did my spirit seal', we are left with eight lines and a troublingly depersonalised or unknowable 'I':

A slumber did my spirit seal;
  I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
  The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
  She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,

With rocks, and stones, and trees.
('A slumber did my spirit seal', 1-8)[27]

What we are not told compels us almost as much as what Wordsworth allows us to know. This potential elegy does not flare into life. Rather, we might wonder if the voice of the first stanza comes from beyond the grave. We are informed that the spirit was sealed, hermetically closed in on itself. The 'I' has no 'human fears' and other emotions are not so much as named. The colon suggests that those fears that might usually plague the 'I' are what 'She', or Lucy, might feel. But she only 'seemed a thing'. Seeming is not reality, but there is nothing else here for us to grasp, nothing but what she does not possess. 'She' has no motion, force, nor senses, and rolls round with nature rather than being subsumed into it. There is no pantheist prettification or Christian creed. The final line might maintain the ballad's rhythm but it eschews the elegy's typical sense of an ending freighted with consolation and transcendence. What we have in the second and final stanza is ritualistic without religious dogma, in a way suggestive of 'the ritualistic dimension of lyric'.[28] The 'I' offers us no religious urging or any Miltonic promise of the poem's ability to transform the elegised subject into something beyond the human: 'Now, Lycidas, the shepherds weep no more; / Henceforth thou art the Genius of the shore'.[29] Wordsworth has no power to reanimate the dead, no wish to become a new Ovid and find for Lucy a mutable status in her posthumous existence,[30] or blaze like Shelley's *Adonais* would beyond the elegy's parameters. For Wordsworth, this lyric must and will fall short of elegy's promises and retreat back into lyric art's self-enclosed and spirit-sealed world. Our access to Lucy and the lyric I's feeling is curtailed. Nothing is promised and nothing is given. Wordsworth gives us an object lesson in what the lyric can refuse to do.

'A slumber did my spirit seal', nods to the ballad with its alternating tetrameter and trimeter lines in the quatrain, and allows Wordsworth to structure, or suppress, the feelings that threaten to spill beyond its bounds. Mark Sandy reminds us of Wordsworth as the poet that reveals to us 'the limitations of our fragile and spectral existences',[31] but Wordsworth also reminds us of our fragile and spectral status as readers of poetry. We cannot grasp this poem or gain purchase upon its elisions and its assertions. We cannot make or imagine the acquaintance of the 'I' given that we are provided with little information. Nor can we step into the lyric I's disembodied shoes. The 'I' is introduced without real introduction. We are aware of its past slumbering and the feeling that 'I had no human fears', but this apparent suspension away from the 'real world' is never explored or explained. Did grief affect this change? Should we assume that the slumber has ended, given that it is in the past tense? If so, where is the clarity we might expect

of the awakened poet? Once we connect the slumber to Lucy, who 'seemed a thing that could not feel', should we assume that this feeling is part of a dream or a vision beyond the mortal realm?

These questions proliferate and refuse any easy answers. If lyric is supposed to offer a place for heightened subjectivity by Hegel's lights, here, such subjectivity will not allow the reader's subjectivity to gain any answer beyond what they might invent independently of the poet's internal evidence. The form is strictly metrical, almost austere in its simplicity, but its content sponsors ambiguity when Lucy's 'seeming' suggests itself as a quality of speaking self's dream. 'Fancy is given to quicken and to beguile the temporal part of our nature, Imagination to incite and to support the eternal', writes Wordsworth.[32] We might ask whether we are beguiled by the temporal or incited into eternity: what does our interpretation do to this lyric? Its linguistic simplicity arrests hermeneutic certainty. Brian McGrath writes that 'understatement figures poetic restraint. Instead of asserting more than what one means, or even exactly what one means, one asserts less in the hopes that one's readers might supplement the thought'.[33] But 'hopes' might be pushing it. What the reader does is supplement what they are given with that they want to see. When the reader completes or supplements the lyric, there is no saying that this makes such supplementary forms of reading successful, only tempting. Wordsworth renders his lyric as sealed as Lucy's grave, endlessly interpretable but defiant of all suggestion of finality. Anahid Nersessian's insight, '[i]f Romantic difficulty exists, it will name a poetic mode that reliably baffles hermeneutic scrutiny even as it demands an emotional response' finds its fullest expression in this lyric.[34] She, or Lucy, is dead, whether she is real or invented, but the lyric lives on, in all its emotional hues, through our continued interpretative struggles. Like in 'This Living Hand', the poem lives on in relation to a living reader's experience of the lyric.

Lucy, 'so sweet a creature',[35] is an enigma, but no more so than the lyric 'I'. Alexander Freer notes that, for critics, '[W]e don't agree whether lyric is fictional or real, whether it names a persistent form, genre, or mode, or a historically contingent reading style. Above all, we still don't agree who is speaking'.[36] This feels like an inherited form of confusion picked up from these unnameable lyric poems of the Romantic period. 'A slumber did my spirit seal' and its elusive version of selfhood provided a tantalizing example for Wordsworth's peers, not least Byron. Byron, for all his apparent enmity towards 'Turdsworth the great Metaquizzical poet',[37] was not ignorant of Wordsworth's ability. The gulf between Byron and Wordsworth, as Jane Stabler and Philip Shaw have shown, is less wide than either poet would admit,[38] and Wordsworth's experimentation with lyric sponsors Byron's sallies into the genre. Byron could render his voice double-edged with 'its very publicness [being] capable of a peculiar kind of intimate revelation'.[39]

The poet of masks and evasion could also call poetry 'the lava of the imagination', parsing its dangerous emotional capabilities in his letter to Annabella Milbanke.[40] 'She Walks in Beauty' of June 1814, is, for many critics, 'one of Byron's loveliest short lyric poems',[41] but appreciation of its beauty also sees Byron's experimentation with lyric go unremarked upon in many discussions. Byron's efforts with lyric have long been overshadowed by his longer pieces. But this choice neglects Byron's lyric self-extinction in 'She Walks in Beauty'. Veronica Forrest-Thomson writes, 'like all true artificers "I" remains enigmatical, presenting only the words on the page'.[42] Byron goes further; the self is banished and the subject also remains a mystery, conjured but faintly before the reader, all glittering surfaces without overt self-expression or full description. The subject remains just out of our reach but the self that is 'speaking' the poem, its origin, seems even further from view. The poem seems to exist without a human speaker as if the lyric frees itself from such personal claims.

Rigid in its iambic tetrameter, Byron's 'She Walks in Beauty' is metrically perfect. Though the sixth line requires 'heaven' to occupy a single stressed syllable, and 'brow' (3. 13) is forced into the same rhyming pattern as 'glow' (3. 15) and 'below' (3. 17),[43] Byron's lyric is burnished to gleaming exactness. Such 'formally tight' poetry might seem glacial, as David Stewart suggests of Felicia Hemans's similar metrical regularity, but Byron's lyric never tips into insipidity.[44] Michael O'Neill notes Byron's attention to the poem's formal procedures as key to this effect: 'The poem succeeds in avoiding blandness by an alertness to its own linguistic conduct; resourcefully, for example, the last stanza's a and b rhymes rhyme, firstly, noun, verb and preposition, and, secondly, adjective, verb and then, again, adjective—the two adjectives both trisyllabic words ('eloquent' and 'innocent') that imply the onlooker's work of observation and understanding'.[45] We supplement the lyric by completing the poem's meaning: the poem's song-like qualities occlude the sparseness of detail about the woman or the lyric 'I'. Byron makes use of form as a means to achieve emotional detachment. In 'She Walks in Beauty', Byron leaves little freedom for the self to break into the poem via the broken rhymes he would later parade in *Don Juan* as evidence of his work's lack of 'servility' (*BCPW* 5, *Don Juan* XV. 20: 157) to externally imposed norms.

Freedom from imposed external norms forms the hidden core of the poem. Though the subject of the poem is she who 'walks in beauty', the poem is strangely removed from its subject, which is curiously unspecific even as it offers an outline of a woman. Byron identified his cousin, Lady Anna Wilmot, as the poem's subject according to James Wedderburn Webster,[46] but as Robert F. Gleckner shows, the poem's '"She" is not merely Lady Wilmot [. . .], but rather Woman—or mankind'.[47] That imprecision manages to expand the lyric's purview from the personal to the

universal, and allows the subject of the poem to be both one individual and an avatar of womanhood. Lacking clarity, Byron creates a mood or a prism through which we see only a blurred figure gendered female with little further elaboration. We are poised not to see her, but to see as the lyric 'I' sees:

> She walks in beauty, like the night
> Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
> And all that's best of dark and bright
> Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
> Thus mellow'd to that tender light
> Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

('She Walks in Beauty', 1. 1-6)

The first clause exploits ambiguity; should we understand the woman to walk arrayed in beauty or surrounded by it? The second clause ensures that we begin to think of this 'she' as almost a natural phenomenon, 'like the night'. Jonathan Culler asks 'Is it that she always walks in beauty, such an extent that really no walking is required, or is it that she repeatedly walks in beauty at any *now* one can contemplate?'[48] The impossibility of giving any complete answer speaks to Byron's care to turn the lyric now, this lyric subject, and this lyric speaker into enigmatic universals rather than clear specifics. Byron's 'She' possesses 'all that's best' of the contraries of darkness and brightness, and Howard Needler views this as an inversion of Kant's ideas on beauty, 'making the morally good, if present here at all, necessarily a symbol of the beautiful'.[49] Beauty has a worth that is deeper than the merely aesthetic, much as the actual woman featured in the poem is more than a discrete individual, protected from individuality and thereby time by the lyric I's effort to render her and the poem free from historical specificity. Byron senses what Friedrich Nietzsche writes: 'Lyric poetry can express nothing that was not already most universally present, with the most universal validity, within the music that compelled the lyric poet to use the language of images'.[50] Byron's 'language of images' aspires towards such a form of 'universal presence', where the woman that 'walks in beauty' does so beyond time. She walks then, now, and always, on the tiptoes of the poem's metrical feet and out of our reach.

The poet perceives the scene but never possesses the distinctive selfhood that so many of Byron's poems boast (think of *Beppo*'s description of the speaker as '(A broken Dandy lately on my travels)' (*BCPW* 4, *Beppo* 52: 410)). *Beppo*, written in another genre, another register, seems antithetical to 'She Walks In Beauty' but what Byron shows us is his range in terms of his poems' speaking selves: *Beppo*, originally published anonymously, is stamped with Byron's identity where 'She Walks in Beauty' shuts down any idea of the self. It is this gambit unfixes the 'I' from the poem. The

praise for this woman seems asexual though intimate, unique to the individual lyric 'I' but something to which all observers might assent: her 'innocent' (3. 18) beauty is 'eloquent' (3. 14). Byron positions his 'I' as intuiting what is already present and available to all onlookers rather than inventing something novel or personal. Lyric is not limited to what is subjective. Smiles and tints 'tell of days in goodness spent' (3. 16) rather than revel in pure aesthetic pleasure at their own beauty. The 'I' is both vital and insignificant. Hegel views a facet of lyric as allowing the poet to transcend the quotidian when faced with God or gods who make 'the individuality of the poet disappear'.[51] 'She Walks in Beauty', belonging to the collection *Hebrew Melodies*, is a devotional poem in this light. The poet might reflect on his craft—for what is 'One shade the more, one ray the less, / Had half impaired the nameless grace' (2. 7-8) if not a species of metalyric?—but Byron embraces a radical form of lyric subjectivity by stripping out his individuality in favour of anonymous praise where self vanishes in the contemplation of the other. This is a song without a singer, where self and subject almost vanish from view: lyric achieves a kind of freedom from even its creator.

That sort of freedom was not sought or found by all poets of the Romantic period. The putting out of the self might have seemed less abstract for John Keats as he tried to cope with the knowledge of his numbered days. 'This Living Hand' replaces the nearly extinguished self of Keats's odes with a self that is shockingly immediate and dangerously ready to challenge the reader. 'This Living Hand' revolves around the problem of the self, the reader, and the interstices between the biographical self and the one articulated, line by line, upon the page. Susan Wolfson asks, 'How can we know the hand writing from the handwriting?'[52] This question cuts to the crux of Keats's lyric, and lyric as a genre. Lyric, as Judson Boyce Allen notes, offers 'the position of a definite but unspecified ego whose position the audience is invited to occupy;' the first- and second-person pronouns of lyric might invite each reader 'to perfect or universalize himself by occupying that language as his own'.[53] But Keats refuses the reader such an easy occupation of the poet's position, preventing us from universalising ourselves within the voice. We are not free to feel with Keats. Though 'lyrics are poems made to be uttered by readers, who may come ritualistically to occupy the place of the lyric',[54] Keats makes the idea of any such occupation uncomfortable, and even impossible. To read 'This Living Hand' is to be made aware of our difference from rather than identification with lyric 'I', to know the gap between poet and reader, to feel the uneasiness of the relationship between the lyric 'speaker' and the real man writing.

Helen Vendler reminds us that 'This Living Hand' escapes any facile biographical readings that fail to attend to the poem's aesthetic power,[55] but Keats makes use of the personal to sponsor the poetry's intricacy, throwing down the gauntlet to the reader: the poem is a matter of life or death.

> This living hand, now warm and capable
> Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
> And in the icy silence of the tomb,
> So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
> That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood
> So in my veins red life might stream again,
> And thou be conscience-calm'd—see here it is—
> I hold it towards you.[56]

('This Living Hand', 1-8)

Plunging us into the poem, Keats insists on specifics: it is '*this* living hand' [emphasis added], his own, that the reader must envisage. Not only does the hand live but this hand is 'capable / Of earnest grasping', with 'earnest' forcing us to recognise a personality, a self that holds out its hand to the reader. The conditional 'if it were cold' affectingly because obliquely, snaps us into a recognition of the speaker's mortality, and into reflecting upon Keats's own failing health. 'Speaker', as a term, seems particularly difficult in this short lyric, where biography looms large in the background and prevents any easy sense of the poem's world as fictional.[57] For instead of garnering our casual pity, Keats turns threatening. The reader will be haunted and long for death so as to return the poet's lost life to him. Shahidha Bari rightly claims, 'In "This Living Hand," the transaction proposed between the living and the dead is neither fair nor feasible'.[58] But the poem doesn't care for this. Keats cannot be freed from his mortality and we cannot be freed from the poem's insistent demand upon us.

The conscience of the living is troubled in relation to the dead, where reading the poem becomes an act predicated upon the reader admitting, in this moment, their inferiority to the poet. For it is in the act of reading these words that the death drive comes. Andrew Bennett writes, 'In fact, however, if we take the words "literally" we find that the life of the poet's hand *entails* the death of the audience: in order for the hand to live, the reader must transfuse his or her blood into it'.[59] The lyric cannot be simply sundered from its creator. Readers don't simply desire death. Instead, their deaths are required. They will bring Keats back at the expense of their own life.

But even this insistence on the bodily presence of the poet, on that hand, on that red life, remains fundamentally aesthetic. Vendler notes allusions to Shakespeare's sonnet 97,[60] but the image of the hand speaks to Shakespeare's work more broadly. *Macbeth*, as is noted by Kathryn L. Lynch, uses hands and fingers to 'organize and structure Shakespeare's meaning',[61] a point unlikely to be overlooked by a Shakespearian of Keats's calibre. Immersed in *King Lear*, the poet would have noted Lear's reference to his hand: 'it smells of mortality' (4. 6. 124).[62] This metonymy allows Keats a firm grasp on the personal and the artistic, connecting his work with the self, and

more broadly, to other artists and works of art, just as Houen describes with his definition of 'impersona'.[63] No doubt Keats also has his own *Fall of Hyperion* in mind ('When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave'). Such agility, where the poet both grounds the lyric 'I' in the personal and the literary, allows the poet to escape the ephemeral world and access an artistic continuum beyond his own day without feigning that he has sundered himself from the present tense. This 'I' is and is not 'I': we are back to the Yeatsian 'phantasmagoria' or Prynne's 'poet's imaginary'. Susan Stewart's sense that 'Part of the power of Keats's "This Living Hand" is its implicit premise that even if death might be contagious, the power of love might bring red life back to another' overlooks much of the discomfort and the confrontation of 'This Living Hand'.[64] We readers react to the knowledge of Keats's death and to the threat of our own deaths. Love will not save Keats. He carves out a new contract with the reader, where freedom might be impossible but the lyric's potency dreams of bringing the poet back to life through the stunned acquiescence of his audience.

Mary Karr's 1991 essay, 'Against Decoration', names the 'two sins' of contemporary poetry as she sees it. The first is '*absence of emotion*' and the second '*lack of clarity*'. Karr calls for a return to 'emotional intention' and invokes Keats as a poet unafraid of depth and sincerity.[65] In a similar vein, Ben Lerner's recent work, *The Hatred of Poetry*, refers to ideal poetry as 'the distillation of your innermost being' where the reader applauds the work for being 'authentic and intelligible'.[66] Keats's 'This Living Hand' meets these criteria of sincerity and clarity. Who couldn't feel for a dying poet writing lines that weren't meant for publication but still open themselves to biographical detective work by virtue of their authenticity? This feels like self-exposure without self-pity, the essence of the poet as Shelley described it, as 'a nightingale who sits in the darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds'.[67] But neither Keats, nor Shelley, allows lyric to be so simple. Keats uses allusion to render the 'I' both more and less than the self, calling upon lyric to do something superhuman as well as something inhuman, even inhumane. Lyric, the genre that has been called 'the epitome of the literary',[68] relies upon as well as distances itself from the private person as if to flag the boundary lines between art and life even as they tend to blur. But Shelley pushes lyric in a different direction than Keats. His lyric poetry enjoys spectral possibilities with the man himself hovering at the edges of the work, even sometimes seeming to take it over. Biography threatens to invade or overwhelm artifice as Shelley shows us the dangerously porous boundaries between art and life.

Shelley's lyrics enjoyed no little fame after his death. Jeremy Dibble views Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's edition of *Posthumous Poems* as laying 'the foundations of the [British] lyric tradition of song-setting in the nineteenth century and thereafter'.[69] The musicality of the lyrics combines with

Matthew Arnold's depiction of Shelley as 'a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain' to create an image of the fragile poet writing guilelessly pure poetry.[70] But Shelley's investigation into what the Romantic lyric could do is never so innocent or simply aesthetic. Shelley's poetry investigates the nature of lyric, bringing key tenets of the ode, as a 'dramatic, self-reflexive, and dialectical form', to bear upon his lyrical achievement as a whole.[71] The crux of the tension in Shelley's lyrics, particularly the Jane poems, is the nature of their sincerity. Alexander Freer writes that '[t]hese are irreducibly personal poems, and yet Shelley's attempts to depersonalize them might be understood as an ethical and aesthetic project'.[72] But these attempts are also an effect of his trial of the lyric genre. As if intuiting Maurice Blanchot's concern, 'that literary forms, that genres, no longer have any genuine significance',[73] Shelley starts to think about the kind of significance to which the lyric can lay claim. Shelley prevents us from resting on 'the illusion of a false stabilisation of terms' that function as a formalist comfort blanket.[74] Not only terms but also ideas collide, striking through the veneer of harmony offered by the musical patterning of rhyme and metre. Ingrid Nelson notes that 'Jacques Derrida and, more recently, Wai Chee Dimock have critiqued the impossible policing of a law of genre, Derrida by deconstructing the concept of the law and Dimock by understanding the law as a kind of permeable, crossable border', and Shannon Gayk and Nelson's understanding of pre-modern genres as 'forms-of-life' rather than fixed laws chimes with Shelley's specific achievement with the lyric.[75] The 'forms-of-life' contained in Shelley's lyric poems are fertile, crisscrossing, and exploratory. They force us to rethink the parameters of the lyric genre.

Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* has won much praise for its daring formal experimentation. Its kaleidoscopic dazzle owes to its 'composite order' as Shelley's lyrical drama sees him play with the possibilities of genre.[76] Shelley's lyrics, on a smaller scale, perform a similar generic feat. Though Shelley so often rejects formal fixity, he also leans upon the set of assumptions implicit in or buried within the genre he chooses. In the same year that Shelley unfixes rhyme and makes metrical feet dance in *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley's Jane poems show a similar license with form, and experimentation with genre was also in his sights. The lyric genre brings the self into the foreground, and Shelley, by introducing a female subject sharing a name with a very real woman in his life into his lyrics, courts all biographical readings that seek to pin down the truth of his possible dalliance with the historical Jane Williams. Critics, such as G. M. Matthews, Donald Reiman, and with many others, have sought to discover the exact form of the relationship between Shelley and Jane,[77] but no indisputable reading of the biographical element of the lyrics has prevailed. We are left with what Cian Duffy describes as 'the inability exactly to determine the relations between poetry

and lived experience'.[78] This is precisely Shelley's point. The boundaries of self, other, and lyric poetry are thrown up in the air, and the poet makes a world imaginatively separate but troublingly parallel with the one in which he lives.

A lyric fragment, 'Time is Flying', provides an important example of how 'poetry and lived experience' intersect in Shelley's work. The fragment runs:

> Time is flying,
> Occasion is dying,
> Hope is sighing,
>   For there is
> Far more to fear
> In the coming year
> Than desire can dare
>   In this.
> I might say that sorrow
> Joy's mask could borrow
> If to day like tomorrow
>   Would remain,
> And between what is bliss
> And a state such as this
>   I would
> ('Time is Flying', 1-15)[79]

The final quoted line, 'I would', is replaced by 'Alas I kiss you Jane' according to Nora Crook's conjectured reading of the manuscript that she places in the collations for line 15. This suggestion provides an answer to the question of the wording and most likely interpretation of the cryptic phrase left in the draft of *The Triumph of Life*, which Crook now views as Shelley's ending of 'Time is Flying'.[80] Crook notes that this ending 'would offer no support for the theory that PBS and Jane became lovers' for '(a biographical reading would have to conclude that they did not even kiss)'.[81] Crook's conjecture provides an intriguingly likely possibility as it would rhyme with 'remain' and offer a satisfying and appropriate ending to this musical lyric. It also fits with Shelley's performance across all the Jane poems: Shelley enjoys courting our identification of the 'I' with himself only to deny us the satisfaction of 'solving' his ludic lyrics.

For in 'To Jane—The Recollection', Shelley turns a similar trick. After registering the presence of the 'envious wind' (5. 81), sometimes identified with Mary Shelley,[82] Shelley passes on to offer what appears to be an enticing clue as to his own personal presence in the poem.

> Though thou art ever fair and kind
>   And forests ever green,
> Less oft is peace in _____'s mind,
>   Than calm in waters seen.

('To Jane—The Recollection', 5. 85-88).[83]

'No prizes, of course, for supplying Shelley's omitted name', writes Michael O'Neill. O'Neill remarks upon the 'uncanny' effect of how 'Shelley seems both to introduce and erase himself in the same breath'.[84] Hovering upon the boundary line between self-exposure and self-concealment, Shelley forces us to concede both the presence and the absence of the poet, the importance and the insignificance of the addressee, and the reader's own role in weighing up their intellectual options. Shelley knows what John Michael claims: lyric 'appeals to an audience that it hopes to move or motivate but that it cannot control'.[85] But if Shelley can't control his reader, he can lead them by the nose. For in 'To Jane—The Recollection' and 'Time is Flying', along with 'To Jane. The Invitation', 'Lines written in the Bay of Lerici', among others, we are tempted to see Shelley as speaking without a mask, making plangent music out of personal suffering. But each of these poems is steeped in allusion that makes us hear other voices rather than guileless speech. Houen's idea of the '*impersona*; one that relates selfhood and otherness as the result of imaginary projections, introjections, and identifications that intermix first-, second-, and third-person voices', as it did for Keats's 'This Living Hand', sparks into life in Shelley's lyrics to Jane.[86] Lyric self is never quite self, and it is never alone.

One of the key influences on the Jane poems is Goethe's *Faust* and its fascination with capturing a single perfect moment. Shelley, while writing his late lyrics and *The Triumph of Life*, praised Goethe's work for its otherworldly leanings and the escape from the mortal world.[87] Shelley brought his reading into his life rather than simply drawing his experiences into his writing. Recording the content of his evenings, he writes 'Jane brings her guitar, and if the past and future could be obliterated, the present would content me so well that I could say with Faust to the passing moment, "Remain, thou, thou art so beautiful"' (*Letters: PBS* II, 435–36). In this letter, literary to its fingertips, Shelley places life and art within touching distance. Likewise, the poetry also feeds upon literature as well as life. *The Tempest* is another touchstone for Shelley in his poems to Jane,[88] granting Shelley a stage upon which to direct his own artistic production of his relationships with his circle. Like Wordsworth's Lucy poems, which Shelley must have had in his sights as he wrote his poems to a woman we readers can barely know, we are prevented from gaining a full picture of the addressee, barred from hearing her voice, refused privileged access to what is 'real'. We see what we are allowed to see, we conjecture rather than know, and are reminded at every turn that these poems are art, not historical records. The rhymes in 'Time is Flying' are so highly wrought as to make a virtue of artifice. The lines display their virtuosity rather than admit to their sincerity. But the stubborn embedding of a knowable and recognizable self gnaws away at any hope to efface entirely the identity of the speaking self, to free ourselves finally of self, 'that burr that will stick

to one' (*Letters: PBS* II, 109). Lyric is and remains an enigma. It lingers at that dangerously porous boundary line between fiction and reality, thumbing its nose at the reader, always a step ahead of the would-be interpreter even as it goads her on.

The Romantic fascination with lyric is only matched by the poets' relentless drive to experiment with and individualise the genre. Lyric's limits test the creative and critical intelligence of the Romantic poet who asks what poetry can know and how it can know it, and what lyric can do and how it can do it. Standing at the intersection between artifice and truth, lyric is a beacon for any artist who would push poetry to revise its norms, its assumptions, and the values implicit in genre that dictate, as Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* 'the shape and action' (*Shelley: The Major Works*, 679) of what is written in verse. Challenge to and embrace of the problem of generic norms is the hallmark or specialness of lyric. Rei Terada rejects any claims for 'the specialness of the lyric mode'.[89] But this might be to discard the 'specialness' of the individual mind as it expresses itself in poetry. For these unnameable Romantic lyrics, poetry wraps itself around the problem of knowing the self and knowing the world and then trying to write them. When we consider if and how poetry is 'a mode of knowing',[90] it is lyric poetry that aims to imagine and unpick the idea of the self in the world. The Romantic poets remind us to ask: what self and what world? Lyric, as one of the genres handed on to and reinvented for each generation, insists on questioning, reflection, and mental action on the part of the reader and the poet. With lyric, by definition, always resisting definition,[91] we are always asked to witness, to challenge, and to participate in what lyric can do.

Notes

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