

***The Concept of Quest in Byron, Shelley, and Keats***

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**Abstract**

This thesis examines the role of quest in the poetry of Byron, Shelley, and Keats. It argues that as proponents of a self-conscious quest poetry, each poet presents quest as a mode that gives shape to desire, but also one that demands scrutiny in its pursuit of potentialities. Utilising a new-formalist approach to poetry, the thesis presents these poets’ interrogations of quest as inseparable from the formal and generic qualities of their work, showing each poet locating artistic achievement in a performative approach to difficulty and struggle.

Developing Harold Bloom’s argument that the Romantics create an ‘internalized’ quest-romance, I show each poet formulating their own unique sense of quest. While Byron tends towards disruption only to stop short of dismantling quest, Shelley’s quest revels in a purposeful precariousness. For Keats, quest represents a means of enacting his voyage towards capable poethood.

The first chapter, on *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III, shows Byron disrupting his quest for self-transcendence through his use of the doubling trope. Chapter two compares *Manfred* and *The Deformed Transformed*, arguing that Byron’s dramas disrupt quest by foregrounding tensions between rhetoric and achievement. Chapter three views Shelley’s quests in *Epipsychidion* and *Adonais* as galvanised by the uncertain relationship between self and other. Chapter four traces the ambiguous role of movement in Shelley’s quest, focusing on the Scrope Davies Notebook and *The Triumph of Life*. Chapter five, on *Sleep and Poetry* and *Endymion*, presents rhyme as central to Keats’s quest to master a longer work of poetry. The final chapter examines the *Hyperion* poems, arguing that Keats refigures the epic to perform his progression towards poetic authority.

By placing quest centre stage in their poetics, Byron, Shelley, and Keats produce poetry that is attuned to the aspiration underpinning human experience. Though tested, scrutinised, and interrogated throughout their works, quest also affords each poet an opportunity to glimpse the loftiest heights of possibility and achievement.

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**Note on Texts**

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Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. with an introd. and notes by Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

All quotations from Shelley’s poetry and prose will be taken from this edition, unless indicated otherwise.

**Introduction: ‘The loftiest star of unascended heaven’**

The concept of quest serves to animate, enrich, and sustain the poetic visions of Byron, Shelley, and Keats. For these poets, to write quest poetry is to harness the energies of aspiration, ambition, and desire that are vital not just to the composition of poetry, but to all human experience. In adopting the mantle of the quest poet and embracing the challenges of questing, each exhibits the desire to wed one’s ‘state’ with one’s ‘conceptions’ that, for these three second-generation Romantic poets, is a quintessentially human aspiration.[[1]](#footnote-1) This thesis argues that Byron, Shelley, and Keats are self-conscious of, and capable of proposing answers to, the question posed by Harold Bloom: ‘though all men are questers, even the least, what is the relevance of quest in a gray world of continuities and homogenized enterprises?’[[2]](#footnote-2) If, for Bloom, this represents ‘the central problem of Romantic (and post-Romantic) poetry’,[[3]](#footnote-3) Byron, Shelley, and Keats unite in transforming this uncertainty into a form of poetic strength, producing self-questioning poetry that valorises even as it interrogates the efficacy of quest. By placing quest alongside a scrutinising of quest at the centre of their respective poetics, Byron, Shelley, and Keats strive towards a brand of poetry that is sensitive to the extremes of experience, making poetic capital out of their ability to present quest as a mode that blends breakthrough with setback, success with failure, and victory with defeat.

**I.**

The writing explored in this thesis earns its designation as quest poetry by virtue of its unwavering desire to achieve something or voyage somewhere, though the object of desire is neither fixed nor common to all three poets, and in some cases is not clearly defined. Rather than entailing a searching after or a progression towards a specific object or destination, as in the Arthurian emphasis on the motif of the Holy Grail as a target for questing,[[4]](#footnote-4) or as implied by Northrop Frye’s suggestion that ‘the complete form of romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages’,[[5]](#footnote-5) Byron, Shelley, and Keats present quest as an embodiment of desire and a process of adventure that resists any stable structure or pattern. In some cases, the poet’s quest lies in his exploration of the possibility that the self might become a quester. In others, striving towards quest as a remote and potentially inaccessible ideal comes to constitute the quest itself. Through this common focus, all three poets utilise quest as a means that may not and need not necessarily lead to an end, writing poetry that consciously challenges any sense of quest as a teleological or linear progression.

To articulate Byron, Shelley, and Keats’s distinction from Arthurian and chivalric notions of quest is to acknowledge the extent to which the term ‘quest’ retains rich and inextricable associations with the generic traditions of Romance.[[6]](#footnote-6) This was particularly the case during the Romantic period, a time in which ‘romance as a genre, however displaced, became again the dominant form’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Frye affirms the intertwinement of quest and Romance in the following terms:

The essential element of plot in romance is adventure, which means that romance is naturally a sequential and processional form. […] As soon as romance achieves a literary form, it tends to limit itself to a sequence of minor adventures leading up to a major or climacteric adventure, usually announced from the beginning, the completion of which rounds of the story. We may call this major adventure, the element that gives literary form to the romance, the quest.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Frye views Romance as the ‘nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream’,[[9]](#footnote-9) arguing that quest gives shape to the ‘hopes and desires’ that comprise Romance.[[10]](#footnote-10) For Byron, Shelley, and Keats, however, quest represents a concept that is fruitfully bound up with, though not exclusively tied to, the Romance genre. Corinne Saunders suggests that the pervasive, ‘inherently slippery’ nature of Romance allows the trope of questing to transcend its immediate generic associations, assuming ‘trans-historical’ significance and a universal resonance in its emphasis on a spirit of adventure that shapes ‘subsequent writing across a whole range of genres’.[[11]](#footnote-11) This is borne out by the works of Byron, Shelley, and Keats, which demonstrate the possibility of writing quest within a diverse range of poetic genres and forms.[[12]](#footnote-12) In response, this thesis avoids using ‘quest’ as a strictly formal or generic label, instead defining ‘quest’ as a mode that is adopted, in contrasting ways, by each of these second-generation Romantic poets. My designation of quest as a ‘mode’ is informed by Michael O’Neill’s belief in the possibility of poetry functioning as a ‘mode of knowing’.[[13]](#footnote-13) This thesis sees Byron, Shelley, and Keats as the proponents of a self-conscious quest poetry,[[14]](#footnote-14) poets who are obsessed with testing the strength of their imaginings and gauging the extent of their achievements as quest poets through a commitment to poetic performance. By adopting the mode of questing only to call it into question, these poets relish the challenges and difficulties of quest. In their writing, quest is at once a concept that inspires and lends shape to poetry and the subject of a poetically productive interrogation.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**II.**

The title of this introduction, from Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, reflects in miniature the concerns of my thesis. The lines are taken from the close of act three, where the Spirit of the Hour offers an idealistic vision of humanity as ‘exempt from awe, worship, degree: the king / Over himself’ (*Prometheus Unbound*, III. iv. 196-97):

Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,

From chance, and death, and mutability,

The clogs of that which else might oversoar

The loftiest star of unascended Heaven,

Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.

(III. iv. 200-204)

The lines seem to revel in achievement, creating an air of a glorious victory.[[16]](#footnote-16) That Shelley is able to create this sense while writing poetry marked by negation and equivocation is testament to his ability to blend the energies of quest with a refusal to take quest at face value. Timothy Webb argues for the significance of negatives in Shelley’s poetry, identifying a dual focus that involves ‘never ignoring the force of the negative but seeking where possible to replace it with the positive which lies ahead’.[[17]](#footnote-17) When Webb concludes that the negatives of *Prometheus Unbound* reveal the poet’s awareness of ‘the potential of a tale *untold*’,[[18]](#footnote-18) the description brings to mind traditional associations between quest and ideas of potentiality and conditionality, as in Bloom’s suggestion that the Romantic quest ‘cannot define what it is, but only what it will be’.[[19]](#footnote-19) In the quoted lines, though the possibility of achieving the envisaged ascent is challenged by the reference to ‘chance’, ‘death’, and ‘mutability’ that precedes it, Shelley prevents the reader from pausing over the ‘clogs’ that restrict unfettered flight. The enjambment of ‘oversoar / The loftiest star’, which follows seventeen lines of poetry which are more firmly end-stopped through a comma, colon, or semi-colon, works mimetically, reflecting a drive to ‘soar’ beyond limits that unites the quest poetry of Byron, Shelley, and Keats. With ‘unascended’ and ‘Pinnacled’ held in tension and threatening to counteract one another, highs and lows co-exist within the lines. The negative construction of ‘unascended’ hints towards the potential accessibility of the ‘loftiest star’ in a way that might act as a boon for the aspiring quester, but also qualifies any optimism through its implication of the failure or inability of ‘Heaven’ to become fully ascended.[[20]](#footnote-20) In the final line, a flurry of short ‘i’ vowel sounds hurries the poetry towards its ‘dim’ though still legible target until the closing noun, ‘inane’, checks this momentum through the introduction of the long ‘a’ vowel sound. The technique reaffirms the presence of a boundary that the writing had sought to overcome, the reader’s feeling of arriving at a void compounded by the stifling repetition of sounds in ‘intense inane’. Yet the triumphs that might be enabled by questing continue to shine through. Shelley’s poetry stands out for its refusal to snuff out these possibilities, even as it creates a precarious, uncertain image of quest that seems to teeter between success and failure.

Though Byron and Keats possess unique approaches to quest, both poets share the impulse revealed in these lines from *Prometheus Unbound*. Each writes poetry of desire and adventure that quests ‘in search of glory’ (*Don Juan*, VIII. 31: 247) only to resist any straightforward image of achievement. Central to Byron’s work is the ability to expose and unpick the uncertainties of quest that, in Shelley, are woven into the fabric of the poetry. When *Don Juan* ponders whether ‘a man’s name in a *bulletin* / May make up for a *bullet in* his body?’ (VII. 21: 162-63), the possibility that quest might afford the self an immortality jostles with an affirmation of the futility of all monumentalising gestures, as well as quest itself. Yet these moments of apparent cynicism fail to dampen the sense that Byron’s poetry grows out of a deep-seated belief in quest’s potential. The description of Harold’s stargazing in Canto III of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* reveals this balance: ‘Like the Chaldean, he could watch the stars’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, III. 14: 118), Byron writes, only to introduce the sobering note of ‘could he have kept his spirit to that flight / He had been happy’ (14: 122-23). Yet the thrust of the poetry’s repeated enjambments show Byron delighting in his ability to take his poetry to the ‘brink’ (14: 126); though this quest in miniature remains unfulfilled, Byron celebrates a flight that is no less enlivening for the fact that it is unsustained.

Keats shares this commitment to poetry that simultaneously embodies and puts pressure upon quest. ‘Specimen of an Induction to a Poem’ opens with the self-conscious declaration that ‘Lo! I must tell a tale of chivalry; / For large white plumes are dancing in mine eye’ (*Specimen of an Induction to a Poem*, 1-2),[[21]](#footnote-21) and the imperative reflects a compulsion to quest and a self-consciousness regarding what it is to be a quester that, though also present in Byron and Shelley, suggests Keats’s uniqueness as a quest poet. With this opening refrain repeated three times throughout the poem, the repetition of ‘I must tell a tale’ has the air of attempting to grasp what is apparently ungraspable. The writing gives the impression of quest slipping through the poet’s fingers, the poem threatening to descend into the ‘white plumes’ (2) of nothingness that it envisages in the opening line. ‘Yet must I tell a tale of chivalry’ (45), Keats later reasserts, but with his assertion modulating into an interrogative: ‘Wherefore more proudly does the gentle Knight / Rein in the swelling of his ample might?’ (47-48). The rhyme of ‘Knight’ and ‘might’ aligns the figure of the quester with a power that is sought after by all three of the poets considered in this thesis. Yet the lines are phrased as a question, rather than an affirmation, and the air of uncertainty is indicative of the way that these poets reject any uncomplicated understanding of the quester’s potential ‘might’. Seen in this light, the word ‘might’ brings to mind the alternative sense of ‘might’ as a conditional grammatical form,[[22]](#footnote-22) reflecting this thesis’s emphasis on the Romantic quester not just as an agent of empowerment, but as an individual who pursues the power of potentiality.[[23]](#footnote-23) For Byron, Shelley, and Keats, quest embodies the possibilities of what Wordsworth calls ‘something evermore about to be’ (*The Prelude* [1850], VI: 608).[[24]](#footnote-24) It represents the ideal mode through which to craft a poetics of desire, yet it also demands scrutiny in its commitment to pursuing that which may be unreachable. Though these poets deploy the mode of quest in distinct and contrasting ways, an ability to spotlight the possibilities of quest while refusing any uncritical acceptance of quest’s efficacy is characteristic of the poetry and drama explored throughout my study.

**III.**

This thesis adopts a new-formalist approach to the poetry of Byron, Shelley, and Keats. It operates in line with studies that foreground the aesthetic qualities of Romantic poetry, and pays close attention to issues of poetic form and genre in order to demonstrate how these poets construct quest poetry even as they call the mode of questing into question. Significant precursors include works by William Keach,[[25]](#footnote-25) Michael O’Neill,[[26]](#footnote-26) Helen Vendler,[[27]](#footnote-27) and Susan J. Wolfson,[[28]](#footnote-28) critics whose strengths lie in their focus on what Vendler engagingly describes as ‘the inner being of the work, its rigorous and fastidious choices, its succession of instinctive and conscious motions, its imperial control and its constant hazarding of disorder, its play of sensibility, its constant tension with tradition’.[[29]](#footnote-29) Through this approach, these critics bear out Wolfson’s claim that ‘in the most critical turns of Romantic and post-Romantic poets, formal elements do not exist “apart” from but play a part in the semantic order’,[[30]](#footnote-30) a statement that is closely related to Isobel Armstrong’s declaration that ‘the components of aesthetic life are those already embedded in the processes and practices of consciousness’.[[31]](#footnote-31) When O’Neill asserts the need for ‘a critical language [of poetry] answerable in its intelligence and imaginativeness to what is read’, suggesting that this language appears most effectively in poetry itself,[[32]](#footnote-32) his criticism also reveals close reading as the most effective means of doing justice to the ‘intelligence’ and ‘imaginativeness’ of writing that revels in an ‘awareness of itself as poetry’.[[33]](#footnote-33) In following the work of these new-formalist critics, this thesis seeks an alternative to Jerome J. McGann’s sense that ‘poems are social and historical products and […] the critical study of such products must be grounded in a socio-historical analytic’.[[34]](#footnote-34) Though the historical backdrop of the French Revolution, for example, represents a significant factor in Byron, Shelley, and Keats’s blend of investing in quest and subjecting quest to scrutiny,[[35]](#footnote-35) my thesis aims to demonstrate how these poets reveal their approaches to quest through the formal features and effects that constitute their poetry.

The influence of McGann’s *The Romantic Ideology* upon my study extends beyond this methodological opposition. McGann’s contentious conception of Romantic poets as committed to an ‘uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations’ is a premise to which this thesis cannot assent.[[36]](#footnote-36) However, Wolfson’s argument in *The Questioning Presence*, which occupies a position diametrically opposed to McGann, provides an alternative mode of conceiving Romantic poetry, identifying it with ‘perceptions that provoke inquiry, experiences that elude or thwart stable organizations, [and] events that challenge previous certainties and require new terms of interpretation’.[[37]](#footnote-37) This position is closer to my own sense of Byron, Shelley, and Keats’s testing of the limits and possibilities of quest in their explorative and self-questioning poetry. Wolfson offers illuminating close-readings that grow out of a position indebted to deconstructive criticism, a movement that, according to Geoffrey Hartman’s ‘Preface’ to *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ‘refuses to identify the force of literature with any concept of embodied meaning’, instead seeking to uncover ‘a certain absence or indeterminacy of meaning’ that, for those critics, is inherent to all language.[[38]](#footnote-38) Yet Wolfson’s study avoids the problem identified by Keach, who suggests that ‘post-structuralist Shelleyans—stimulating as much of their work is—have been too little concerned with distinguishing the elusive activity peculiar to Shelley’s writing from the condition of language generally’.[[39]](#footnote-39) A prominent example appears in Paul de Man’s ‘Shelley Disfigured’. In presenting *The Triumph of Life*’s ‘shape all light’ as ‘the figure for the figurality of all signification’,[[40]](#footnote-40) de Man risks suppressing the ‘autonomous potential of language’ that his deconstructive project purports to uncover,[[41]](#footnote-41) reducing Shelley’s ambiguous image to an allegory of linguistic theory. The nihilistic leanings of de Man’s reading of the poem also come close to undercutting the emphasis on questing desire that, according to this thesis, lies at the heart of Byron, Shelley, and Keats’s vision, as in the declaration that *The Triumph of Life* presents experience as a series of ‘random event[s] whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of [their] occurrence’ (see chapter four for further discussion).[[42]](#footnote-42) Despite these points of departure, aspects of deconstructive thought often influence my analyses. The above quotation from de Man exhibits a scepticism towards the possibility of poetry achieving any ‘sequential [or] processional form’,[[43]](#footnote-43) terms that Frye uses to describe the prototypical structure of quest poetry, and this informs my understanding of how Byron, Shelley, and Keats manipulate traditional quest structures. Crucially, in my readings, this kind of scepticism is not the product of any ‘mandarin, self-delighting’ version of play,[[44]](#footnote-44) nor does it stem from a nihilistic acceptance of the ‘unanswerable nature of larger questions’,[[45]](#footnote-45) a quality that Terence Hoagwood finds explicit in Byron’s prose. Rather, this thesis reads the Romantics as exhibiting varying degrees of scepticism as a means of testing the strength of the questing mode, in which a refusal to guarantee success co-exists with a refusal to prohibit any possibility. In arguing for these poets’ ambiguous and ambivalent use of the questing mode, this thesis is written out of a belief that deconstruction’s scepticism towards a text’s unity or coherence, when combined with a sustained attention to poetic form, represents the most effective lens through which to consider the quest poetry of Byron, Shelley, and Keats.

In adopting this new-formalist approach to quest, my study aims to situate itself in the relative lack of writing on the Romantics and quest since Harold Bloom’s seminal 1969 essay ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’. David Perkins’s *The Quest for Permanence*: *The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats* (1959) predates Bloom, arguing that the Romantics seek to explore ‘certain urgent notions, impressions, and way[s] of feeling which had not previously been exploited in poetry’.[[46]](#footnote-46) Perkins’s title foregrounds the word ‘quest’ not to prohibit the possibility of achievement but to show any accomplishment as contingent on a process of searching, an approach to which this thesis is indebted. Yet the book’s concern is with the ‘relatively new technical means’ used to accommodate these stylistic innovations as much as quest itself,[[47]](#footnote-47) focusing on the poets’ contrasting use of symbolism as a search for ‘states of mind—confidence, calm, security and the like—associated with the experience of certitude’.[[48]](#footnote-48) If Perkins’s study uncovers one manifestation of the impulse towards questing that underpins Romantic poetry, reconsideration of the questing mode is now overdue. Works following these studies often allude to the Romantic quest without making it the subject of sustained focus. I intend to build upon studies such as Greg Kucich’s *Keats, Shelley, and* *Romantic Spenserianism*,[[49]](#footnote-49) where an emphasis on Keats’s and Shelley’s debts to Spenserian Romance and Spenserian self-debate allows some references to questing. Yet the book’s approach does not involve giving any particular attention to quest as a mode in its own right, while its title reflects a lack of sustained discussion on Byron, a poet who, according to my thesis, is deeply invested in quest. Similarly, though Jeffrey N. Cox’s chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* valuably presents Keats as a poet ‘on a quest to write a few fine quest romances’, his interest primarily lies in the way that Keats adapts the eroticism of the Romance genre.[[50]](#footnote-50) Mark Sandy’s chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley* is closer to my own approach, using *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion* to explore ‘Shelley’s poetics of desire at the heart of his re-imagining of romance’,[[51]](#footnote-51) an angle that can be fruitfully applied to the poetry of Byron and Keats. Also influential for my thesis is Herbert Tucker’s wide-ranging *Epic*: *Britain’s Heroic Muse 1790-1910* which, despite its focus exclusively on the epic genre, usefully analyses a type of poetry that Tucker defines as ‘the last rite of passage to full poetic majority, the summative test of art’.[[52]](#footnote-52) In foregrounding the Romantic ambivalence towards the trial of epic, an approach that presents the production of poetry as inseparable from trepidation and self-doubt, Tucker’s readings inform this thesis’s understanding of how Byron, Shelley, and Keats approach the challenging mode of quest, a mode that is occasionally, though not exclusively, deployed through the epic.

**IV.**

Bloom’s ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’ plays a prominent role in discussion throughout my thesis, standing out amongst extant criticism for the way that it positions a manipulation of quest at the centre of the intellectual and imaginative activities of the Romantic movement. Bloom’s argument builds upon the vital foundations laid by Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), where Frye’s synthesising of myriad examples, conventions, and traditions, particularly from the Bible, gives rise to a comprehensive theory of quest. In presenting the ‘central form of quest-romance’ as ‘the dragon-killing theme exemplified in the stories of St. George and Perseus’,[[53]](#footnote-53) Frye argues that the dragon’s status as the archetypal quest antagonist is the result of its metaphorical association with Satan, an association that is shared amongst most antagonists of quest.[[54]](#footnote-54) However, my study does not intend to follow the interpretative pathways laid out by Frye or Bloom, nor does it seek to map their models onto the work of my chosen poets. Frye outlines a schema from which Byron, Shelley, and Keats successfully deviate, defining the complete quest as entailing three typical stages:

the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero. We may call these three stages respectively, using Greek terms, the *agon* or conflict, the *pathos* or death-struggle, and the *anagnorisis* or discovery, the recognition of the hero, who has clearly proved himself to be a hero even if he does not survive the conflict.[[55]](#footnote-55)

The strengths of Bloom’s ‘Internalization’ lie in his emphasis on the radicalism of the Romantics in breaking from the traditions outlined by Frye. Bloom draws upon Freudian psychoanalysis to adapt Frye’s analogue between the quest-romance and the dream, which suggests that ‘translated into dream terms, the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfilment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality’.[[56]](#footnote-56) Constructing his essay from the counter-argument that ‘internalized romance […] cannot be translated into dream terms, for in it the libido turns inward into the self’,[[57]](#footnote-57) Bloom proposes that ‘the poet takes the patterns of quest-romance and transposes them into his own imaginative life, so that the entire rhythm of the quest is heard again in the movement of the poet himself from poem to poem’.[[58]](#footnote-58) For Bloom, while ‘the movement of quest-romance, before its internalization by the High Romantics, was from nature to redeemed nature, the sanction of redemption being the gift of some external spiritual authority, sometimes magical’,[[59]](#footnote-59) the impact of Romanticism was to make the poet ‘a seeker not after nature but after his own mature powers, so that the Romantic poet turned away, not from society to nature, but from nature to what was more integral than nature, within himself’.[[60]](#footnote-60) Mapping the patterns and structures of medieval Romance onto human consciousness, Bloom argues that quest plays a vital role in shaping the mental and creative endeavours that define the Romantic movement.

Bloom’s conception of the prototypical internalised quest entails two main stages. The first, called the ‘Prometheus’ stage, is characterised by a ‘deep involvement in political, social, and literary revolution, and a direct, even satirical attack on the institutional orthodoxies of European and English society’.[[61]](#footnote-61) Here, the ‘struggle against repressiveness’ is aided by nature, which represents the self’s ‘ally, though always a wounded and sometimes a withdrawn one’.[[62]](#footnote-62) The second and most crucial stage, described by Bloom as ‘the Real Man’ or ‘the Imagination’ stage, ‘emerges after terrible crises’ in the first stage and ‘is typified by a relative disengagement from revolutionary activism, and a standing aside from polemic and satire, so as to bring the search within the self and its ambiguities’.[[63]](#footnote-63) Inherent in this stage is a repositioning of nature as ‘the immediate though not the ultimate antagonist’,[[64]](#footnote-64) owing to nature’s status as an external, tangible force that resists the self’s attempt to transcend the exterior world. The ‘ultimate antagonist’ of this second stage and the ‘final enemy to be overcome’ is ‘a recalcitrance in the self, what […] Shelley [calls] the unwilling dross that checks the spirit’s flight, […] and Keats, most simply and perhaps most powerfully, the Identity’.[[65]](#footnote-65) Bloom argues that the Romantics identify something within our ‘identity’ or ‘selfhood’ that blocks us from embracing the ‘enchantment’ that is the foundation of ‘all romance, literary and human’.[[66]](#footnote-66) For him, to overcome these fetters is for the poet to experience ‘intimations [not] of a former union with nature or the Divine, but rather of his former selfless self’.[[67]](#footnote-67) This is seen as the ‘apocalypse of imagination’ that would allow each poet to attain their ‘mature powers’,[[68]](#footnote-68) a process that, for Bloom, is only partially achieved in the works of Byron, Shelley, and Keats.

While Bloom’s ground-breaking discussion is hugely influential for this thesis, it also provides various, and highly significant, points of departure. One lies in the poets that Bloom chooses to focus on. ‘Internalization’ is centred around analysis of Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats, and when the closing stages of the essay reveal Bloom’s intention to ‘trace the major phase of quest in the four poets’,[[69]](#footnote-69) discussion of Byron’s poetry receives only a cursory mention. This is seemingly the result of Bloom’s hypothesis that ‘Byron’s quest, even had he lived into middle age, would have become increasingly ironic’,[[70]](#footnote-70) where ‘increasingly’ implies a belief that Byron’s poetry eschews any serious consideration of quest. This thesis disputes Bloom’s position. W. H. Auden writes of Byron possessing qualities that are a ‘defect as a serious poet’ but ‘a virtue for the comic poet’,[[71]](#footnote-71) and though this relatively broad distinction downplays Byron’s skill in mixing contrasting modes, perhaps informing Bloom’s deprioritising of Byron in his ‘Internalization’, I adopt Auden’s division to focus exclusively on Byron’s ‘serious’ poetry, which is seen as revealing the extent of the poet’s investment in quest. Though Bloom sees Keats’s and Shelley’s poetry as exhibiting ‘the fullest development of the Romantic quest, after Blake’s mythology and Wordsworth’s exemplary refusal of mythology’,[[72]](#footnote-72) Byron’s emphasis on the importance of questing is comparable to that of Keats and Shelley and hugely significant in its own right. Keats’s sonnet ‘To Lord Byron’ affirms the younger poet’s fascination with Byron’s work, even if Byron later exhibited revulsion towards Keats’s poetry,[[73]](#footnote-73) and Shelley’s writing is consistently shaped by his intense and occasionally tumultuous friendship with Byron.[[74]](#footnote-74) These connections suggest the importance of the link between Byron’s, Shelley’s, and Keats’s respective poetic projects, even as their works abound in the individualities and idiosyncrasies that make each poet unique. Any exploration of how Keats and Shelley utilise the questing mode is informed by affording similarly close consideration to Byron’s distinct yet equally powerful brand of questing.

A further point of divergence for my thesis stems from Bloom’s methodological approach. In adapting Frye’s formulation of the ‘dialectic structure’ of romance, in which quest is built upon a conflict that involves ‘two main characters, a protagonist or hero, and an antagonist or enemy’,[[75]](#footnote-75) Bloom proposes that ‘the hero of internalized quest is the poet himself, the antagonists of quest are everything in the self that blocks imaginative work, and the fulfilment is never the poem itself, but the poem beyond that is made possible by the apocalypse of imagination’.[[76]](#footnote-76) To make such an argument is to lay the foundations for Bloom’s claim in *The Anxiety of Influence*: ‘criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poem’.[[77]](#footnote-77) The phrasing is mirrored in ‘Internalization’, where Bloom writes that ‘the entire rhythm of the quest is heard again in the movement of the poet himself from poem to poem’.[[78]](#footnote-78) Echoes of *The Anxiety of Influence* also appear in the following passage:

What allies Blake and Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, is their strong mutual conviction that they are reviving the true English tradition of poetry. It is in this highly individual sense that English Romanticism legitimately can be called, as traditionally it has been, a revival of romance. More than a revival, it is an internalization of romance, particularly of the quest variety.[[79]](#footnote-79)

The self-conscious pivot of Bloom’s prose, where he defines English Romanticism as a ‘revival’ of Romance only to immediately redefine it as ‘more than a revival’, is reminiscent of his assertion that creativity resides in a poet’s willed or unwilled misreadings of his precursors.[[80]](#footnote-80) One way in which this thesis seeks to develop the arguments of ‘Internalization’ is through the kind of sustained close-reading that is absent from Bloom’s essay. New-formalism’s focus on aesthetic effects allows one to counter Bloom’s suggestion that the fulfilment of the Romantic quest lies not ‘in the poem itself’ but in ‘the poem beyond that is made possible by the apocalypse of imagination’.[[81]](#footnote-81) Such an argument defines quest as an enterprise that, for the eyes of the reader, can never achieve a complete form. Yet Bloom’s discussion of quest as a process dominated by conflict is illuminated by a more thorough analysis of the aesthetic achievements that pervade Byron, Shelley, and Keats’s work. Corinne Saunders’s critique of Frye’s writing on quest is also applicable to Bloom, arguing that Frye fails to sufficiently emphasise the ‘oddly mixed mode of much romance: at their most sophisticated, romance narratives are characterized by irony, parody, self-consciousness, and comedy—and sometimes by a sense of deep failure and loss’.[[82]](#footnote-82) Byron, Shelley, and Keats embrace and perform the possible slide into ‘failure and loss’ that is inherent in all quest. When *The Anxiety of Influence* argues against ‘the insistence of whole traditions of poetry and of Romanticism in particular’ to assert that ‘poems are not given *by* pleasure, but by the unpleasure of a dangerous situation’,[[83]](#footnote-83) it affirms a position that this thesis seeks to qualify. Byron, Shelley, and Keats prize quest for the way that it steers poetry into the ‘dangerous situation[s]’ and a courting of danger that, as O’Neill suggests, allow the poets to win aesthetic victories from their virtuosic mastering of difficulty and struggle.[[84]](#footnote-84) Though this aspect of performativity is absent from Bloom’s study, it represents an important facet of my own.

Most significantly, this thesis seeks to adapt Bloom’s understanding of the relationship between quest and the self. Yet it concurs with Bloom’s critique of Irving Howe’s belief that the Romantics ‘do not surrender the wish to discover in the universe a network of spiritual meaning which, however precariously, can enclose their selves’.[[85]](#footnote-85) Similarly, it echoes Bloom’s opposition to Marius Bewley’s suggestion that pivotal to Romanticism is a desire ‘to merge oneself with what is greater than oneself’.[[86]](#footnote-86) The essay’s objections to these readings reveal Bloom’s alertness to the Romantic desire for an independent, autonomous self, supporting this thesis’s sense that Byron, Shelley, and Keats exhibit an ambivalent approach to identity. Despite often seeking to transcend or alter the self, each poet consistently acknowledges the self’s importance as an agent of quest. Yet ‘Internalization’ often downplays this ambivalence in favour of presenting the self and self-consciousness as exclusively negative. Bloom declares that ‘in Romantic quest the Promethean hero stands finally, quite alone, upon a tower that is only himself, and his stance is all the fire there is’;[[87]](#footnote-87) the argument is compelling but only partially true, as is the suggestion that:

The high cost of Romantic internalization, that is, of finding paradises within a renovated man, shows itself in the arena of self-consciousness. The quest is to widen consciousness as well as to intensify it, but the quest is shadowed by a spirit that tends to narrow consciousness to an acute preoccupation with self.[[88]](#footnote-88)

This thesis argues that, to varying extents, Byron, Shelley, and Keats utilise quest as a mode that allows both internalised and externalised approaches to poetry, writing quests that are often but not exclusively about the self. Far from being unequivocally ‘destructive of the social self’,[[89]](#footnote-89) these poets write quests that are typically marked by or exist within self-consciousness yet also draw their impetus from an awareness of the otherness available in the world beyond the self. The ‘arena of self-consciousness’ is one possible arena in which the quests of Byron, Shelley, and Keats take place, and self-consciousness represents a mode that supports rather than stymies their ability to produce subtle and engaging quest poetry. When Bloom, near the beginning of his essay, writes that ‘Wordsworth’s Copernican revolution in poetry is marked by the evanescence of any subject but subjectivity, the loss of what a poem is “about”’,[[90]](#footnote-90) his emphasis on ‘loss’ brings to mind the reductive language of lack and vacancy that characterises some deconstructive maneuverers.[[91]](#footnote-91) Though this thesis is indebted to Bloom’s work on highlighting the self as integral to the Romantic quest, it seeks an alternative understanding of how Byron, Shelley, and Keats manipulate the questing mode, one that identifies self-consciousness as key to poetry that makes a performance out of its ability to ‘snatch plenitude from the jaws of negation’.[[92]](#footnote-92)

**V.**

My decision to focus on Byron, Shelley, and Keats as opposed to first-generation Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake is motivated by the divergent ways in which the first and second-generation Romantics approach quest. This distinction is, in part, an issue of the varying extents to which these poets point up quest’s centrality to human experience. Also significant is the way that Byron, Shelley, and Keats present quest as a mode inseparable from conflict, struggle, and the prospect of failure. Though these qualities are evident in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Blake, the poetry of the earlier Romantics can either leave these comparatively implicit or not relate them to quest in the ways seen in their later Romantic inheritors.

Though *The Prelude* depicts Wordsworth’s ‘perilous quest through the uncharted regions of his own mind’,[[93]](#footnote-93) M. H. Abrams reveals Wordsworth’s difference from the questers of this thesis when he describes the quest of *The Prelude* as ‘radically achronological, starting not at the beginning, but at the end—during Wordsworth’s walk to “the Vale that I had chosen”’.[[94]](#footnote-94) This structural technique is indicative of an approach to achievement that reveals the reason for Wordsworth’s omission from my study. In *The Spirit of the Age* Hazlitt identifies the achieved quality of Wordsworth’s writing, declaring that ‘there is little mention of mountainous scenery in Mr. Wordsworth's poetry; but by internal evidence one might be almost sure that it was written in a mountainous country, from its bareness, its simplicity, its loftiness and its depth!’[[95]](#footnote-95) Hazlitt finds a strange disjunction between the ‘internal evidence’ of Wordsworth’s poetry, which possesses an air of ‘loftiness’ that creates the impression of a completed ascent, and the apparent lack of literal summits depicted in his work. The observation is suggestive of the way that Wordsworth’s poetry embodies fulfilment, while Hazlitt’s focus on heights and depths resonates with his belief that Wordsworth’s muse is ‘a levelling one’ that ‘proceeds on a principle of equality, and strives to reduce all things to the same standard’.[[96]](#footnote-96) By contrast, Byron, Shelley, and Keats present quest as a mode that disrupts any possibility of levelling. By centring their poetry on experiences that embody extremes, pairing exhilaration with a turbulence that can come close to derailing quest, these poets draw out the tensions that are implicit in Wordsworth’s work. Wordsworth’s deployment of his ‘levelling’ muse is evident in Book VI of *The Prelude*. Recalling his crossing of the Simplon Pass, the poet describes how the track before him ‘held forth / Conspicuous invitation to ascend / A lofty mountain’ (*The Prelude*, [1850], VI: 571-73). The lines are rife with anticipation, yet the poet, realising this to be the incorrect path and descending to an alternative route, discovers that his journey is already complete: ‘every word that from the peasant’s lips / Came in reply, translated by our feelings, / Ended in this—*that we had crossed the Alps*’ ([1850], VI: 589-91). Wordsworth’s tone captures the disillusionment of the quester’s thwarted expectations, with the addition of the italics in the 1850 *Prelude* pointing up the strangeness of an apparently transcendent experience having been unknowingly achieved. Yet in foregrounding the act of recollection, the poetry also reflects affectingly on the progression between the poet’s ‘two consciousnesses’ ([1850], II: 32). For Wordsworth, to compose *The Prelude* is to affirm his development from his comparatively naïve former self, ‘lost’ and ‘halted’ in the face of a seemingly anti-climactic experience ([1850], VI: 596-97), and the heightened awareness of the current poet, who realises the significance of him having unwittingly crossed the Alps in prompting heightened imaginative activity: ‘And now, recovering, to my Soul I say / “I recognise thy glory”’ ([1805], VI: 531-32).[[97]](#footnote-97) This present-tense affirmation situates the poetry in a moment of culmination and consummation. By looking back retrospectively on ‘The Growth of a Poet’s Mind’, as the poem’s title denotes, *The Prelude* proceeds with a sense of limits having already been addressed and overcome, exemplifying an approach to quest that Byron, Shelley, and Keats seek to qualify and redefine.

Coleridge’s exclusion from this thesis is not motivated by any belief that he lacks a sustained interest in quest, as Bloom asserts,[[98]](#footnote-98) but a result of the impulse towards unity that pervades Coleridge’s oeuvre. *Biographia Literaria* describes poetry as concerned with ‘the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects’.[[99]](#footnote-99) The lines bear out Seamus Perry’s suggestion that ‘on the one hand, [Coleridge’s] intellect desires comprehensive inclusiveness and unity; while, on the other, his sensibility is tenaciously loyal to the diverse plenitude of its experience’.[[100]](#footnote-100) The remark is sensitive to the way that Coleridge’s poetry aspires towards unity while retaining an awareness of both the challenges inherent in such a project and the potential attractions of division. The presence of the word ‘or’ in the phrase ‘balance or reconciliation’ allows the prose to hover quietly in tension, holding together two verbs that seem teasingly close to one another without being synonymous. The impression is both that poetry might ‘balance’ two discrete entities in a way that allows them to retain their individual characters, and also that poetry might ‘reconcile’ two separate parts into a single whole. Yet this kind of tension is not typically made explicit in Coleridge’s work.

Though often identifiable in his writing, Coleridge does not overtly seize upon or spotlight this type of friction in the same way as Byron, Shelley, and Keats.[[101]](#footnote-101) Perry notes Coleridge’s ‘evident distaste for the unmade-up mind which Keats so enthusiastically embraces, or for the plural self in which Byron luxuriates’,[[102]](#footnote-102) and the opposition cuts to the heart of Coleridge’s distinction from the second-generation Romantics. Byron, Shelley, and Keats amend Coleridge’s thought by bringing discordance into open play, tugging at the prospect of unity in order to subject their quests to a productive scrutiny.

Like Wordsworth and Coleridge, Blake often seems to write with the concept of quest in mind, particularly in *Milton*, which Bloom presents as a work ‘palpably in the displaced romance mode’.[[103]](#footnote-103) Byron, Shelley, and Keats owe much to a Blakean poetics that ‘include[s] and exploit[s] more than the usual measure of ambiguity, contradiction, subversion, and intellectual sabotage’,[[104]](#footnote-104) as well as the foregrounding of the self in a work such as *Vala, or The Four Zoas.* Yet this thesis omits Blake from its discussions from its sense that Blake prioritises the creation of broader mythological structures as a lens through which to understand human experience, rather than quest itself. John Beer’s conception of Blake’s poetic project has influenced this belief, arguing that ‘[Blake’s] quest, however mannered, always reflects larger human preoccupations and concerns’.[[105]](#footnote-105) Beer’s suggestion that Blake is always ‘seeking some confirmation of [his] belief that human nature is capable of more dimensions than [his] own utilitarian society would normally allow’ is astute.[[106]](#footnote-106) However, Byron, Shelley, and Keats diverge from Blake in entrusting to quest, rather than mythology, as a means of glimpsing the possibility of human betterment.

Despite aligning Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats as the Romantic poets worthy of greatest praise, Bloom distinguishes between the first and second-generation Romantics by arguing that Shelley and Keats, unlike Blake and Wordsworth, ‘did not complete their development’ as quest poets, even if each was able to ‘prophesy the final phase of quest’ in their final, incomplete works.[[107]](#footnote-107) By reassessing the quest poetry of Keats and Shelley, as well as the vital and underappreciated quests of Byron, this thesis will modify Bloom’s claim. Though McGann’s distinction between the first and second-generation Romantics comes close to caricature, his characterisation of the second-generation poets nevertheless strikes a suggestive chord: ‘Blake fell silent, Wordsworth fell asleep, and Coleridge fell into his late Christian contemptus. The second generation Romantics, however, fashioned from these evil times a new set of poetic opportunities’.[[108]](#footnote-108) The remark captures the way that Byron, Shelley, and Keats write their poetry out of a desire to create and capitalise on new opportunities, opportunities that, according to my thesis, are both satisfied and scrutinised through the challenging mode of quest.

**VI.**

This thesis is divided into three sections. It devotes one section each to Byron, Shelley, and Keats, with each containing two chapters. This ordering is chronological; as the eldest of the second-generation Romantics, Byron opens the study, while Keats, as the youngest, closes it. Rather than drawing overt comparisons between the poets, each section explores each poet’s unique approach to quest. Following Bloom’s suggestion that the self represents the sole subject of the Romantic quest, all three sections contain one chapter that considers the importance of the self in each poet’s conception of quest. However, while I accept aspects of Bloom’s argument, I also see the Romantics as producing quests that are not exclusively about the self. Therefore, each section also includes a second chapter on the techniques used by the poet to create their individual, idiosyncratic brand of quest, more broadly demonstrating the role played by quest in shaping their poetics.

Byron’s uniqueness as a quest poet lies in his emphasis on an artistic technique of disruption. Bloom identifies an ‘ironic’ approach to quest in Byron’s writing, suggesting that the poetry is intent on ‘playing with’ nihilism.[[109]](#footnote-109) Yet for Byron, to disrupt quest is not the same as to prohibit it. In tending towards irony while refusing the safety of any detached or apathetic position, Byron’s works confirm the image of a poet who is ‘cunning in mine overthrow / The careful pilot of my proper woe’ (‘[*Epistle to Augusta*]’, 23-24), one who flirts with a dismantling of quest but refuses to undercut aspiration completely or outlaw the possibility of achievement. When, in *Manfred*, Nemesis sees the protagonist vainly attempting to will the Spirit of Astarte into life, bemusedly telling Manfred ‘Mortal! thy quest is vain, / And we are baffled also’ (*Manfred*, II. iv.116-17), the character exhibits a scepticism towards quest that Byron often shares but to which his poetry can never unequivocally assent. To demonstrate this my thesis focuses on Byron’s ‘serious’ as opposed to comic writing,[[110]](#footnote-110) offering Canto III of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* as a prime example, as well as Byron’s dramas, which, with the exception of *Manfred*, remain critically underexamined.[[111]](#footnote-111) These works best exemplify the poet’s thorough and intellectually rigorous conception of a disrupted quest. Though *Don Juan* is central to Byron’s achievement and a poem that often embodies a spirit of quest and adventure, it is omitted from my study owing to the way that it subordinates quest to digression and self-consciousness. At the climax of Canto I, for instance, a flurry of reflections on the act of composition seem to take the place of quest itself, as when Byron’s Donna Julia writes that ‘I have no more to say, but linger still / And dare not set my seal upon this sheet’ (*Don Juan*, I. 197: 1569-70). Though Canto VIII articulates a sentiment that underpins the quest poetry of my thesis, stating ‘Yet I love Glory:—glory’s a great thing’ (VIII. 14: 105), the stanza immediately ironises this through its satirising of those who profit from tales of war, perhaps Byron himself included, rebuking those ‘maintained at the expense of your good king’ (VIII. 14: 107). Curran argues that ‘Byron subtly insinuates an antiromance into the texture of [*Don Juan*]’,[[112]](#footnote-112) and though the poem’s rejection of quest or romance is never total, it is more intent on ironising patterns of desire and ambition than the writing explored in my study.

The opening chapter of my first section, on Canto III of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, shows Byron disrupting quest through his manipulation of the doubling trope. Capitalising on the inherent discontinuities of the Spenserian stanza, the poem depicts Napoleon, Rousseau, and Wordsworth as a series of doubles that deliberately fail to correlate with Byron’s self. The move consciously undermines the poet’s affected quest towards self-transcendence, but it also allows Byron to reposition the self, for all of its divisions, at the centre of his ambivalent conception of quest. Chapter two foregrounds the importance of Byron’s drama in his creation of a disrupted quest, reading his first play *Manfred* alongside his final, under-examined *The Deformed Transformed*, which I see as a mature work deserving of greater critical emphasis. Both plays embrace disruption by foregrounding a tension between rhetoric and achievement. Each manipulates the responses of its audience through contrasting uses of the focalising lens; while *Manfred*’s singular focus on its protagonist forces audiences into an ambivalent sympathy with Manfred’s problematic rhetoric of self-mastery, *The Deformed Transformed* offers an abundance of failed quests and questers, tempting audiences towards nihilism by seeming to undercut questing rhetoric at every turn. Like *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III, both plays come close to the ironic approach identified by Bloom, yet each stops short of any fully-fledged undercutting of quest. Far from depicting a poet who lacks ‘faith in his own imaginings’,[[113]](#footnote-113) as Bloom contends, both chapters show Byron disrupting quest while retaining a firm though often embittered faith in quest’s lasting potential.

In Shelley’s work, quest becomes a precarious and perilous enterprise that exists on the brink of collapse.[[114]](#footnote-114) Shelleyan precariousness is the counterpart to Byronic disruption; where Byron openly affects a sabotaging of quest, Shelley presents quest as a mode ‘pavilioned upon chaos’ (*Hellas*, 772) that contains the germ of its own defeat. Though Bloom sees *Prometheus Unbound* as an example of ‘the fullest development of the Romantic quest’,[[115]](#footnote-115) the poem is absent from my study due to the way its quest is deliberately curtailed in the premature unbinding of Prometheus, which takes place in the third of Shelley’s four acts. *Prometheus Unbound* incorporates quest as one aspect of its larger mythological structure; as Webb writes, ‘two acts out of four are devoted to a detailed analysis of the patient and difficult process by which a victory is achieved; the last two acts are mostly given over to a celebration of the new order and an examination of what it implies’.[[116]](#footnote-116) The poetry of my thesis differs from *Prometheus Unbound* in bringing this ‘patient and difficult process’ more extensively to the fore, forestalling consummation and prioritising process.[[117]](#footnote-117) Focusing on *Epipsychidion* and *Adonais*, chapter three examines the role of the self and the other in the Shelleyan quest, challenging Bloom’s assertion that the Romantic quest ‘tends to narrow consciousness to an acute preoccupation with self’.[[118]](#footnote-118) I argue that the difficulty of *Epipsychidion* stems from Shelley questing after a complex, potentially ineffable state of romantic union that would preserve the distinct identities of the self, as an agent of quest, and the other, as both an object of quest and an individual in its own right. The chapter then shows *Adonais* filtering these concerns through the generic paradigm of the elegy. In a quest built on paradox, Shelley figures the elegist as a quester whose power to command and console is contingent on his separation from all others, including the readership he intends to address. In both poems, Shelley’s quest lies in his exploration of the precarious relationship between self and other. Chapter four compares the lyrics of the Scrope Davies Notebook with *The Triumph of Life*, described by Bloom as a ‘death-fragment’ that foreshadows the poet’s mature approach to quest.[[119]](#footnote-119) These poems unite in their mutual fascination with the relationship between movement and quest; echoing Bloom’s sense of *The Triumph of Life*’s maturity, my chapter reads the earlier lyrics alongside Shelley’s final, unfinished work to trace the development of an impulse that pervades the poet’s imagination. Focusing on ‘Upon the wandering winds’ and the two distinct versions of ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, I show the lyrics of the Scrope Davies Notebook to be galvanised by their attempt to situate untargeted motion within a context of questing, as Shelley consciously refines his work to foreground processes of pursuit. In *The Triumph of Life*, Shelley develops these ideas through an interrogation of the role of ‘commencements’ and ‘conclusions’ in quest, terms taken from the questioning of human experience that comprisesthe essay *On Life* (*On Life*, p. 634). Deftly sidestepping the threat of nihilism to win aesthetic victories from its suspended position between movement and quest, *The Triumph of Life* shows Shelley’s poetics of desire going hand in hand with an embrace of peril. In both chapters, I argue that the poet’s emphasis on a purposeful precariousness acts to spur his commitment to a process of questing.

Keats’s quest is marked by the poet’s desire to reach ‘as a high a summit in Poetry as the nerve bestowed upon me will suffer’,[[120]](#footnote-120) a state that this thesis defines as one of ‘capable poethood’.[[121]](#footnote-121) Of all the poets in my study, Keats comes closest to the model insisted upon by Bloom, who reads the Romantic quest as comprised of a poet’s seeking after his ‘own mature powers’.[[122]](#footnote-122) For this thesis, however, Keats’s poetry actively performs this quest towards ‘capable poethood’. For Keats, exploration becomes vital to a quest that locates the attainment of one’s ‘mature powers’ in the innovation of existing forms and genres, even as the exploratory mode directs the poet towards poetic successes as well as poetic failures. By highlighting the setbacks, false starts, and wrong turns that accompany his striving after poetic maturity, Keats makes these aspects central to a broader enactment of quest. Bloom sees *Endymion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* as Keats’s most potent examples of quest poetry,[[123]](#footnote-123) and by reading these alongside a mix of longer and shorter works such as *Sleep and Poetry* and the 1819 Odes, I show the Keatsian quest taking shape over the course of the poet’s career. Chapter five argues that *Sleep and Poetry* establishes an unperfected approach to rhyme that is later refined in the quest of *Endymion*. While Bloom sees *Endymion* as a poem in which ‘all quest must be forlorn’,[[124]](#footnote-124) I present the poem as a self-conscious quest to master a longer work of poetry, arguing that the poemallegorises Keats’s progression towards poetic excellence. Central to Keats’s method is his vacillating between a wielding of the couplet form and a yielding to the sounds suggested by rhyme. I relate historical criticism of Keats as a powerless, immature poet to the way the poetry presents quest as contingent on a blend of activity and passivity, as Keats entrusts to rhyme as a means of making ‘4000 Lines of one bare circumstance’.[[125]](#footnote-125) My final chapter reads *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* as a prolonged attempt to assert poetic authority, focusing on the way Keats self-consciously refigures the epic genre to perform his quest towards capable poethood. Though *Hyperion* locates authority in objectivity, attempting to suppress the subjective concerns of the poet, Keats’s characters each reveal the poet’s struggle to compose objective epic, laying the foundations for the poem’s rewriting as *The Fall*. There, by wedding epic and lyric through a foregrounding of the lyric ‘I’ as protagonist, Keats establishes himself as a quester by depicting his gradual re-entering of the landscape of his former poem. In spite of its status as an incomplete ‘death-fragment’,[[126]](#footnote-126) the work depicts an achieved quest, enacting Keats’s successful completion of his quest towards capable poethood.

**VII.**

As poets of aspiration, ambition, and desire, Byron, Shelley, and Keats write quests out of a determination to maximise the drama and tension of the poetic endeavour, an effort that becomes inseparable from their work’s virtuosic manipulations of form and genre. Though Byron self-deprecatingly suggests that ‘I by no means rank poetry or poets high in the scale of intellect’, claiming to ‘prefer the talents of *action*’,[[127]](#footnote-127) his writing grows out of a sense that quest poetry might satisfy the drive towards change that inspires this obsession with ‘action’. By steering his poetry away from the nihilism that nevertheless seems to spark its vision, Byron’s taut interplay between aspiration and disruption becomes the hallmark of his approach to quest. For Shelley, ‘poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world’ (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 701). When *A Defence of Poetry* relates such powers to poetry’s alertness to ‘evanescent visitations of thought and feeling […] always arising unforeseen and departing unbidden, but elevating and delightful beyond all expression’ (*A Defence*, p. 697), the remarks reflect Shelley’s commitment to poetry that valorises a spirit of adventure through its straining after that which is elusive, creating an uncertain image of quest in which victory seems at one with potential collapse. Keats declares himself to be ‘never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest’, suggesting that the act of leaping ‘headlong into the Sea’ of poetry makes him ‘better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks’ than had he ‘stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea & comfortable advice’.[[128]](#footnote-128) Keats’s poetry puts this metaphor into practice, openly displaying the poet’s striving after his own mature powers. Behind the defiant claim to be ‘never afraid of failure’ lies a troubled and troubling mixture of affirmation and self-doubt that Keats’s quest towards capable poethood places centre stage. Characteristic of each of Byron, Shelley, and Keats is the intuition, evident in these quotations, ‘that poetry cannot afford to fail, nor can it afford to avoid taking risks that might result in failure’.[[129]](#footnote-129) While all three poets strenuously test quest’s ability to transport the poet beyond the here and now, each entrusts to quest out of an anticipation that it might redeem, or at least honour, the ‘inadequacy of [man’s] state to his Conceptions’.[[130]](#footnote-130)

**Part One: ‘Cunning in mine overthrow’: Byron’s Disruption of Quest**

**CHAPTER ONE:**

**‘Living in shattered guise’: Quest and Doubling in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III**

*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III (hereafter *Childe Harold*) subjects both quest and selfhood to scrutiny. By deliberately arresting any straightforward sense of momentum or progression, Byron creates a poem of ebbs and flows, of fits and (false) starts, and of disrupted and irregular movements. In subtitling his poem ‘A Romaunt’ the poet invites audiences to impose a swathe of preconceptions on a work that actually ‘makes no pretension to regularity’.[[131]](#footnote-131) Byron notes that detractors often object to Harold on the grounds that ‘he is very *un-knightly*’,[[132]](#footnote-132) as evidenced by the comments of numerous contemporary reviewers.[[133]](#footnote-133) Yet *Childe Harold*’s generic designation as ‘A Romaunt’ immediately brings to mind the concept of questing,[[134]](#footnote-134) as does Byron’s use of the Spenserian stanza which, as Jerome Christensen points out, was the ‘canonical vehicle for romance in an enlightened age’.[[135]](#footnote-135) Byron’s emphasis on the form’s tendencies towards fracture, division, and discontinuity mean its relationship with quest is an ambiguous and potentially contradictory one. The Byronic Spenserian stanza works with disruptive effect, prohibiting the kind of linear progression expected of a quest-narrative. Paradoxically, then, Byron’s formal choice serves to counteract the poem’s genre even as it seems to announce it. Though *Childe Harold* may ‘consort with its own self-ironizing shadow, the mock- or anti-romance’,[[136]](#footnote-136) this never becomes a definitive embrace. As Susan J. Wolfson argues, ‘Byron’s poetry shimmers with a complex interplay of formal commitments in which the energies of freedom and eruption are set against the demands of constraint and conservatism’.[[137]](#footnote-137) The relationship between form and genre in the poem shows Byron set ‘freedom’ against ‘constraint’ by holding generic expectations against formal commitments. The poem evokes the glories of quest even as it undercuts its own quest-narrative, pitting genre and form against one another to suggest and then reject any climactic moments in favour of a continued and often fractious vacillation. With Byron’s readings of the Spenserian imitations of Beattie and Thomson prompting him to ‘associate the Spenserian heritage with self-division’,[[138]](#footnote-138) the poet uses this fractured quest framework to explore his conflicted relationship with the self. Byron’s narrative becomes a vehicle for questioning alongside questing, as the poet interrogates his transcendent aspirations to explore but ultimately undermine the possibility of leaving the self behind.

**I.**

Harold Bloom argues that quest, for the Romantics, is an ‘internalized’ process that gives rise to an ‘acute preoccupation with self’, an observation that holds true to the way *Childe Harold* stages its quest within what Bloom calls ‘the arena of self-consciousness’.[[139]](#footnote-139) While Byron’s adapted Spenserian stanza means disruption dominates the canto at every juncture, this technique is seen most clearly in the poet’s quest to abandon the self. Though Alan Rawes and Mark Sandy focus on Canto III as an exercise in forgetting,[[140]](#footnote-140) the poem’s proliferation of figures that act as potential doubles for Byron as poet suggests a quest for something more radical than forgetfulness. Affecting a drive towards leaving the Byronic self behind entirely, the poem presents not ‘everlasting centos of himself’,[[141]](#footnote-141) to quote Hazlitt’s complaint, but instead, in its depiction of Napoleon, Rousseau, and Wordsworth,[[142]](#footnote-142) a series of selves that Byron might become.[[143]](#footnote-143) Yet the intensity of this yearning for self-transcendence jars with the poet’s acute awareness of the problems inherent in his quest to assume an alternative self. Refusing to ignore or assuage such doubts, Byron adopts the technique of doubling only to repeatedly and deliberately sabotage his own designs, consciously undermining his claims to leave the self behind. Though Vincent Newey writes that ‘Byron commits himself progressively to the extinction of any self prior to the word and the image, and chooses the freedom—and the instability—of living through others and in constantly changing guises’,[[144]](#footnote-144) the poetry is marked by a refusal to commit wholeheartedly to any such scheme. Newey asserts that doubling is the ‘characteristic artistic signature’ of *Childe Harold*,[[145]](#footnote-145) observing that the poem:

proliferates—at once unfolds and fractures—in a series of inequations. This seems to me a more accurate way of putting it than to talk, as one might be tempted to do, of Byron’s weaving of variations around a theme, for that would be to suggest a conscious orchestration that is on the whole lacking.[[146]](#footnote-146)

Despite identifying the ‘fractures’ or ‘inequations’ of Byron’s poem, Newey’s account overlooks the deliberate quality of Byron’s work by implying that this is unintentionally loose or unsustained, slipping beyond the poet’s control. Disruption stands alongside doubling as the most significant ‘artistic signature’ of Canto III,[[147]](#footnote-147) and the latter technique must be read in light of the former. Seen in the context of the poem’s broader effort to interrogate quest, the subtle failure of Canto III’s doubling, or the sense that the images of Napoleon, Rousseau, and Wordsworth never fully mesh with Byron’s self, is the product of a ‘conscious orchestration’. As Byron aspires towards what he knows to be an untenable enterprise, this self-consciously doomed quest not only renounces the idea of abandoning the self as a fiction, but shows the poet positioning himself at the centre of his remodelled quest-romance.

*Childe Harold* uses the Spenserian stanza to create the ‘intricate interplay of disjunction and repetition, continuity and separation, [and] endings and beginnings’ that prove vital to the poem’s doubling efforts, qualities that Frederick Garber identifies as a hallmark of Canto III.[[148]](#footnote-148) The form’s predisposition towards such interplay makes it the ideal medium for representing Byron’s quest, capturing the cyclical quality of a poem that consistently moves outwards only to circle back to the self. While Philip Martin claims that ‘it is necessary to dispense with the notion that *Childe Harold* is modelled on, inspired by, or even usefully comparable to Spenser’s poetry’,[[149]](#footnote-149) Greg Kucich convincingly shows how Cantos III and IV utilise Spenser’s ‘prosodic strategies for dramatizing the mind’s conflicts’ to create a ‘new kind of [Spenserian] adaptation’ based on ‘strengthening what is already manifest in Spenser’.[[150]](#footnote-150) In his Preface to Cantos I and II Byron argues that ‘the stanza of Spenser […] admits of every variety’, approvingly quoting Beattie’s celebration of a flexible, versatile form that ‘give[s] full scope to [his] inclination’.[[151]](#footnote-151) For Byron, as for Beattie before him, the Spenserian stanza helps to shape a style of poetry that rejects any fixed or preordained course. Byron’s dedication to *The Corsair* explicitly concedes the stanza’s unsuitability for conventional narrative: ‘the stanza of Spenser is perhaps too slow and dignified for narrative; though, I confess, it is the measure most after my own heart’.[[152]](#footnote-152) *Childe Harold*, in moving to disrupt quest, capitalises on this implication of the form’s ability to stunt and obstruct, leaning particularly heavily on the stanza’s concluding alexandrine as a means of maximising this effect.

John Hughes, an eighteenth century editor of Spenser, spotlights the fractured quality of the Spenserian measure implied by George Saintsbury in commenting that ‘the same Measure, closed always by a full Stop, in the same Place, by which every Stanza is made as it were a distinct Paragraph, grows tiresom by continual Repetition, and frequently breaks the Sense, when it ought to be carry’d on without Interruption’.[[153]](#footnote-153) This description brings to mind the image of the broken heart in Canto III:

And thus the heart will break, yet brokenly live on:

Even as a broken mirror, which the glass

In every fragment multiplies; and makes

A thousand images of one that was,

The same, and still the more, the more it breaks;

(32-33: 288-92)

Despite the stoicism and anticipated regeneration of the heart that ‘brokenly live[s] on’ in spite of adversity, the mirror that makes ‘[t]he same, and still the more, the more it breaks’ less optimistically suggests an endless and inescapable process of duplication. This recalls Hughes’s suggestion that the Spenserian stanza creates ‘continual repetition’ in poetry,[[154]](#footnote-154) while Byron’s fractured glass resonates with the assertion that nine-line stanzas ‘break the sense’, shattering poetry into disparate shards. Cross-stanza enjambment performs the splintering that the lines describe, stretching words over the edges of Byron’s jagged formal framework. Assuming metapoetic significance as it ambivalently echoes the terms of Hughes’s complaint, the passage confirms Byron’s interest in fracture and fragmentation, concepts central to the design of *Childe Harold* III, and implies the suitability of the Spenserian stanza to this poetic vision. With these multiplying ‘images of one that was’ also foreshadowing the poet’s later difficulties in abandoning the self, the ‘broken mirror’ becomes a blueprint not just for Byron’s remodelled Spenserian stanza but for the poem’s fractured process of doubling, making it the central image of Canto III.

The first stanza of *Childe Harold* III prizes the tensions of the Spenserian stanza and ekes out poetic capital from them, as Byron eschews linearity from the outset of the canto:

Is thy face like thy mother’s, my fair child!

Ada! sole daughter of my house and heart?

When last I saw thy young blue eyes they smiled,

And then we parted,—not as now we part,

But with a hope.—

Awaking with a start,

The waters heave around me; and on high

The winds lift up their voices: I depart,

Whither I know not; but the hour’s gone by,

When Albion’s lessening shores could grieve or glad mine eye.

(1: 1-9)

Combining personal pronouns, autobiographical reference, and rhythmic and syntactic disruptions, this anguished opening stanza lays bare the poet’s distress to situate the poem within his own self-consciousness. However, if the landscape of the poetry seems to be that of the poet’s self, its formal splintering posits this as a site of conflict. In Canto I Byron describes how ‘unavailing woe / Bursts from my heart’ (I. 91: 927-28) and though these lines might similarly suggest a ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’,[[155]](#footnote-155) this Wordsworthian dictum implies a sincerity and naturalness that jars with the artfulness of Byron’s selected form.[[156]](#footnote-156) Wilson-Okamura notes how ‘a Spenserian stanza can be organised in several ways: pausing at the end of the lines, at the couplet in the middle, or not pausing at all until the alexandrine’,[[157]](#footnote-157) but the flagrancy of Byron’s central pause shows him playing up this convention, explicitly highlighting the Spenserian stanza’s tendency towards discontinuity.[[158]](#footnote-158) Winding down into silence mid-line after ‘but with a hope’, the disorientation caused by this line break occurring so early in the stanza is heightened by the ambiguous manner in which the poem recommences, ‘awaking with a start’, a phrase that is not explicitly linked to any grammatical subject. While the context suggests that it is Byron who is awakening, the syntax also attributes this rousing to the heaving waters that surround him, a motif that is in keeping with the personification of the winds in line seven. Gavin Hopps points out that this syntactical slippage implies a synchronicity between Byron and nature with the waters ‘appear[ing] to be contingent upon, and in sympathy with, the consciousness of the speaker’,[[159]](#footnote-159) so that what initially resembles a ‘breach of linguistic etiquette’ in fact introduces one of the canto’s pivotal issues,[[160]](#footnote-160) the relationship between the self and the external world. While ‘awaking with a start’ hints towards harmony in its bridging of the gap between distinct grammatical subjects, this reading understates the disruptive effect of this line break. Placing a wedge between the central ‘part’ and ‘start’ couplet of lines four and five, Byron wrenches apart the interlocking rhyme scheme responsible for the complex movements of the Spenserian stanza. This pause means that by the time the stanza reaches the final iteration of the rhyme, ‘I depart’, the preceding pattern of ‘heart’ / ‘part’ / ‘start’ feels strangely distant. In dislocating this rhyme Byron forces himself to question his footing and ‘depart’ from unstable ground, having refused to trust to poetic form as a vehicle for progression. To abandon the self is to embark on a journey of existential uncertainty, and the alexandrine magnifies this doubt. The long assonantal vowel sounds of syllables eleven and twelve ‘mine’ and ‘eye’ stretch the line beyond its already elongated bounds, accentuating the distinctive profile of the Spenserian measure and unmooring the poet in this final tailing off of sound. Jeff Dolven has emphasised the alexandrine’s suitability to concluding statements, writing that ‘among the most characteristic [of effects] is a kind of summary authority’ so that the line ‘provide[s] some kind of provisional, narrative closure, rounding out a unit of action’.[[161]](#footnote-161) Byron’s ‘provisional’ alexandrine steers him away from the familiar territories of Albion and the self but not towards an alternative destination. Rather, it seeks conclusion in negation, stressing only that which cannot provide fulfilment. In this ambiguous opening stanza that professes to ‘know not’ where it is going, form becomes less an agent of structure, direction, or organisation than a means of problematising Byron’s quest to abandon the self.

Stanza 5 continues to forge an artistic blueprint for the disrupted quest of Canto III:

He, who grown aged in this world of woe,

In deeds, not years, piercing the depths of life,

So that no wonder waits him; nor below

Can love, or sorrow, fame, ambition, strife,

Cut to his heart again with the keen knife

Of silent, sharp endurance: he can tell

Why thought seeks refuge in lone caves, yet rife

With airy images, and shapes which dwell

Still unimpair’d, though old, in the soul’s haunted cell.

(5: 37-45)

Abandoning the autobiographical first person pronouns seen in previous stanzas, these lines apparently move into a sketch of Harold, ‘the wandering outlaw of his own dark mind’ (3: 20) recalled in stanza three. Whether the stanza refers to Harold or instead represents a piece of thinly veiled self-portraiture is unclear.[[162]](#footnote-162) In either case, Byron refuses the opportunity to outline the figure that will undertake the quest of Canto III. The canto becomes embroiled in a further false start, beginning to flesh out the identity of the quester before checking its own momentum. With the lines describing how thought ‘seeks refuge’ in caves that house ‘old’ but ‘unimpair’d’ images, Alan Rawes argues that these caves represent memory,[[163]](#footnote-163) and suggests that throughout Canto III Byron ‘sets his sights not on a future of painful memory but on the redemptive possibilities opened up by the human capacity to forget’.[[164]](#footnote-164) For the poet of this stanza, however, forgetfulness seems impossible. The phrase ‘he can tell’ keeps narrative progress at bay, distancing Byron from the knowledge of why thought ‘seeks refuge’ in memory by attributing it instead to the fictional Harold. Byron is, as Rawes points out, unwilling to dwell upon the subject,[[165]](#footnote-165) but here the poet’s torment is less the result of memory than the possibility of having to ‘tell’ it, meaning the stanza deprioritises ‘forgetfulness’ (4: 35) in favour of an abdication of narrative responsibility. The suggestively metapoetic undertones of this refusal to ‘tell’ bespeak Byron’s broader refusal to ‘tell’ a conventional quest narrative. Though the poet describes thought’s tendency to hide itself away in ‘lone caves’, his refusal to elucidate the contents of that thought drives the poem into its own dead-end. Having been exiled from a potential strand of narrative, readers are instead steered towards images of entrapment that capture the poem’s sense of the Spenserian stanza and its architecture. While *Childe Harold* situates itself within the ‘haunted cell’ of Spenser’s nine-line stanza, it refuses to adopt this form of ‘airy images’ as a vehicle for linear progression.

Despite this inclination towards disruption, however, Byron’s poem is never able to dismiss the enticing possibilities of quest. Canto III often gestures towards the possibility of teleology, as observed by Vincent Newey:

No one writing […] can do so without teleological assumptions, some principle of order or some centre of value. Patterns of quest and aspiration *are* present in *Childe Harold*: Byron wants (that is, lacks *and* desires) somewhere to steer, a locus of higher truth and a state of higher being.[[166]](#footnote-166)

Newey’s insightful observation nevertheless fails to account for the painful self-awareness that defines the poet of *Childe Harold*. Though Byron desires ‘somewhere to steer’, he also insists on scrutinising the legitimacy of any possible ‘locus of higher truth’, rather than committing blindly to any ‘state of higher being’. The poem refuses to make any kind of ‘assumptions’ or to take any purportedly teleological narrative at face value, rendering teleology a generic aspiration that Byron’s poem deliberately fails to achieve. Stanza 14, which depicts a kind of quest for self-transcendence in miniature, exemplifies how the highs of Byronic writing are always tempered by this ambivalence:[[167]](#footnote-167)

Like the Chaldean, he could watch the stars,

Till he had peopled them with beings bright

As their own beams; and earth, and earth-born jars,

And human frailties, were forgotten quite:

Could he have kept his spirit to that flight

He had been happy; but this clay will sink

Its spark immortal, envying it the light

To which it mounts as if to break the link

That keeps us from yon heaven which woos us to its brink.

(14: 118-26)

This account of Harold’s stargazing reaches a crescendo as early as line four, soaring on the alliterative and assonantal buoyancy of ‘beings bright / As their own beams’. ‘Human frailties’ are ‘forgotten quite’ at the climax of the stanza’s most firmly end-stopped line, which, in a passage dominated by enjambment, provides readers with a temporary resting point, momentarily suspending the poem at a point of spiritual and poetic serenity. If this quest for transcendence has seemingly reached its culmination, the demands of form compel the poem onwards; aware that five lines remain in the stanza, the reader recognises this climax as premature. From this point the poetry’s movement is one of descent. As this brief sense of security is snatched away by the conditional ‘could he’, Byron seems unable to shake off the contradiction inherent in Harold’s effort, the ‘peopl[ing]’ of the stars as a way to abandon ‘human frailties’. Having hinted that this transcendence relies on the projection of earthly ideas onto an apparently unresponsive external force, the poet cannot help but disrupt what he considers to be an inauthentic enterprise. Moving swiftly into confirmation that ‘this clay will sink’, Byron reiterates the earth-bound nature of our existence, an existence that is mirrored by the poetry’s attention to the formal conditions of the Spenserian stanza. However, like the stargazer who recognises his mortality but continues to aspire for more, these lines exploit any room for manoeuvre within their strict metrical parameters, as if transcendent aspirations are forced into battle with the limits imposed by form. The elastic syntax of lines eight and nine magnifies the alexandrine, heightening its pace and power: ‘as if to break the link / That keeps us from yon heaven which woos us to its brink’. Yet this elasticity provides only temporary leeway. In a reminder of the alexandrine’s ability to accommodate the twists and turns of a poem that seems to engage in questing even as it questions the legitimacy of quest, Byron captures the paradox of being both kept from and ‘wooed’. Surging towards transcendence even while recognising the impossibility of achieving it, the line is both weighed down and uplifted by its additional syllables. The act of linking two lines together becomes a performance; heavy enjambment enacts the possibility of breaking down the boundary between earth and ‘yon heaven’, even as this optimism is simultaneously tempered by rhyme. The Spenserian stanza’s final couplet that initially seems to give form to Byron’s over-reaching harks back to the previous *c* rhyme at line six, reminding the poet that anyone who attempts such flight will ultimately ‘sink’. Byron, despite having taken us to the brink, can go no further, but the poetry arrives at this impasse without despondency. This vacillation between advancement and retreat and between pressure and counter-pressure is characteristic of *Childe Harold* III.[[168]](#footnote-168) The stanza contains a glimmer of triumph that is never definitively extinguished by the poet’s insistence on disruption, as Byron refuses to downplay the thrill of being ‘wooed’. Though being thrown back onto the self is a setback, it affords the poet a further opportunity to cast himself outwards again.

The movement demonstrated by stanza 14 shapes Canto III. As the poem progresses through its invocations of various historical figures and events, Byron’s yearning for self-transcendence prevents his narrative from acceding to any conventional idea of travelogue. Instead, his portraiture becomes inflected with a sense of the poet edging towards even as he pulls away from a series of figures that might represent doubles for himself. This means that Byron’s doublings, though teasingly suggestive of self-portraiture, remain half-formed, resisting any sustained or definitive comparison in their failure to cleanly cohere with the poet’s self. Though Deborah Forbes captures the fractured quality of this doubling, she frames her discussion of the poem’s ‘unrecognised doubles’ and ‘unassimilated voices’ in terms of Harold’s inability ‘to recognise himself definitively in the fallen heroes, desolate landscapes, and ruined buildings that he encounters on his travels’, a failure that is seen to parallel ‘Byron’s own refusal to identify himself completely with Harold’.[[169]](#footnote-169) Yet the way that Byron prevents the invoked figures from ever cleanly meshing with the Byronic self suggests an alternative motive for this disrupted doubling.[[170]](#footnote-170) Individuals who might act as doubles for Byron become an opportunity for the poet to foreground virtues that are uniquely Byronic.

Jerome J. McGann considers Byron’s deployment of what he terms literary ‘masks’,[[171]](#footnote-171) arguing that

one has to read [Byron’s maskings] in terms of a “sameness with difference.” The poetry lies exactly in the relation, in the dialectical play between corresponding apparitional forms: on one side, the spectacular poet, […] on the other, the various fictional and historical selvings.[[172]](#footnote-172)

Yet this discussion implies a clean-cut quality to Byron’s doublings that is not borne out by the poetry. Byron’s fluid movements in and out of his doubles mean that the poem eschews the sense of fixity implied in this stress on ‘corresponding apparitional forms’. Instead, Byron seems to recoil from any blurring of Byronic and Napoleonic or Rousseauian personae at precisely the points when the identification seems at its strongest, an approach that is consistent with Canto III’s overarching emphasis on disrupting quest.

**II.**

Napoleon has long been regarded as one of Byron’s favourite doubles. John Clubbe posits him as the poet’s ultimate obsession, describing a man that ‘seize[d] Byron’s imagination more than any other living human being […] and never relinquish[ed] his grasp until Byron’s dying hour’.[[173]](#footnote-173) Simon Bainbridge foregrounds Napoleon’s centrality to the self-fashioning present throughout Byron’s oeuvre, explaining how the poet’s ‘ongoing struggle to grasp and formulate Napoleon’s political and imaginative meaning played an important part in his own continuous process of self-assessment and self-representation’.[[174]](#footnote-174) However, if *Childe Harold* shows Byron exploring the possibility of becoming Napoleonic as a route out of the Byronic self, Canto III’s emphasis on the artistic technique of disruption, which persists throughout the depiction of Napoleon, complicates Byron’s conflicted engagement with a notoriously complex individual. Byron’s effort to negotiate the dichotomy of poetry and action is central to this disruption. The distinction often occupies Byron’s thoughts; ‘Who would write, who had anything better to do?’,[[175]](#footnote-175) Byron comments archly in early 1813, before declaring that ‘no one should be a rhymer who could be anything better’.[[176]](#footnote-176) This sentiment manifests itself more extremely in Byron’s claim that ‘I have no ambition; at least, if any, it would be “*aut Caesar aut nihil*”’,[[177]](#footnote-177) which, according to McGann, shows how Byron in early 1814

still clung to a naïve conception of what constituted greatness of soul. *Aut Caesar aut nihil* he said for himself, thus insuring an impasse, and his nihilism. Poetry alone seemed to remain, and yet it rankled that this should be so. For poetry was nothing next to a life of action, and even if it were something, he was unfit for its tasks.[[178]](#footnote-178)

In describing poetry as ‘nothing’ to Byron, McGann maps the dichotomy of poetry and action onto *aut Caesar aut nihil* [either Caesar or nothing], equating poetry with *nihil*. Yet *Childe Harold* reveals a greater degree of ambivalence in Byron’s thinking. Though the portrait of Napoleon allows Byron to scrutinise the idea of *aut Caesar aut nihil* by questioning what it is to be Napoleonic and what it is to be nothing, it also reveals the poet muscling his way into this equation, in spite of Byron’s apparent effort to leave the self behind. Napoleon acts as a means for Byron to consider the possibility that while he might be nothing or he might be Napoleonic, he might also be irrevocably Byronic. The poem gestures towards reconciling the poetry and action dichotomy as a way of aligning Byron and Napoleon, but it also shows Byron embracing such a distinction as evidence that he, as poet, possesses qualities that Napoleon does not.

In stanza 37 the doubling disintegrates at the point that Napoleon begins to resemble a failed Byronic poet, rather than Byron himself:

Conqueror and captive of the earth art thou!

She trembles at thee still, and thy wild name

Was ne’er more bruited in men’s minds than now

That thou art nothing, save the jest of Fame,

Who wooed thee once, thy vassal, and became

The flatterer of thy fierceness, till thou wert

A god unto thyself; nor less the same

To the astounded kingdoms all inert,

Who deem’d thee for a time whate’er thou didst assert.

(37: 325-333)

For Deborah Forbes, ‘this description would apply equally well to Harold or to the reputation that Byron has made for himself, but he goes on to criticise Napoleon, without in any way implying that he applies these criticisms to himself’.[[179]](#footnote-179) Yet the stanza is more ambivalent than Forbes allows. Byron’s image of the fallen Napoleon as paradoxically both ‘Conqueror and captive’ suggests that his demise has not entirely effaced his previous achievements, which, according to this stanza, lay in a distinctly Byronic capacity to create and dictate a version of the self to others. However, as the lines blur critique with admiration, the poet vacillates between associating with and disassociating from the figure of Napoleon. With Byron experiencing unprecedented fame at the time of the poem’s composition, the rhyme of ‘name’ and ‘Fame’ speaks to two undeniably Byronic concerns.[[180]](#footnote-180) Though their presence in the portrait of Napoleon suggests a shared preoccupation with heritage and reputation, to be ‘the jest of Fame’ is a Byronic pose that is true of the self-surrendering Napoleon but less so of Byron at this time, despite him writing in the aftermath of the separation scandal of 1816.[[181]](#footnote-181) While his description of a man who became ‘a god unto thyself’ has the air of a critique, Byron places greater stress on the fact that Napoleon’s belief in his own godly status was shared by his ‘astounded kingdoms’. The alexandrine celebrates a former version of Napoleon who had absolute control over what he was ‘deem’d’ to be and used this ability to facilitate his ascent. As the closing *c* couplet suggests, language and the ability to ‘assert’ one’s self through words allows its agent to craft a self of their making and, in turn, to render their foes ‘inert’. In this opposition between ‘assert’ and ‘inert’ Byron comes teasingly close to collapsing his ‘poetry-action dialectic’ by implying that the assertive power of language,[[182]](#footnote-182) the poet’s primary tool but here deployed by Napoleon, is a powerful form of action in its own right. The sentiment gains additional potency from being housed in the increased articulatory space afforded by the alexandrine. Crucially, however, the couplet also recalls the rhyme’s previous iteration, ‘thou wert’. This use of the past tense looms over the stanza, instilling Byron’s observations with an elegiac quality. The tone of the alexandrine, and ultimately the stanza as a whole, is dictated by ‘for a time’. Having refused to condemn the fact that Napoleon was ‘a god unto thyself’, the poet instead laments the cessation of Napoleonic assertion, deploring the loss of this power to ‘assert’ a god-like persona. The accusatory direct address of ‘Now / […] thou art nothing’, laden with bitterness and regret, resonates with the pronouncements of stanza 6 in its use of the term ‘nothing’, with the earlier stanza confirming that Byron, too, knows what it is to be ‘nothing’:

’Tis to create, and in creating live

A being more intense, that we endow

With form our fancy, gaining as we give

The life we image, even as I do now.

What am I? Nothing; but not so art thou,

Soul of my thought!

(6: 46-51)[[183]](#footnote-183)

Napoleon, at the peak of his powers, could be ‘whate’er [he] didst assert’, as if enacting the process described above: ‘’Tis to create, and in creating live / A being more intense’. Yet this is no longer the case. The resemblance between the two stanzas magnifies the impression that stanza 37 is honing in on Napoleon’s now diminished skills of self-creation, but it also highlights the fact that though Byron and Napoleon are aligned through their mutual nothingness, they respond to nothingness in fundamentally different ways. In the description of Napoleon as ‘Conqueror and captive’ (37: 325), the proximity of the word ‘still’ (37: 326) to ‘captive’ in the previous line imbues the temporal adverb ‘still’ with an adjectival sense of a physical ‘still[ness]’, characterising the dethroned emperor as an immobilised force. Napoleon seems to succumb to the very inertia that once paralysed his foes, presenting a stark contrast with the imaginative mobility attributed to the Byronic self in stanza 6. Whereas stanza 37 dishearteningly qualifies its ‘nothing’ by stating that Napoleon is ‘nothing, save the jest of Fame’ (37: 328), stanza 6 more optimistically qualifies ‘nothing’ through the conjunction ‘but’, which acts as the catalyst for Byron’s envisioned movement beyond the self. ‘Gaining as [he] give[s]’ (6: 48), the poet’s self is shaped, in part, by his creation as it comes into being. Byron’s enjambed lines teem with activity and vigour through the use of the present tense ‘even as I do now’, enacting the interdependent process they describe. As it was in Canto III’s earlier image of the broken mirror that ‘makes / A thousand images of one that was’ (33: 290-91), creativity is the force that allows the self to ‘brokenly live on’ (32: 288).

Jerome Christensen argues that the cult of Napoleon was indebted to ‘his gifted impersonation of a monarch’, attributing Napoleon’s fall to the fact that ‘even a talented, chameleonic actor’s face will, after a long run, eventually settle into a habitual expression’.[[184]](#footnote-184) In this light, when Michael O’Neill observes that stanza 6 ‘spurn[s] and send[s] packing identity as empirically fixed; it emerges as a ‘Nothing’ crying out for imaginative and aesthetic replenishment’,[[185]](#footnote-185) he suggests a compelling reason for Byron’s rejection of Napoleon as a potential double. For Byron, Napoleon’s ultimate failure was, in his surrender, to stop creating, and to eschew the self’s demand for ‘imaginative and aesthetic replenishment’.[[186]](#footnote-186) The poet of *Childe Harold* III stops aspiring to be Napoleon not because of any belief that he as mere poet lacks the required ‘greatness of soul’,[[187]](#footnote-187) but upon the recognition that Napoleon has ceased to ‘assert’ ‘the life we image’ (37: 333 & 6: 49). If those who encountered Napoleon deemed him ‘whate’er [he] didst assert’ but only ‘for a time’ (37: 333), Byron differentiates himself from his potential double by claiming a continued ability to transcend nothingness through his apparently ceaseless creativity. Napoleon exemplifies the fate that will befall Byron, too, should he stop creating. As a result, Byron disrupts the doubling between himself and Napoleon not because of his own inability to be Napoleon, or even because of Napoleon’s failure to be Napoleon, but because of Napoleon’s failure to be Byronic. While McGann writes of Byron’s doubling that ‘Byron puts on a mask, or a double-mask, and seems to invite it to exert its own power over him’,[[188]](#footnote-188) here the opposite is true. The power of the mask is checked and challenged at every juncture. The poem’s quest to transcend the Byronic self is stymied by Byron’s realisation that he does not want to become Napoleon, and a determination to succeed where Napoleon failed charges the quest of Canto III. Though Forbes’s sense that Harold’s myopia renders him unable to draw lessons from Napoleon is challenged by the self-awareness of the writing, her reading of the structural implications of this failed doubling is acute: ‘if Byron […] were to explicitly recognise himself in one of the figures he invokes, the sequential finding of new counterparts—the substance of the narrative—would be arrested’.[[189]](#footnote-189) In its movements towards and away the self, the incessant motion of Canto III is evidence that lessons have been learned from Byron’s portrait of Napoleon. Here, the Byronic quest exists in the process of questing rather than the reaching of any final destination; to settle on such a resting point would render one susceptible to the kind of shackles that the ‘still’ Napoleon must now endure (37: 326).

**III.**

When *Childe Harold* III turns to Rousseau, doubling becomes more problematic for Byron. Rousseau was frequently compared to Byron,[[190]](#footnote-190) and McGann lists him alongside Napoleon as one of the ‘passionate figures’ that fascinated the poet throughout his career.[[191]](#footnote-191) Byron draws a sustained distinction between himself and Rousseau in a journal entry of 1821, writing ‘I can’t see any point of resemblance—he wrote prose—I verse—he was of the people—I of the Aristocracy—he was a philosopher—I am none’,[[192]](#footnote-192) concluding that ‘altogether, I think myself justified in thinking the comparison not well founded. I don’t say this out of pique—for Rousseau was a great man—and the thing if true were flattering enough—but I have no idea of being pleased with a chimera’.[[193]](#footnote-193) Yet *Childe Harold* cannot sustain this distinction without running into complications. Having rejected the prospect of becoming Napoleonic, Byron entertains the possibility that Rousseau might represent a potential double for himself, presenting Rousseau as a figure whose ‘desire / Was to be glorious; ’twas a foolish quest, / The which to gain and keep, he sacrificed all rest’ (76: 722-24). The airiness of this dismissal only thinly veils the sense that Byron is seduced by the Rousseauian quest for glory even as he laments the extent of Rousseau’s sacrifice. The stanzas reveal an uncomfortable near doubling as Byron allows his own aspirations to become entangled with even as he asserts his autonomy from the flawed genius of Rousseau.

In the above quotation, the phrasing of ‘to gain and keep’ implies that the glory to which Rousseau aspires is something that can only ever be glimpsed and that any attempt to ‘keep’ it comes at great cost. Though the possibility of achieving glory ‘woos us to [the] brink’ (14: 126) throughout Canto III, Byron’s disruptive tactics ensure his poetry always remains on this ‘brink’, swerving away from any permanent immersion in its visions of glory. As in his depiction of the ‘captive’ Napoleon (37: 325), Byron distances himself from the folly of his apparent double by figuring his self as perpetually in motion. Byron is ‘a passing guest, / Where [Rousseau] became a being’ (76: 721-22), and Rousseau is ‘a native of the land where I respire / The clear air for a while’ (76: 720-21). However, even if Byron implies his own refusal to ‘sacrifice all’ in pursuit of quest, the rewards of doing so seem dangerously appealing:

Here the self-torturing sophist, wild Rousseau,

The apostle of affliction, he who threw

Enchantment over passion, and from woe

Wrung overwhelming eloquence, first drew

The breath which made him wretched; yet he knew

How to make madness beautiful, and cast

O’er erring deeds and thoughts, a heavenly hue

Of words, like sunbeams, dazzling as they past

The eyes, which o’er them shed tears feelingly and fast.

(77: 725-33)

Rousseau may be a ‘self-torturing sophist’ and the ‘apostle of affliction’, but the musicality of this alliterative and assonantal phrasing shows Byron’s observations transcending mere rebuke. The semi-colon of line five, the stanza’s heaviest caesura, shows the poet only momentarily lingering on Rousseau’s self-induced wretchedness. Instead, Byron elevates this as the reason for and the price of Rousseau’s literary successes, and the stanza pivots on the subsequent ‘yet’ conjunction to extol the power of Rousseauian ‘words’. ‘Cast[ing]’ off through its cascading enjambments, the poetry has an intoxicating, seductive quality that celebrates Rousseau’s ability to transform ‘madness’, or ‘erring deeds and thoughts’, into ‘dazzling’ ‘sunbeams’ that enchant those who gaze upon them. Rousseau’s strength lies in his ability to arouse emotion, but the lulling quality of the stanza, which beckons the poet into his own luxuriance in language, invites concern. The doubling seems too easily achieved as Byron settles comfortably into the pose of the tortured artist, exhibiting a linguistic fervour that flaunts his own ability to create and be transfixed by ‘a heavenly hue / Of words’. The knowledge that Rousseau’s ‘madness’ devoured him even as it gave rise to this ‘enchantment’ is momentarily repressed. As Byron gestures towards embracing ‘overwhelming eloquence’ irrespective of the costs, ‘overwhelming’ assumes a darker guise to imply a poet at the mercy of the constructions of his own imagination.

The portrait of Rousseau remains aware that the ambitions of the idealist, though glorious, involve self-sacrifice:

His love was passion’s essence—as a tree

On fire by lightning; with ethereal flame

Kindled he was, and blasted; for to be

Thus, and enamoured, were in him the same.

But this was not the love of living dame,

Nor of the dead who rise upon our dreams,

But of ideal beauty, which became

In him existence, and o’erflowing teems

Along his burning page, distempered though it seems.

(78: 734-42)

Imagery of fire pervades the depiction of Rousseau, described as ‘a tree / On fire by lightning’, an individual ‘kindled’ by the ‘ethereal flame’ of ‘ideal beauty’ but also ‘blasted’ and dangerously combustible as a result. The Byronic symbiosis of creator and creation described in stanza 6, where ‘we endow / With form our fancy, gaining as we give / The life we image’ (6: 47-9), is recast as an incendiary process; the interdependence of the ‘kindled’ soul and his writing creates a kind of wildfire, igniting ‘his burning page’. Rousseau becomes the lightning rod in whom creator and creation, or creator and ‘ideal beauty’, unite hazardously in a ‘whirling gulf of phantasy and flame’ (7: 58). In imploring its readers ‘to look on One, whose dust was once all fire’ (76: 719), stanza 76 confirms that such a burning will inevitably reduce all to ashes. Even so, Byron cannot abandon his sense that to be a self-destructing ‘apostle of affliction’ (77: 726) is far preferable to being a ‘vulgar mind’:

To that gentle touch, through brain and breast

Flash’d the thrill’d spirits love-devouring heat;

In that absorbing sigh perchance more blest,

Than vulgar minds may be with all they seek possest.

(79: 748-51)

The pithy dismissiveness of ‘all they seek’ and the monosyllabic flatness of the alexandrine treats the aspirations of ‘vulgar minds’ with contempt. Though Rousseau erred in ‘absorbing’ the products of his imagination as true ‘existence’ (78: 741), in doing so he pursued something of which ‘vulgar minds’ could not even conceive. As the trochaic stress of ‘Flash’d’ bursts into line 749, the prospect of a life of Rousseuain intensity both ‘kind[ling]’ and ‘blast[ing]’ acquires an appeal that makes Byron’s poetry ‘teem / Along his burning page’ (78: 741-42), where the propulsion of the enjambment posits this as an enlivening but potentially uncontrollable force. Developing his fire imagery, Byron stresses that the inflamed fervour of Rousseuian idealism not only gave rise to his novel *Julie*, *or the New Heloise* but helped instigate political uprising, with the poet revering Rousseau’s writings as ‘those oracles which set the world in flame / Nor ceased to burn till kingdoms were no more’ (81: 763-64). The Byronic dichotomy of words and actions again animates his portraiture, as if Rousseau exemplifies the premise of stanza 114: ‘I do believe, / Though I have found them not, that there may be / Words which are things’ (114: 1059-61).

These ambivalent meditations suggest that an embrace of the uncontrollable ‘fire’ (78: 735) allows the artist to create words of aesthetic beauty and revolutionary power, tools that will help the poet to annihilate his foes. Yet Byron also foregrounds the uncontrollable quality of this fire, depicting it as a force that can destroy both the self and the world around it. Though these stanzas prize the potency of Rousseau’s voice as that which enabled his quest for glory, they ultimately turn away from such a nihilistic bent:

His life was one long war with self-sought foes,

Or friends by him self-banish’d; for his mind

Had grown Suspicion’s sanctuary; and chose

For its own cruel sacrifice, the kind,

’Gainst whom he raged with fury strange and blind.

But he was phrenzied,—wherefore, who may know?

Since cause might be which skill could never find;

But he was phrenzied by disease or woe,

To that worst pitch of all, which wears a reasoning show.

(80: 752-60)

The stanza opens out into critical dissection at its sixth line; ‘But he was phrenzied’ becomes a refrain that marks Byron’s definitive turn away from Rousseau as a double. For Byron, Rousseau’s ‘phrenzied’ embrace of ‘ideal beauty’ (78: 740) reaches ‘that worst pitch of all’ in legitimising itself through its false resemblance to reason. The comment recalls Byron’s recognition in an earlier letter of ‘how admirably we accommodate our reasons to our wishes’.[[194]](#footnote-194) Yet the poetry, in lamenting how Rousseau bent his reasoning to the will of his passions, sharpens the sentiment into a critique. Byron writes damningly on how Rousseau’s revolutionary zeal ‘roused up too much wrath’ (81: 769), inciting his countrymen to the extent that ‘good with ill they also overthrew’ (82: 774). The speculation that Rousseau was poisoned ‘by disease or woe’ recalls the earlier critique of ‘the madmen who have made men mad / By their contagion’ (43: 379-80), where the knottiness of Byron’s repetition mirrors the entanglement of ‘mankind’ (83: 870) in the glorious yet falsifying rhetoric of ‘Conquerors and Kings, / Founders of sects and systems, […] / Sophists, Bards, Statesmen’ (43: 380-82). In honing in on the gap between appearance and reality, Byron implies his own immunity to the contagious spread of false reason. His manner resonates with his letter on the Bowles/Pope controversy:

The truth is that in these days the grand “primum mobile” of England is *Cant—*

Cant political—Cant poetical—Cant religious—Cant moral—but always Cant— multiplied through all the varieties of life. It is the fashion, and while it lasts will be too powerful for those who can only exist by taking the tone of the time. I say Cant, because it is a thing of words, without the smallest influence upon human actions— the English being no wiser, no better, and much poorer, and more divided amongst themselves—as well as far less moral—than they were before the prevalence of this verbal decorum.[[195]](#footnote-195)

This lacerating response to the cultural malaise of canting stands out for designating cant as linguistic, ‘a thing of words’. As Anthony Howe outlines, cant represents ‘a disfiguring, pervasive betrayal of thought’, one ‘linked to the kinds of linguistic dishonesty that expedite moral and political degeneration’.[[196]](#footnote-196) These observations cast a shadow over Byron’s observations of Rousseau’s ‘heavenly hue / Of words’ (77: 731-32) which, in embracing unfounded idealisations of political upheaval as ‘existence’ (78: 741), ‘roused up too much wrath’ (81: 769) and ‘made men mad’ (43: 379). The letter’s pose and tone, scathingly indicting a society in which appearances take precedence over reality, lurks behind the lines from *Childe Harold* and their reference to Rousseau’s ‘reasoning show’ (80: 760). There is a sense that Rousseau convinced the world but could not convince Byron; Byron presents himself as a poet of discernment, one who, like Napoleon, is ‘deeply in men’s spirits skill’d’ (38: 340). As in the invocation of Napoleon, the doubling is disrupted by the poet’s insistence on seeing through his apparent double and diagnosing his flaws.[[197]](#footnote-197) However, the complexity of the poetry lies in Byron’s tendency to treat his rejected double with reverence alongside disillusionment, gesturing towards both emulation and renouncement of the frenzy that is both Rousseau’s strength and his Achilles heel. Though stanza 77 flirts with becoming a ‘self-torturing sophist’ (77: 725) who can ‘make madness beautiful’ (77: 730), edging towards a life of Rousseauian intensity, the poet dismisses any sublimated autobiographical drive through the knowing self-consciousness of his response to Rousseau. Instead, as Byron rejects the prospect of becoming his latest poetic double, what takes precedence is the way the outward movement of Childe Harold III is once again checked by the quest’s circling back to the self that the poetry purports to transcend.

**IV.**

This use of the half-formed double to problematise Byron’s quest beyond the self is complicated by Canto III’s exploration of Wordsworthian poetic preoccupations. When McGann writes that ‘Byron’s absorption into a sense of nature’s transcendental processes is not a culminating or defining event, it is one experience among many’,[[198]](#footnote-198) he underscores the way that Byron’s invocation of Wordsworth, despite its gestures towards an achieved transcendence, is just the latest experience in this disrupted quest to leave the self behind. Though the poem proposes Wordsworth as a third further self that Byron might aspire to become, the poet’s doubling effort is markedly different to that seen in his portraits of Napoleon and Rousseau. This owes to Byron’s decision in stanzas 71-76 to embody more directly the double by speaking in a register indebted to Wordsworth’s own poetry. The assumption of a quasi-Wordsworthian voice suggests that Wordsworth should, regardless of any antipathy between the poets, be read as a further instance of the ‘maskings’ present throughout Byron’s oeuvre. Yet Byron’s adoption of Wordsworth’s voice creates an ambivalent and ambiguous blurring of himself and Wordsworth that destabilises any reading based on the principle of ‘sameness with difference’, complicating McGann’s readiness to draw a line between ‘the poet’ and his ‘various selvings’.[[199]](#footnote-199)

Contemporary reviewers commit a similar misreading in suggesting that Canto III houses Wordsworth and Byron as two distinct presences. John Wilson echoes the sentiments of Francis Jeffrey, who reads Canto III not as Byron attempting to become Wordsworth but as him successfully confronting Wordsworth on Wordsworth’s own terms.[[200]](#footnote-200) Wilson suggests that Byron

has delivered up his soul to the impulses of Nature, and […] that high communion has elevated and sublimed it. […] He came into competition with Wordsworth upon his own ground, and with his own weapons; and in the first encounter he vanquished and overthrew him.[[201]](#footnote-201)

The claim that Byron has surpassed Wordsworth on his own terrain misleadingly posits Byron as the victor of this encounter, failing to account for the tensions of poetry that, despite its Wordsworthian rhetoric, is shot through with equivocation. Rather than going to war with Wordsworth, Byron more subtly undercuts the Lake poet’s rhetoric by wearing his mask:

I live not in myself, but I become

Portion of that around me; and to me,

High mountains are a feeling, but the hum

Of human cities torture: I can see

Nothing to loathe in nature, save to be

A link reluctant in a fleshly chain,

Class’d among creatures, when the soul can flee,

And with the sky, the peak, the heaving plain

Of ocean, or the stars, mingle, and not in vain.

(72: 680-88)

The poet dons the mask but in doing so he points up that this is and only ever will be a mask, one that will never correspond fully with Byron’s poetic self. The mask seems ill-fitting; despite a strongly affirmative opening sentence that apparently sets the tone for the poetry to follow, what gains prominence is the persistence of Byron’s qualifications. Veering between the curiously over-assertive and the strangely tentative, the poet betrays his discomfiture with his subject matter as early as the second line, which stumbles through its heavy caesura into the inelegant repetition of ‘around me; and to me’. Metrical stresses appear to enact a process of self-formation, with the shift from the initial unstressed ‘me’ to the stressed ‘me’ of the final syllable suggesting the growth enabled by an embrace of the natural world. This movement from unstressed self to stressed self broadly mimics the conceptual movement of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s poem ‘on the growth of my own mind’,[[202]](#footnote-202) but the fact that Byron condenses the formative experience of Wordsworthian epic into just four syllables invites scrutiny in its brevity and superficiality. This stress on the individualised nature of Byron’s perceptions through the repetition of ‘me’, seen again in the subsequent iteration of the *b* rhyme ‘I can see’, jars against the way that Byron, in these stanzas, is reaching beyond that which comes naturally to him as poet, as if trying to see through someone else’s eyes. Settling on the rather gnomic declaration that ‘to me, / High mountains are a feeling’, the lines grope vainly towards a kind of Wordsworthian profundity. Yet the absence of descriptive clarity means this statement knowingly fails to convince. While such a formulation might be defended as indicating the ineffability of the poet’s love for ‘high mountains’, to label mountains as a ‘feeling’ is carelessly yet deliberately nonchalant, creating the impression of Byron paraphrasing Wordsworth, a poet whom Hazlitt celebrates as a poet of the mountains and Shelley calls ‘Poet of Nature’ (Shelley, ‘To Wordsworth’, 1).[[203]](#footnote-203) The claim that ‘I can see / Nothing to loathe in nature’ more openly invites suspicion through its negative structure, which implies that the poet is actively seeking reasons to spurn nature, as well as the term ‘loathe’, which seems overly charged in the context of a denial. The listing syntax of the final couplet renders the alexandrine cumbersome, stifled by the delaying of the sentence’s main verb, ‘mingle’. As the verb gets lost in the irregular, lumbering rhythm of this elongated line, there is the sense that its agent, the poet, is himself merely an afterthought, an insignificant speck in the vastness of ‘the sky, the peak’ and ‘the heaving plain / Of ocean’. The connotations of ‘mingle’ capitalise on this implied disjunction. In this context, to ‘mingle’ is not to be fully integrated, disrupting the earlier and more confident claim that ‘I become portion of that around me’. In a move typical of the canto, the demands of form appear to place Byron under duress, with the additional syllables of the alexandrine creating further space for prevarication. With the line petering out into a meek qualification that this mingling will not be ‘in vain’, this apparently defiant alexandrine, like the stanza as a whole, collapses suspiciously easily under any kind of critical inspection. Byron resists the mask of Wordsworth as he seems to embrace it, with the lines affecting embodiment but committing only to ventriloquism. Carefully positioning himself outside of a perspective he initially seems to endorse, Byron’s quest to transcend the Byronic self is undercut by a deliberate failure to attain Wordsworth’s style.

Thomas Moore writes that Wordsworth objected to these stanzas on the grounds that ‘the feeling of natural objects which is there expressed, [was] not caught by [Byron] from nature herself, but from [Wordsworth] and spoiled in the transmission’.[[204]](#footnote-204) The notion that these sentiments are ‘spoiled in transmission’ is crucial to the writing and illuminates Byron’s method. Form proves vital in disrupting the apparent affinities between Byron and his ‘corporeal enemy’,[[205]](#footnote-205) to use McGann’s phrase. With the Lake School having ‘popularised blank verse as the vehicle of natural feeling’,[[206]](#footnote-206) Byron’s use of the Spenserian stanza colours his engagement with nature with a sharply Byronic hue. Wordsworth’s own attitude towards the form was ambivalent. ‘The Female Vagrant’ reveals a desire to attune the Spenserian measure with the rusticity and simplicity prized by his ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*’, which bemoans poets who ‘indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation’.[[207]](#footnote-207) Despite his praise for a ‘fine structure of verse’, Wordsworth’s letter to Catherine Grace Godwin laments her decision to model her writing on ‘the broken and more impassioned movement’ of Byronic Spenserianism, arguing that ‘it is a form of verse ill adapted to conflicting passions; and it is not injustice to say that the stanza is spoiled in Lord Byron’s hands; his own strong and ungovernable passions blinded him as to its character’.[[208]](#footnote-208) Though unduly critical in its suggestion that Byron’s style is gratuitously uncontrolled, Wordsworth correctly identifies the emphases on ‘conflict’ and rupture that underpin *Childe Harold* III. That such techniques prevail throughout the poem’s invocation of Wordsworth suggests that Byron, despite his desire to transcend the self, is refusing to abandon his own poetic territory. Philip Martin’s claim that Byron attempts to ‘master new material with his old compositional habits’ and consequently ‘relaps[es] into his safe techniques’ overlooks that this seems to be a deliberately created quality in these stanzas.[[209]](#footnote-209) The technique allows Byron to achieve his fullest realisation of the link between the Spenserian heritage and self-division, described by Greg Kucich as central to the Romantic engagement with Spenser.[[210]](#footnote-210) The Byronic inclination towards disruption and the Wordsworthian emphasis on man’s harmony with nature bleed into one another, as the opposing drives towards unity and self-division become ‘antithetically mixt’ (III. 36: 317). Rather than staging a clash between Byron as he is now and Byron as he would like to become, the poetry presents the fractious encounter of two competing projects of self-representation; Byron’s desire to attempt to write Wordsworthian poetry collides with the poetry’s need to refute the Wordsworthian model of representing the self.[[211]](#footnote-211)

The movement between stanzas 72 and 73 demonstrates this conflict. Seeming to force square pegs into round holes, Byron uncomfortably accommodates Wordsworth within the fabric of his own poetry:

And thus I am absorb’d, and this is life:

I look upon the peopled desert past,

As on a place of agony and strife,

Where, for some sin, to Sorrow I was cast,

To act and suffer, but remount at last

With a fresh pinion; which I feel to spring,

Though young, yet waxing vigorous, as the blast

Which it would cope with, on delighted wing,

Spurning the clay-cold bonds which round our being cling.

(73: 689-97)

The observations of John Hughes and O. B. Hardison, who claim that the Spenserian stanza ‘frequently breaks the Sense’ and ‘segment[s] the narrative into arbitrary chunks’,[[212]](#footnote-212) resonate with Byron’s method. The poet uses the contours of the Spenserian stanza to disrupt the progression of his poetry. Given that this follows the previous assertion that Byron will ‘mingle, and not in vain’ (72: 688), the opening line of this stanza, ‘and thus I am absorb’d’, seems a false and illogical leap, one accentuated by the stanza gap, as if the poet is claiming a victory that he has yet to achieve. The presumptuous ‘thus’ assumes that the poetry has demonstrated the absorption it describes, but the line’s conclusive tone makes it oddly out of place as an opening to a stanza, standing out in a manner that would not be so apparent in continuous blank verse. If taken at face value as an indicator that transcendent aspirations have been fulfilled, the proclamation seems better suited to the final line of the stanza, if not the entire poem.

The line has consequently been called ‘the most unconvincing Byron ever wrote’ by Jerome Christensen, who sees it as abbreviating ‘the Wordsridgean doctrine of the “one life”’ with typical ‘Byronic negligence’.[[213]](#footnote-213) However, Michael O’Neill writes engagingly on how the line’s failure to convince ‘is its dramatic justification’, with the upbeat emphases that fall on ‘this’ and ‘life’ failing to disguise a ‘downbeat inflection, as though to say, “And this is “life”, this process of needing to escape from what I know only too well as “life”’.[[214]](#footnote-214) This implausibility is crucial to Byron’s intended effect. Groping for conclusion and for comfortable sanctuary beyond his own self, Byron implies that he has successfully become a Wordsworthian poet. Yet the air of prematurity that accompanies the line’s arrival renders its achievement facile, staining Byron’s evocation of Wordsworth with an air of condescension. In defining Byron as a ‘lordly writer’ who ‘is above his own reputation, and condescends to the Muses with a scornful grace’, Hazlitt captures this aspect of Byron’s tone,[[215]](#footnote-215) but Canto IIIsuggests a condescension borne out of poetic difference rather than class-consciousness or ‘aristocratic individualism’.[[216]](#footnote-216) The poem’s emphasis on a disruption antithetical to Wordsworthian synthesis positions the quest of *Childe Harold* III in a post-Wordsworthian landscape. Implicit in these stanzas is Byron’s belief that he is too great to become Wordsworth or to succumb to the delusion of unifying with nature, regardless of his own yearning for self-transcendence. ‘Could he have kept his spirit to that flight / He had been happy’ (14: 122-23); though Byron wishes he could suspend his disbelief and commit to such a ‘flight’, he presents himself as possessing greater knowledge than the ‘Poet of Nature’ (Shelley, ‘To Wordsworth’, 1), and the effect of the writing commands assent. As the alexandrine sets up only to qualify the possibility of transcending earthly ‘clay’ within a single line, the poet juxtaposes a defiant ‘spurning’ with tacit recognition that mortal bonds will inevitably always ‘cling’. Byron spotlights the antonymic relationship of these heavily stressed verbs by using them to bookend the alexandrine through internal rhyme, typifying the insistent self-negation that Vincent Newey identifies in this section of the poem.[[217]](#footnote-217) Gradually building throughout the preceding three lines in ‘spring’, ‘waxing’, and ‘wing’, the sound of the proliferated *c* rhyme overbearingly ‘cling[s]’ to the stanza, culminating in the double ringing out of ‘being cling’. With this repetition comes a sense of shackling that undermines the vision of flight, recalling stanza 14’s description of ‘the link / That keeps us from yon heaven which woos us to its brink’ (14: 125-26). Despite purportedly transcending the Byronic self, Byron continues to ‘cling’ to his own artistic blueprint. In foregrounding this friction, the poet confirms the link between himself and Wordsworth as the product of a ‘broken mirror’ (33: 289), rather than a viable doubling that might allow him to leave the self behind.

**V.**

In ‘Anima Hominis’W. B. Yeats remarks that ‘we make out of the quarrels with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry’.[[218]](#footnote-218) This observation, considered alongside *Childe Harold*, is suggestive of the fractious encounters that constitute Canto III. Byron’s tussles with his potential selves ruffle his poetry but also kindle his quest into life, and it is also through these quarrels that the poem’s great ‘counter-truth’ (W. B. Yeats, ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’, 17) begins to emerge.[[219]](#footnote-219) Despite his refusal to be confined to the Byronic self, Byron’s emphasis on the flaws of his supposed doubles reveals an equal unwillingness to become the figures that his poem invokes. With the doubles rejected as possible routes out of the self, self-affirmation emerges from attempted self-transcendence. In returning to the autobiographically-inflected style of stanza 1, the closing stanzas of Canto III set out their stall as a ‘journey homeward to habitual self’ (Keats, Endymion, II. 276), with Byron pointing up the symmetrical quality of the poem in stanza 115: ‘My daughter! with thy name this song begun— / My daughter! with thy name thus much shall end’ (115: 1067-68). With this quest to abandon the self culminating in a sustained act of self-expression, the poetry’s cyclical trajectory embodies the Eliotic mantra of ‘in my beginning is my end’ (‘East Coker, 1940’, 1).[[220]](#footnote-220) However, ‘in my beginning is my end’ is not an albatross around Byron’s neck. The poet foregrounds the self to which he returns as a site of fortitude and stoicism, while stressing the skill and self-control required to centre the self productively:

Thus far I have proceeded in a theme

Renewed with no kind auspices:—to feel

We are not what we have been, and to deem

We are not what we should be,—and to steel

The heart against itself; and to conceal,

With a proud caution, love, or hate, or aught,—

Passion or feeling, purpose, grief or zeal,—

Which is the tyrant spirit of our thought,

Is a stern task of soul:—No matter,—it is taught.

(111: 1031-39)

Recalling the broken heart that lives on but shows ‘no visible sign, for such things are untold’ (33: 297), the rhyme progression of ‘feel’/ ‘steel’/ ‘conceal’ aligns an exertion of emotional self-control with the artistic control demanded by the Spenserian stanza. When O’Neill writes that a poet’s ‘desire for self-transcendence posits a self to be transcended’,[[221]](#footnote-221) it is equally the case that this stanza’s desire for self-suppression reveals a current of self-expression that is padlocked behind Byron’s rhymes. It is not that the self is incapable of feeling; in the cataloguing of ‘love, or hate, […] / Passion or feeling, purpose, grief or zeal’, feeling threatens to run amuck as the ‘tyrant spirit of our thought’. Though the accusatory ‘tyrant’ condemns unchecked feeling as a despotic force, Byron’s phrasing throws us back to the enlivening ‘soul of my thought’ (6: 51) described in stanza 6, which celebrates imaginative creation as that which allows us to ‘live / A being more intense’ (6: 46-7). Feeling may be the ‘tyrant spirit of our thought’, the darker shadow and apparent adversary of the ‘soul of my thought’, but this echoing hints that an outpouring of the self might also animate Byron’s poetry. The poet claims an ability to productively centre the self and with it the potency of feeling while ensuring his poetry staves off any mawkish self-indulgence. The lines stress what ‘we are not’ but resist any air of elegiac lament, allowing the self to emerge in this void and defiantly dig in its heels. Yet this remains an act of self-affirmation voiced only through gritted teeth, with Byron retaining some wariness of the self even as he asserts his mastery over it. The writing suggests a begrudging acceptance that the self is all that remains. For all its talk of self-repression, the stanza places equal weight on the self as the home to which the poet, for better or for worse, must always return.

Manuscripts show that Byron originally ended Canto III at the climax of the following stanza, writing ‘End of Canto third’ beneath his final flourish of ‘I stood and stand alone,—remembered or forgot’ (112: 1048).[[222]](#footnote-222) Pivoting on its medial caesura, the line shifts from defiant self-definition to an implicit invitation. ‘Remembered or forgot’: the choice is set forth as one the reader must make, and the poem ends with Byron suggesting that his audience may judge him as they wish. However, the resumption of the poem in stanzas 113-118 reveals a sharp change of tack. Byron strikes through any implied possibility that his audience might have the last word:

I have not loved the world, nor the world me;

I have not flattered its rank breath, nor bow’d

To its idolatries a patient knee,—

Nor coin’d my cheek to smiles,—nor cried aloud

In worship of an echo; in the crowd

They could not deem me one of such; I stood

Among them, but not of them; in a shroud

Of thoughts which were not their thoughts, and still could,

Had I not filed my mind, which thus itself subdued.

(113: 1049-57)

As the poet doggedly cleaves himself from the crowd, the lines display a degree of self-consciousness that renders McGann’s reading unsatisfactory:

Whenever Byron says “I have not loved the world, nor the world me” he is uttering a desperate and piteous lie. The truth is that he has loved it much too long and far too well, and that in this love his illusions (which are part of his loves) have always been threatened with collapse.[[223]](#footnote-223)

Where *The Romantic Ideology* stresses these ‘Romantic illusions’ as Byron’s ‘greatest love of all’,[[224]](#footnote-224) ‘Romanticism and the Anonymous Lyric’ revises this in the claim that ‘Byron’s relation to Romanticism is secondary and critical’.[[225]](#footnote-225) Describing Byron as ‘the manipulator of his own subjectivities’, McGann implies that it was his own error to ever take this poet of ‘deliberate hypocrisy’ at his word:[[226]](#footnote-226)

Pain or pleasure, benevolence or cruelty, good and evil: the poem (as it were) will decide what to take up among this range of human things and in what point of view to consider the subject-poet and his overhearing reader. Theatricality replaces Sincerity as the measure of Romantic style.[[227]](#footnote-227)

This is too cynical a reading to be applicable to Byron’s announcement that ‘I have not loved the world, nor the world me’, implying a sense of detachment that is not borne out by the poetry. It is neither a ‘desperate and piteous lie’ nor a hollow and artificial rhetorical gesture delivered by an apathetic poet.[[228]](#footnote-228) McGann focuses on what he perceives as the dishonesty of Britain’s most famous poet claiming to have been unloved by his audience, but Byron’s act of self-definition exhibits a deliberate artfulness that offers a nod to its own constructed quality. With mankind an indiscriminate mass described only as ‘them’ and ‘their’, the ‘I’ stands alone with absolute clarity, ventriloquising the voice of ‘the world’ to cement this opposition. If the syntax suggests tumult in its refusal to be contained by the perimeters of the lines, the maintenance of rhyme scheme reveals this as an intricately crafted act of self-display. In this tension lies some kind of middle ground between ‘sincerity’ and ‘theatricality’,[[229]](#footnote-229) to use McGann’s terms, one that is informed by Paul de Man’s investigation of autobiography: ‘we assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life’.[[230]](#footnote-230) De Man’s stance is pre-empted in Byron’s writing. *Childe Harold* III’s conclusive return to selfsuggests that through poetry, autobiography can be spun from being the dross that checks one’s flight into an opportunity for poetic self-expression. Self need not be a prison-house that confines and stifles poetry, and the lines have their strongest resonance as a self-reflexive meditation on the poem’s unsuccessful doubling and what this means for the self that remains. In claiming that ‘I stood / Among them, but not of them’, the stanza confirms an impression implicit throughout Byron’s doubling, that the Byronic self possesses an independence that precludes assimilation and renders any possible double unsatisfactory. Though the self may mingle intermittently with the figures of Napoleon, Rousseau, and Wordsworth, it can only ever be ‘in a shroud / Of thoughts which were not their thoughts’ (113: 1055-56). While Byron exclaims earlier in the canto ‘Yet must I think less wildly:—I *have* thought / Too long and darkly’ (7: 55-56), stanza 113 concludes with him laying claim to these ‘thoughts’ as his and only his, however ‘dark’ these products of the ‘filed mind’ (113: 1057) may be.

The interrogated quest of *Childe Harold* III attests to both Byron’s ambivalence towards the self and his masterful ability to foreground these tensions through a manipulation of poetic form. For Byron, poetry is not the vessel through which the ‘I’ can be transcended, yet neither is it the vessel through which the ‘I’ comes directly to the fore.[[231]](#footnote-231) Earlier in the canto Byron muses that ‘there are wanderers o’er Eternity / Whose bark drives on and on, and anchored ne’er shall be’ (70: 669-70). The enjambment suggests Byron’s own proclivity for such ‘wander[ing]’, as seen in his encounters with Napoleon, Rousseau, and Wordsworth, and the technique is mirrored in stanza 42’s account of those who cannot ‘tire / Of aught but rest’ and possess ‘a fire / And motion of the soul which will not dwell / In its own narrow being’ (42: 371-73). However, rather than offering merely a self-reflexive commentary on Byronic mobility, the air of obligation that accompanies these lines instead reveals Byron’s ambivalence towards his own existential wonderings. Swirling dizzyingly around the ‘arena of self-consciousness’,[[232]](#footnote-232) the quest of *Childe Harold* III funnels the poet back and forth, this way and that, initially away from but always back towards the self he wishes to transcend. Yet this does not represent defeat. The trajectory of Canto III is aptly reflected in Byron’s exclamation in Canto IV: ‘But my soul wanders; I demand it back / To meditate amongst decay, and stand / A ruin amidst ruins’ (IV. 25: 217-19). Byron’s wrenching open of the Spenserian stanza shows him fashioning the poetic ruins in which he can display the fractured existence of the conflicted self. It is by his own design that the poem impedes his affected march beyond that which is Byronic, yet the poet eschews nihilism in presenting his discovery that ‘there woos no home, nor hope, nor life, save what is here’ (IV. 105: 945). Even as the modified Spenserian measure destabilises and ultimately prohibits quest-narrative, the very act of recalibrating Spenser’s nine-line stanza redirects the spotlight to the individuality of Byron’s poetic self. Having proposed a series of potential doubles that remain half-formed, the quest of *Childe Harold* III instead affirms the sovereignty of the self that endures through all of Byron’s travails, like the broken heart, ‘living in shattered guise’ (33: 294).

**CHAPTER TWO:**

**‘But found would it content you?’: Rhetoric and Achievement in *Manfred* and *The Deformed Transformed***

*Manfred* and *The Deformed Transformed* interrogate the limits and potential of quest. As Byron’s first and final plays respectively,the dramas build on the disruption of quest that galvanises Byron’s poetry, revealing the development of a technique that also pervades his dramatic writings. Harold Bloom suggests that Byron’s willingness to ‘play’ with nihilism gives rise to an approach to quest that, were it not for the poet’s premature death, ‘would have become increasingly ironic’,[[233]](#footnote-233) but Byron’s dramas seem to court yet ultimately resist any fully-fledged ironising of quest. The plays achieve this through their interest in the tension between, as well as the possibility for a more positive blurring of, rhetoric and achievement. This fascination with the powers and pitfalls of rhetoric, ‘the art of using language effectively so as to persuade or influence others’,[[234]](#footnote-234) reflects a preoccupation with language that recurs throughout Byron’s oeuvre.[[235]](#footnote-235) The plays invite comparison by exploring the relationship between rhetoric and achievement in contrasting ways. *Manfred*’s focus is on a character who claims to be acutely aware of his desires and bent on achieving them, even if this involves being his ‘own destroyer’ (III. iv. 139). The play’s intensity and narrowness of focus, indebted to that of monodrama, renders its eponymous protagonist all the more compelling.[[236]](#footnote-236) But Byron’s generic manipulations also disrupt the possibility of scrutinising Manfred’s credentials as quester, ushering audiences into a strained and ambivalent sympathy with Manfred’s problematic, near-nihilistic rhetoric. The dangers of rhetoric are still more explicit in *The Deformed Transformed*, which, in contrast to *Manfred*, contains a surfeit of potential questers and quest-narratives. Where *Manfred* draws readers into the drama, Byron’s final play consistently denies its audience any reliable foothold. In each case it is the Stranger, also known as Cæsar, who foils quest, prohibiting the characters of *The Deformed Transformed* from achieving their goals. By crafting a drama that deliberately lacks a single successful quest for audiences to support, Byron places his audience perilously close to the position of the Stranger, forcing them to passively, even impassively, watch quest unravel. Despite demanding that we reject the Stranger’s view of quest as a futile exercise, the complexity of *The Deformed Transformed* lies in its refusal to depict the redemptive quest narrative that would definitively discredit this stance. Considering the two plays that bookend Byron’s dramatic career alongside one another, this chapter will show that the singularity of *Manfred* and the multifaceted focus of *The Deformed Transformed* work with different means towards similar ends, questioning the value of questing rhetoric and exploring its complex relationship with achievement.

**I.**

As Byron’s ‘first adult play’,[[237]](#footnote-237) *Manfred* shows Byron developing his tendency towards challenging the ‘interpretative mastery’ of his audiences.[[238]](#footnote-238) This is, in part, the product of a self-conscious approach to genre, designed to manipulate the reader’s response to Manfred. When Michael Cooke describes Manfred’s character as marked by an ‘impregnable loftiness’,[[239]](#footnote-239) he suggests something of Byron’s ability to fix an audience’s gaze on his protagonist, lending his words a powerful assertive thrust. The focalisation is indebted to that of monodrama,[[240]](#footnote-240) defined by Chris Baldick as ‘a play or dramatic scene in which only one character speaks’.[[241]](#footnote-241) Such generic leanings afford Manfred the platform from which to articulate the rhetoric of the wilful, autonomous quester, but in a quest marked by several abrupt changes of tack, what Manfred does is made to seem less important than the posture that he assumes in doing it.[[242]](#footnote-242) While Manfred’s rhetoric creates the image of a character who consistently achieves his goals, the direction in which Manfred’s will points him lacks any such consistency. Byron points this up by contravening as many conditions of monodrama as he adheres to, denoting Manfred as the play’s primary consciousness even as he renders him subject to the voices and values of others.

Even as Byron alerts us to the potential gulf between Manfred’s rhetoric and his achievements, however, the terms of the play, which remain those of Manfred, ensure such a separation is never clear-cut. Frederick Garber isolates the fundamental problem of reading *Manfred* when he remarks that ‘Manfred is guilty in terms of an external and relative set of values’ and subject to ‘standards of reward and punishment other than those he has created for himself’.[[243]](#footnote-243) Implicit in this account and worthy of greater attention is Garber’s sense that our abundant exposure to Manfred’s personal motivations might, as the play progresses, sharpen into a subtle yet revealing tension between the values of audience and character. Characteristic of Byron’s ability to complicate quest, however, is the way the poet nudges audiences towards scrutiny while ensuring Manfred is never merely a self-deceiving ‘dupe’ (III. iv. 138). By probing this tension, this chapter will develop Jerome J. McGann’s assertion that *Manfred* represents ‘the key text for constructing [Byron’s] distinction between lying and cant’,[[244]](#footnote-244) arguing that neither label accurately reflects the ambivalence that engulfs Manfred’s rhetoric. Central to this ambivalence is the way in which the play resists fully-fledged monodrama even as it refuses to forfeit its claim to the power of the monological. Such generic awkwardness forces critics to offer qualified descriptions of the play, as in Caroline Franklin’s definition of *Manfred* as ‘an experimental poem: a modified monodrama, or short lyrical play, concentrating on one protagonist’s psyche’.[[245]](#footnote-245) As the only canonical Romantic poet to possess ‘extensive, practical experience of the stage’,[[246]](#footnote-246) Byron’s immersion in theatrical culture suggests an appreciation of the intricacies and flexibilities of dramatic convention that is borne out by *Manfred*,[[247]](#footnote-247) with the play’s experimental deployment of monodramatic devices standing as the result of deliberate artistic design. Though Byron presents a quester who is checked and challenged at every juncture, Manfred’s ability to funnel audiences into a particular line of thought is simultaneously put forth as the character’s most significant victory.

The indebtedness of Romantic drama to monodrama is affirmed by Jeffrey Cox, who argues that the Romantics ‘sought a new central dramatic mode that recombined the elements isolated by the monodrama and melodrama into a new tragic drama’.[[248]](#footnote-248) While this chapter’s concern is less with examining any melodramatic resonances in Byron’s play, an avenue explored by Philip Martin,[[249]](#footnote-249) Cox’s inference that Romantic playwrights turn to monodrama as a means of heightening the emotional complexity of their work remains adroit. Byron uses monodramatic devices not to blend generic forms but to disrupt quest, deliberately steering his audience towards a conflicted response to his protagonist. Alan Richardson repudiates ‘the stock characterisation of the Romantic drama as “monodrama”’,[[250]](#footnote-250) suggestively arguing that ‘in the Romantic theatre of the mind, consciousness develops not spontaneously but through interaction with another’ so that *Manfred* ‘verges towards monodrama only to reject it, less a celebration of isolated subjectivity than a critique of the false assumptions beyond psychic autonomy’.[[251]](#footnote-251) Yet *Manfred*’s rejection of monodramatic inflections is never total; ‘celebration’ and ‘critique’ co-exist uneasily in a play that eschews the rigidly singular voice of monodrama even as it affords its protagonist a primacy reminiscent of the monodramatic subject. Though Manfred’s perspective is always subject to varying degrees of scrutiny, Byron outmanoeuvres any misjudged attempt to reductively label Manfred as a kind of ‘unreliable narrator’.[[252]](#footnote-252)

Manfred’s opening encounter with the spirits shows him claiming the ability to define his own life and character:

Ye mock me—but the power which brought ye here

Hath made you mine. Slaves, scoff not at my will!

The mind, the spirit, the Promethean spark,

The lightning of my being, is as bright,

Pervading, and far-darting as your own,

And shall not yield to yours, though coop’d in clay!

Answer, or I will teach ye what I am.

(I. i. 152-58)

Having declared that his Promethean spirit, misplaced in his current physical form, makes him equal to all he encounters, Manfred’s two threats, ‘scoff not at my will!’ and ‘I will teach ye what I am’, cut to the heart of the play’s interest in the monodramatic sphere. Explicitly asserting his self-sufficiency, Manfred claims sole responsibility not only for what he is but, more importantly, for how he is perceived by others, foregrounding his ability to nullify all external judgement. With the play having opened with Manfred in soliloquy and the pointed stage direction ‘MANFRED *alone*’, Byron appears to immediately put forth his protagonist as representing the play’s dominant perspective. However, even in the above passage, Manfred’s boasting declaration of ‘the power which brought ye here’, seemingly a reference to his willed summoning of the spirits, uses its impersonal construction to hint towards a disembodied power distinct from Manfred’s own, suggesting that forces greater than Manfred are at work in the play. The protagonist’s capacity to ‘teach ye what I am’ is immediately under threat, with Byron questioning the extent to which Manfred’s self-reliance should translate to an audience’s dependence on Manfred for their understanding of the play. Yet while the passage makes it unclear whether Manfred is teaching us what he is or merely what he believes himself to be, the play as a whole renders the distinction between the two unstable and, as a result of Byron’s generic manipulations, threatens to erode the distinction entirely in the play’s final act.

Though strength of affirmation represents Manfred’s most potent weapon throughout the drama, Byron ensures that Manfred’s quest is built on more fragile foundations than is initially apparent. ‘I do know / My route full well, and need no further guidance’ (II. i. 5-6), Manfred tells the Chamois Hunter, but his effort to make himself into a self-determining quester is called into question as early as the play’s opening scene, which initiates a subtle tendency towards equivocation that becomes explicit in the movement between acts two and three. Having summoned the spirits for the first time, Manfred professes that he quests after ‘forgetfulness’ (I. i. 136) before proclaiming his desire for ‘oblivion, self-oblivion’ (I. i. 144). But this is not quite the same as ‘forgetfulness’; ‘forgetfulness’ suggests not complete self-transcendence but the self freeing itself from consciousness of previous experience, containing within it the possibility that new memories might arrive to redeem the self from previous torments. The distinction, though a fine one, offers the first hint of Manfred’s tendency to refine his aims in order to maintain the guise of the wilful quester. Byron has the spirits spotlight this changeability when Manfred demands that ‘him, / Who is most powerful of ye, take such aspect / As unto him may seem most fitting’ (I. i. 185-87):

SEVENTH SPIRIT. [*Appearing in the shape of a beautiful female figure*]

Behold!

MAN. Oh God! if it be thus, and *thou*

Art not a madness and a mockery,

I yet might be most happy.—I will clasp thee,

And we again will be——— [*The figure vanishes*

My heart is crush’d!

[MANFRED *falls senseless*

(I. i. 188-91)

While Manfred’s self-declared inscrutability threatens to disrupt the interpretative effort of the audience, this difficulty does not extend to the other characters of the play, who know precisely how to point up Manfred’s vulnerabilities. The spirit’s assumption of its chosen form represents a deliberate effort to wield influence over Manfred, undercutting his previous claim that ‘there is no form on earth / Hideous or beautiful to me’ (I. i. 184-85) and undermining his pose of self-sufficiency. If Manfred acts according to his will, the spirits, unbeknownst to the protagonist, seem to set the course of his will, reminding Manfred of the source of his suffering and revealing the original motive for his questing. The appearance of the female figure dangles a prospect before Manfred that the protagonist’s reaction suggests is preferable to ‘forgetfulness’ (I. i. 136) or ‘self-oblivion’ (I. i. 144). The scene’s emphasis on the second-person pronoun ‘thou’ as a ‘madness and a mockery’, with Manfred vainly groping outwards to try and ‘clasp’ the figure, also bears considerable metapoetic weight. Manfred’s inability to grasp this ‘thou’ implies his inability to embrace anything beyond the narrow confines of the self, regardless of whether this is another human or a set of values other than his own. The scene may steer Manfred into what Frederick Garber calls the ‘cul-de-sac’ of self,[[253]](#footnote-253) but in doing so it also funnels him into the confines of monodramatic singularity. That Manfred’s loss of consciousness stems from the trust he places in the spirits’ judgement, asking them to assume the form they find ‘most fitting’ (I. i. 187), intensifies the effect. In doing so Manfred explicitly renders himself subject to what Garber calls ‘an external and relative set of values’.[[254]](#footnote-254) The decision has catastrophic consequences; when Manfred ‘falls senseless’ the play implies the protagonist’s vulnerability to value systems other than his own, suggesting that Manfred’s existence in the drama depends solely on his ability to play by his own rules.

If the play’s insistent focus on Manfred might seem to enable such an effort, affording Manfred the stage from which to espouse the rhetoric of an autonomous quester, acts one and two show the play’s monodramatic leanings to work in opposition to Manfred as much as in his favour. Monodramatic tropes cluster in particular around Byron’s depiction of the relationship between Astarte and Manfred. The effect is sharply ironic; the play’s genre becomes the snare that tightens around Manfred the more he struggles beyond the self. Garber suggestively reads Astarte in the context of the ‘numerous self-images studded through the drama, most designed to put echoes of Manfred into the world outside of himself’,[[255]](#footnote-255) and his perspective can be pursued further to show that this design is influenced by the play’s exploration of monodrama. Though Manfred sees a renewal of his connection with Astarte as a route out of a stifling self-consciousness, the play uses Astarte to create precisely the opposite effect, threatening to convert this ‘Dramatic Poem’ into a myopic monodrama:

She was like me in lineaments—her eyes,

Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone

Even of her voice, they said were like to mine;

But soften’d all, and temper’d into beauty;

(II. ii. 105-8)

The lines affect an air of disclosure. Yet their reliance on simile serves to occlude Astarte as much as describe her, foregrounding her likeness to Manfred rather than her characteristics as individual. The mirroring anticipates Shelley’s *On Love*, which describes love as motivated by the presence within the self of an ‘ideal prototype of every thing excellent and lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man’ (*On Love*, p. 632). For Shelley, this prototype acts as ‘a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness’ (*On Love*, p. 632), and Astarte’s status as a ‘soften’d’ and ‘temper’d’ reflection of Manfred resonates with Shelley’s description. However, contrary to Shelley’s idealised sense of mirroring, where an inward gaze towards the ‘ideal prototype’ paradoxically allows one to transcend narcissistic isolation and achieve sympathetic connection, *Manfred*’s mirroring has the opposite effect, magnifying the stifling singularity of the play’s focalisation. With Manfred only able to conceive of the individual he seeks a connection with in terms that mirror himself, Byron’s drama begins its transformation into an echo-chamber dominated by Manfred’s pervasive consciousness.

This impression is heightened when Nemesis summons the Phantom of Astarte later in act two, where Byron presents Manfred’s slide into the one-sidedness of soliloquy as countering his effort to instigate conversation:

I know not what I ask, nor what I seek:

I feel but what thou art—and what I am;

And I would hear yet once before I perish

The voice which was my music—Speak to me!

For I have call’d on thee in the still night,

Startled the slumbering birds from the hush’d boughs,

And woke the mountain wolves, and made the caves

Acquainted with thy vainly echoed name,

Which answered me—many things answered me—

Spirits and men—but thou wert silent all.

(II. iv. 132-41)

The soliloquy offers a counterargument to Simon Bainbridge’s assertion that *Manfred* increasingly places its protagonist ‘within a social context’,[[256]](#footnote-256) a reading that takes its lead from Byron’s note to Murray describing *Manfred* as a ‘poem in dialogue’.[[257]](#footnote-257) This is a soliloquy about soliloquising but also one about soliloquising unwillingly, a soliloquy that wishes it was an act of dialogue, one where Manfred’s desire to ‘hear yet once before I perish / The voice which was my music’ is complicated by the strange impersonality of the construction. The lines lament the loss of Astarte’s voice, but the impersonal determiner ‘the voice’ and the first person pronoun in ‘my music’ delete the agent of the voice from the lines, erasing any explicit reference to Astarte’s presence. The resulting impression, at least initially, is that ‘the voice which was my music’ might be a reference to Manfred’s own, as if Astarte’s voice is subsumed in Manfred’s own ‘music’. Even in celebrating the voice of another, Manfred’s words slip into an inadvertent reminder of the conditions of monodrama and the isolation of his own soliloquising voice. The effect is intensified when Manfred laments that ‘many things answered me— / Spirits and men—but thou wert silent all’. Bainbridge argues that the play shows Manfred as ‘able to engage with the forces within and outside himself: with his own past in his encounter with the Witch of the Alps, with the events of history given voice to by the Spirits in Act II scenes iii and iv, and with the religious belief for which the Abbot acts as a spokesman’.[[258]](#footnote-258) But the scene shows Manfred unable to engage fully with Astarte, the only character in the play with whom he genuinely seeks a connection, and this failure is of greater significance than any dialogue with the drama’s cast of ‘wilfully antagonistic spirits’ and ‘unintentionally antagonistic men’.[[259]](#footnote-259)

Paradoxically, Byron’s disruption of Manfred’s attempted dialogue comes to a head when the Phantom of Astarte, having been implored to speak, finally breaks its silence. Andrew Elfenbein comments that ‘although we would expect [this] encounter to be the play’s most private moment, it is actually the most public, witnessed by Arimanes, Nemesis, Spirits, and Destinies, all of whom comment on the action’.[[260]](#footnote-260) The tension recurs throughout the play, with Manfred continually surrounded by an abundance of supporting cast members yet always appearing irrevocably alone, and is the result of the play’s tendency to jarringly transpose monodramatic tropes into dramatic settings. Here, a surplus of onlookers does nothing to dampen the impression of the play spiralling into a monodramatic prison-house:

PHANTOM OF ASTARTE. Manfred!

MAN. Say on, say on—

I live but in the sound—it is thy voice!

PHAN. Manfred! To-morrow ends thine earthly ills.

Farewell!

MAN. Yet one word more—am I forgiven?

PHAN. Farewell!

MAN. Say, shall we meet again?

PHAN. Farewell!

MAN. One word for mercy! Say, thou lovest me.

PHAN. Manfred!

(II. iv. 150-56)

Far from freeing Manfred from a stifling self-consciousness, the words of Astarte complete the play’s conversion into an echo-chamber. Despite A.W. Schlegel’s pinpointing of ‘conversation’ as the dramatic poet’s primary tool to create and sustain narrative,[[261]](#footnote-261) the scene reveals *Manfred*’s resistance towards straightforward acts of conversation. Dialogue and monologue rub up against one other with fractious results; if *Manfred* is ‘a poem in dialogue’ then the lines typify Byron’s insistence on presenting any dialogue as one-sided,[[262]](#footnote-262) with the play tending towards monological vantage points even as it funnels the protagonist into the dramatic encounters that make it more than a single character, monodramatic work. Four of Astarte’s speech acts consist of just a single word and Manfred’s own name dominates, framing the speech and appearing on a further occasion in the interim. Byron’s lineation spotlights the effect, as Manfred’s completion of the Phantom’s lines suggests less a co-operative adherence to a shared metrical framework than a vain attempt to supplement the fragmentary pronouncements of a partial consciousness. Manfred’s filling of the interstices is not conducive to the harmony for which he longs, instead reinforcing the fact that the playcontains little space for anyone other than the protagonist.

Despite Manfred’s dominance, Astarte is still attributed with the most teasing line of the exchange: ‘Manfred! To-morrow ends thine earthly ills’ (II. iv. 152). The declaration appears to wriggle free from the semantic vacuum that engulfs the rest of the dialogue, seeming to acquire additional significance through its status as Astarte’s only complete iambic pentameter line. The statement has provoked responses from various critics who, perhaps invited by Nemesis’s declaration that ‘her words will be fulfill’d’ (II. iv. 157), overstate the authority of the line, remarking on the accuracy with which it forecasts the events of act three and unpicking the qualifying effect of ‘earthly’.[[263]](#footnote-263) But what the line fails to do is more important than what it does; the meaning of its content is less significant than the way that the Phantom sidesteps Manfred’s instruction ‘say that thou loath’st me not’ (II. iv. 125), refusing to offer Manfred the answer that he desires. It would be inappropriate to read the line as akin to the authoritative pronouncements of Shelley’s Demogorgon, who, in a scene from *Prometheus Unbound* that is indebted to the above exchange, enigmatically tells Asia ‘If the abysm / Could vomit forth its secrets:—but a voice / Is wanting’ (*Prometheus Unbound*, II. iv. 114-16). A voice other than Manfred’s is equally wanting in Byron’s drama; when Demogorgon responds to Asia’s confusion with the retort ‘I spoke but as ye speak’ (*Prometheus Unbound*, II. iv. 112), the sentiment might also be voiced by the Phantom of Astarte, who represents less a reliable external presence than a device used by Byron to compound Manfred’s isolation.[[264]](#footnote-264) Byron lays Astarte as a trap for Manfred and the audience alike. To trust to her character as offering a truth that shapes either Manfred’s quest or the interpretative efforts of the audience would be to duplicate Manfred’s error when he relies on Astarte’s forgiveness as that which will afford him salvation. In doing so Manfred trusts to an ‘external set of values’,[[265]](#footnote-265) claiming to ‘live but in the sound’ of Astarte’s voice (II. iv. 151), but the scene, like the play as a whole, implies the fallacy of such an approach. That Manfred seeks salvation from outside himself in an exchange so devoid of meaningful content reaffirms the terms that govern the play; Manfred can rely on no-one other than himself for the terms that shape his existence. Far from facilitating Manfred’s quest by granting him the forgiveness he craves, the Phantom of Astarte shows Byron again throwing Manfred back onto his own resources.

Though Garber writes that Manfred’s inability to will Astarte into life in act two prompts events of the play’s final act, with Manfred opting to ‘join Astarte in the descent into nothingness’,[[266]](#footnote-266) this reading is challenged by Manfred’s failure to mention Astarte at any point in act three. The omission leaves open the possibility that Manfred has once again refined his goals, opting for suicide not as a means to a predetermined end but as a way of appearing to wrench back control of his own destiny. Yet it is typical of *Manfred* that this inference is never wholly sanctioned by the poet as the ‘correct’ reading of the play. The complexity of the drama lies in Byron’s even-handed approach to conflict, continuing to partially shield his protagonist against such interrogation while laying bare the flip-flopping that characterises Manfred’s agenda. The play’s final scene, more so than any in the drama, foregrounds the power of the monological even as it creates cracks in its own monodramatic veneer. That the writing retains its impartiality in approaching this contradiction is crucial, such that McGann misses the mark in stating that *Manfred* ‘can only succeed by attacking itself, satirising and exposing itself to itself’.[[267]](#footnote-267) Emily Bernhard Jackson writes along similar lines in declaring that *Manfred* ‘is something of a hybrid text, its extravagant bombast and glower begging its own debunking’.[[268]](#footnote-268) Both accounts risk downplaying the way that Byron subtly steers us away from readings that either assent to or undercut Manfred’s questing credentials. While Bernhard Jackson follows Terence Hoagwood in seeing the play as forwarding a case for the instability of all knowledge,[[269]](#footnote-269) creating a myriad of interpretative possibilities such that ‘the reader must supply all the meaning’,[[270]](#footnote-270) any sense of the play inviting the audience to freely determine its own interpretation of Manfred’s quest is difficult to sustain.

Manfred’s encounter with the Abbot foregrounds a tension between the two characters that is of broader significance than Manfred’s obvious scepticism towards the Abbot’s invocation of religious doctrine:

MAN. Thou know’st me not;

My days are numbered, and my deeds recorded:

Retire, or ’twill be dangerous—Away!’

ABBOT. Thou dost not mean to menace me?

MAN. Not I;

I simply tell thee peril is at hand,

And would preserve thee.

ABBOT. What dost mean?

MAN. Look there!

What dost thou see?

ABBOT. Nothing.

(III. iv. 53-59)

The opening claim, ‘thou know’st me not’, is typical of Manfred’s rhetoric. The more this monodramatically-inflected work pushes Manfred to the fore, exposing the audience to his motives and desires, the more Manfred insists on the impossibility of understanding his condition. This friction seems similarly evident in the questions between Manfred and the Abbot, where the Abbot’s queries ‘Thou dost not mean’ and ‘What dost mean?’ result only in further, contrasting questions on the part of Manfred. Hoagwood’s claim that this desire for meaning denotes the Abbot as ‘stand-in for the metaphysical certainties of the orthodox in Manfred’s culture’ seems unsatisfactory,[[271]](#footnote-271) as does his argument that the Abbot reinforces broader Byronic concerns regarding ‘the unanswerable nature of larger questions, indicating too that the problem of undecidability is conditioned by relativity of the human subjects who pose and consider it’.[[272]](#footnote-272) These notions of relativity resonate with Byron’s examination of Manfred’s strained relationship with any ‘external and relative set of values’,[[273]](#footnote-273) but also risk smoothing out the ambivalences that constitute the play. With quick-fire questions spotlighting the divide between contrasting perspectives, the scene does not so much hover complacently in relativism as swing uneasily from vantage point to vantage point. The tensions of the exchange seem related to issues of genre; in having the Abbot’s wish for meaning rub up against Manfred’s imploring of the Abbot to see things the way he sees them, the exchange is suggestive of the pressures that monodrama as a genre places on the audience, forcing them to consider the extent to which they too see as the play’s protagonist sees.

As the exchange continues, however, Byron also proposes a potential route out of this impasse:

MAN. Look there, I say,

And steadfastly;—now tell me what thou seest?  
ABBOT. That which should shake me,—but I fear it not—

I see a dusk and awful figure rise

Like an infernal god from out the earth;

(III. iv. 59-63)

Crucially, the exchange marks the first occasion in the play where a stage direction is not used to signify the entrance of a spirit. The effect is to momentarily obscure the presence of the spirit for readers and audiences alike, making them complicit in the Abbot’s inability to see. The narrative consequently becomes suspended in fragmentary questions reminiscent of the exchange between Astarte and Manfred, only proceeding forwards when the Abbot perceives what Manfred points out to him. Unlike the earlier scene, however, which strayed close to monologue, dialogue does have some efficacy here. Though act three shows the Abbot and Manfred unable to reconcile their conflicting world views, with the Abbot refusing to sanction Manfred’s desire to commit suicide and Manfred resisting the Abbot’s offering of ‘penitence and pity’ (III. i. 50), this exchange works towards a more productive understanding between apparently opposing perspectives. The lines revise the closet scene from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, but where Gertrude, unable to see the ghost of Hamlet’s father, claims to gaze on ‘nothing but ourselves’ (*Hamlet*, III. iv. 124),[[274]](#footnote-274) the Abbot confirms Manfred’s vision. This process by which the Abbot gradually begins to see as Manfred sees resonates with the interpretative efforts of the audience, with the Abbot acting as their stand-in. When the Abbot comments ‘I’ll follow him—but cautiously, though surely’ (III. i. 171), his remarks reflect the balance of caution and co-operation Byron demands of the audience in their own interpretation of Manfred.

Such a scene implies that *Manfred* should not be read as akin to the kind of dramatic monologue voiced by an unreliable narrator, one where interpretation is contingent on the dissenting reader reconstructing truth from the inconsistencies in the speaker’s perspective. Instead, in a work that often veers close to monodrama, Byron does affirm the value of a kind of dialogue, with this revised closet scene suggesting that the most productive approach to the play’s ambiguities is co-operation, or at least to consider Manfred’s perspective on its own terms. Yet at the same time Byron never unequivocally commits to Manfred’s singular perspective, refusing to grant his protagonist the privileges of monological dominance. Even with the Abbot coming to see as Manfred sees, the drama retains an open-endedness that complicates any understanding of Manfred’s condition, and the role of the Abbot reflects Byron’s commitment to the play of contrasting values. Critiqued and ridiculed as a corrupt member of the church in Byron’s original draft,[[275]](#footnote-275) the Abbot of the play’s final version is granted a far greater degree of respect and stature. The move suggests Byron’s realisation of the value of the Abbot’s counterarguments, which serve to temper the dominance of Manfred’s voice even as they are made to stop short of discrediting his stance.

In that respect, to take Manfred on his own terms throughout the final act would be to downplay Byron’s emphasis on the difficulties of ever fully seeing through the protagonist’s eyes, with the climax of the play offering numerous hints that Manfred’s victory is not as total as he declares. In a continuation of the questioning from the previously quoted exchange, the Abbot, having identified the ‘awful figure’ (III. iv. 62), asks Manfred ‘What doth he here?’ (III. iv. 71). Manfred’s response is telling: ‘Why—ay—what doth he here? / I did not send for him,—he is unbidden’ (III. iv. 71-2). Two characters previously embroiled in the stalemate of their contrasting enquiries now mimic the precise terms of each other’s questioning, and the affinity complicates Manfred’s sense of himself as possessing an elevated subjectivity that, as he tells the Chamois Hunter, is ‘not of thine order’ (II. i. 38). Previously the play has rendered Manfred’s relationship with the spirits ambiguous albeit tentatively suggestive of a degree of strength, with Manfred sufficiently empowered to summon the spirits but not to make them conduct his bidding. Yet here the ‘unbidden’ spirit is, in his own words, ‘the genius of this mortal’ (III. iv. 81). Even when Manfred seems to vanquish his foes, exclaiming ‘Back, ye baffled fiends! / The hand of death is upon me—but not yours!’ (III. iv. 140-41), an earlier concession reveals the grip of death already upon him prior to the departure of the spirits: ‘I do defy ye,—though I feel my soul / Is ebbing from me, yet I do defy ye’ (III. iv. 99-100). The lines raise the possibility that the spirits withdraw with their task already complete, undermining Manfred’s later characterisation of himself as his ‘own destroyer’ (III. iv. 139). With each example exposing a growing chasm between Manfred’s words and his actions, the play forces the audience to consider whether Manfred is deliberately fooling himself as Nemesis suggests when, having seen Manfred fail to will Astarte into life, he declares ‘Mortal! thy quest is vain, / And we are baffled also’ (II. iv. 116-17).[[276]](#footnote-276)

Yet to commit wholeheartedly to Manfred as either an autonomous self-destroyer or self-deceiving ‘dupe’ (III. iv. 138) would be to commit the inverse error of an overstatedly relativist reading that sees the play as destabilising all claims to knowledge. Byron’s manipulation of genre ensures that the play remains shot through with ambivalence; the depiction of Manfred as a would-be monodramatic subject exposes the audience to claims to which it remains difficult to assent but also hard to dismiss out of hand. For Elfenbein, Manfred ‘cannot be taken at his word’;[[277]](#footnote-277) yet the play’s genre, and the primacy it affords its protagonist, poses the prospect that Manfred cannot not be taken at his word, given the absence of anyone capable of definitively negating Manfred’s stance. Having trained audiences to be alert to the changeability and vulnerability that lies behind Manfred’s haughty defiance, Byron also ensures that Manfred’s rhetoric avoids any shallow sense of falsity:

The mind which is immortal makes itself

Requital for its good or evil thoughts—

Is its own origin of ill and end—

And its own place and time—

[…]

*Thou* didst not tempt me, and thou couldst not tempt me;

I have not been thy dupe, nor am thy prey—

But was my own destroyer, and will be

My own hereafter.

(III. iv. 129-140)

If the mind was previously not enough for Manfred, given his efforts to unite with Astarte, any renouncement of Manfred’s logic is impossible to sustain given the terms of the play. Neither do the lines simply act as ‘Byron’s epistemological manifesto, one that gifts the perceiver, rather than the perceived, with power in the scene of knowing’.[[278]](#footnote-278) ‘The mind which is immortal makes itself / Requital for its good or evil thoughts—/ Is its own origin of ill and end—’: Byron’s syntax disrupts any air of a straightforward manifesto. On first reading ‘makes itself’ seems intransitive, so that the opening line appears to instil the mind with the power to will its own immortality, as if to state that ‘the mind which is immortal makes itself’. If grammatical intransitivity momentarily seems indicative of existential self-sufficiency, this prospect is snatched away when the run-on syntax introduces the object, ‘requital’, so that syntax puts the very possibility of self-sufficiency on trial. Byron implicitly acknowledges that to be self-sufficient is not to exist in a total vacuum, free of all accountability or external influence. In keeping with the poem’s tendency to present monologue and dialogue rubbing up against one another, Manfred claims independence even as he uses language indebted to literary predecessors. Sounding behind the lines is the chiastic phrasing of Milton’s Satan, ‘The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven’ (*Paradise Lost*, I. 254-55)[[279]](#footnote-279), and this commitment to intertextual dialogue prevents Manfred’s assertion from spiralling into an imprisoning myopia. Byron’s intended effect is less to undercut Manfred’s stance than to suggest the inevitability of external values always coming to bear on Manfred’s perspective. But by implying that Manfred’s belief in his own rhetoric grants his words a kind of authenticity, Byron ultimately sidesteps any characterisation of him as a ‘dupe’, even as he leaves in play the possibility that Manfred’s is a truth applicable only to himself.

What Manfred aspires to as a quester is the monological autonomy fundamental to lyric poetry, ‘the sense that [his] words have shaped themselves into a self-sufficient discourse’.[[280]](#footnote-280) But if *Manfred* is a work that toys with the idea of being a monodrama, a play ‘in which only one character speaks’,[[281]](#footnote-281) it is also one that affirms the value of engaging in dialogue with alternative voices, true to its subtitle as a ‘Dramatic Poem’. By placing the audience in such proximity to Manfred’s values but never quite delivering the monodramatic work that he appears to offer, Byron invites and challenges audience enquiry in the same instance. Though this imbues the play with a degree of open-endedness, Byron never allows the audience to dismiss or invalidate Manfred’s credentials as quester through a reductively relativist reading. Instead, the play focuses on a beleaguered consciousness that is never fully watertight but always manages to stay afloat, with Byron reiterating Manfred’s centrality through a manipulation of stage directions throughout the final scene. Where the omission of a stage direction previously aligned readers with the unseeing Abbot, Manfred’s final command to the spirits, ‘Back ye baffled fiends!’ (III. iv. 140), is followed by a stage direction that transforms the figures, previously introduced as ‘Other Spirits’ (III. iv. 92), into ‘Demons’: ‘The Demons disappear’ (III. iv. 142). Manfred’s opposition to the spirits seems to seep even into the apparently objective realm of the play’s machinery. The effect bespeaks Byron’s desire to stay in touch with the power of the monological and its ability to dictate the terms of the drama, subtly aligning the audience with the besieged perspective of the protagonist. But the play’s insistence on questioning its own singularity confirms an equal alertness to the dangers of any heavy-handed approach to genre that might blindly depict Manfred’s rhetoric and actuality as one. By depicting the relationship between rhetoric and achievement as one of knotty intertwinement rather than rigid bifurcation, the play uses genre to spotlight the power of Manfred’s rhetoric even as it prohibits him from achieving any straightforward questing success.

**II.**

Though Samuel Chew contends that ‘the chief of many objections to *The Deformed Transformed* is that it lacks a definite plan’,[[282]](#footnote-282) this chapter will argue that Byron’s final play is a mature work that shows the crystallisation of the impulse to disrupt quest established in *Manfred*. Yet the play also stands apart from Byron’s previous work. While Bloom suggests that the Romantics produce an ‘internalized’ quest-romance in which ‘the hero of internalized quest is the poet himself [and] the antagonists of quest are everything in the self that blocks imaginative work’,[[283]](#footnote-283) *The Deformed Transformed* offers a comparatively externalised and empiricist account of quest, depicting a range of characters engaged in contrasting struggles to achieve something tangible. G. Wilson Knight reads *The Deformed Transformed* in the context of what he calls ‘Byron’s “Richard” complex’,[[284]](#footnote-284) comparing the disfigured Arnold to Shakespeare’s portrayal of Richard III. But the play’s exploration of the gap between rhetoric and achievement more closely aligns it with *Richard II* and this earlier play’s interest in the split between words and deeds,[[285]](#footnote-285) typified by the contrast between the perpetually soliloquising Richard and the zeal of Henry Bolingbroke, who claims that ‘what my tongue speaks my right-drawn sword may prove’ (*Richard II*, I. i. 49). Though Byron laments ‘the inadequacy of [man’s] state to his Conceptions’,[[286]](#footnote-286) in *The Deformed Transformed* even man’s conceptions are muddled, with quest presented as something that cannot always be convincingly conceived of, let alone adequately fulfilled. Shifting from the singular, near-monodramatic focalisation of *Manfred*, an abundance of foiled quests and frustrated questers deliberately muddies the waters of Byron’s final play, furthering *Manfred*’s efforts to produce an ambiguous brand of quest. The drama tempts audiences to assent to Bloom’s sense that the progression of Byron’s career suggests an ‘increasingly ironic’ approach to quest,[[287]](#footnote-287) but constantly disrupts any possibility of an unambiguous interpretation.

While Rosemarie Garland Thomson, amongst others,[[288]](#footnote-288) focuses on Arnold in reading *The Deformed Transformed* as ‘Byron’s only aesthetically rendered comment on [his] disability’,[[289]](#footnote-289) this chapter will argue that Arnold functions as a means of disrupting quest rather than as a vessel for thinly veiled self-portraiture.[[290]](#footnote-290) In Arnold, Byron presents a protagonist whose commitment to quest, though genuine, is devoid of direction and resolve. Bemoaning the fact that he is ‘not made like other creatures’ (I. i. 36),[[291]](#footnote-291) Arnold’s opening soliloquy reveals his desire to commit suicide to escape the ‘hunchback’ (I. i. 1) body he despises:

…Must I bleed too

Like them? Oh that each drop which falls to earth

Would rise a snake to sting them, as they have stung me!

Or that the devil, to whom they liken me,

Would aid his likeness! If I must partake

His form, why not his power? Is it because

I have not his will too?

(I. i. 37-43)

Indiscriminately taking aim at the self and the world around it, Arnold’s lament is impassioned but pitiable. Initially proclaiming his desire to ‘sting’ all other living creatures, Arnold then deplores his lack of devilish power before ruing the absence of his mother’s love (I. i. 43-45). The passage’s flurry of rhetorical questions gives the impression of a character desperate to alleviate his suffering but unable to determine an appropriate way out. Arnold’s invocation of the devil, the figure ‘to whom they liken me’, proves grimly prophetic. His frustration at the split between the devil’s ‘form’ and the devil’s ‘power’, the former of which Arnold possesses and the latter he lacks, confirms his awareness of the dichotomy later presented by the Stranger, who, when unveiling the various forms that Arnold may assume, states ‘I can promise you his form; his fame / Must be long sought and fought for’ (I. i. 193-94). In lamenting this apparently irreconcilable division, Arnold displays a self-awareness that condemns, rather than redeems, his character. With the play foregoing any arc of self-discovery, the rhetorical question ‘Is it because I have not his will too?’ reveals Arnold’s consciousness of perhaps his most significant flaw, as well as his fundamental difference from the self-destructively wilful Manfred, as early as the play’s opening soliloquy. Arnold lacks willpower and knows it, and the audience’s empathy for the character is tempered by watching him stumble through a quest that he lacks the strength to direct or control. Michael Cooke’s reading of ‘Prometheus’ foregrounds the importance of the will to the Byronic hero, stressing how ‘the Titan’s immortal nature and condition constitute a “symbol” or model for man, whereby he can recognise the only way possible for coping, namely, by invincible defiance’.[[292]](#footnote-292) Arnold is unable to follow this model; if will and strength of character form the basis of all efforts to transcend the turmoil of human existence,[[293]](#footnote-293) Arnold lacks even the prerequisites required to be a quester.

Byron spotlights Arnold’s shortcomings in the second half of his soliloquy:

[ARNOLD *goes to a spring and stoops to wash his hand:*

*he starts back*

They are right; and Nature’s mirror shows me

What she hath made me. I will not look on it

Again, and scarce dare think on’t. Hideous wretch

That I am! The very waters mock me with

My horrid shadow—like a demon placed

Deep in the fountain to scare back the cattle

From drinking therein.

[*He pauses*

And shall I live on,

A burthen to the earth, myself, and shame

Unto what brought me into life?

(I. i. 46-54)

‘And shall I live on?’ recalls *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*’s description of the heart that ‘will break, yet brokenly live on’ (III. 32: 297). Yet the way that *The Deformed Transformed* recasts the stoic affirmation of the earlier poem as an unanswered question fraught with self-doubt reiterates the sense that in Byron’s final play, resources once available to the Byronic hero have been lost. Arnold’s resentment of ‘Nature’s mirror’ that ‘shows me / What she hath made me’ continues this echoing in its reminiscence of the ‘broken mirror, which the glass / In every fragment multiplies; and makes / A thousand images of one that was’ (*CHP* III. 33: 289-91). If the fracturing of the self is, in *Childe Harold*, an opportunity for regeneration, in *The Deformed Transformed* Arnold’s stasis offers only a futile reminder of the ‘hideous wretch / That I am’, prompting his drive towards self-destruction. Though Roderick Beaton reads *The Deformed Transformed* as ‘Byron’s fantasy of exchanging his own identity (the composite made up of Arnold and the Stranger/Devil), not quite for that of Shelley, but rather, for the embodiment of the Shelleyan ideal’,[[294]](#footnote-294) the above passage suggests that the play parades Arnold’s inability to match up to Byronic ideals of self-transformation, rather than Byron’s inability to match up to the ideals of Shelley. Flickers of previous Byronic rhetoric lay the quests of Byron’s previous speakers before Arnold as potential ways out of torment, but these are routes his directionless protagonist is unable to follow.

If suicide is Arnold’s goal at the opening of the poem, it is one that does not come to fruition. This owes as much to an absence of will as to the arrival of the Stranger, as the Stranger points out when Arnold accuses him of interrupting him:

STRANGER. What is that resolution which can e’er

Be interrupted? If I be the devil

You deem, a single moment would have made you

Mine, and for ever, by your suicide;

And yet my coming saves you.

ARNOLD. I said not

You *were* the demon, but that your approach

Was like one.

(I. i. 89-95)

Consciously prolonging the interruption despite the injunction to ‘pursue / Your purpose’ (I. i. 87-88), Arnold’s willingness to be in thrall to the Stranger, even as the Stranger denies that he is the devil, lends the interaction a strangely muted quality. Suicidal urges are less overcome or averted than nonchalantly tossed aside, and as Arnold’s lack of commitment to his chosen course prevents his death, it allows the Stranger to teasingly name himself as Arnold’s saviour. Reminiscent of how Manfred, when engrossed in soliloquy, was unwillingly rescued by the Chamois Hunter before he could leap from the Jungfrau (*Manfred*, I. ii. 56-125), the Stranger’s words cast himself and Arnold as players in an emptied out parody of this rescue scene.

The impression of Arnold dimly echoing Manfred’s resolve is confounded in the pact between Arnold and the Stranger, where the former opts to abandon his physical form:

STRANGER. An hour ago you would have given your soul

To look like other men, and now you pause

To wear the form of heroes.

ARNOLD. No; I will not.

I must not compromise my soul.

STRANGER. What soul,

Worth naming so, would dwell in such a carcase?

ARNOLD. ’Tis an aspiring one, whate’er the tenement

In which it is mislodged. But name your compact:

Must it be signed in blood?

STRANGER. Not in your own.

ARNOLD. Whose blood then?

STRANGER. We will talk of that hereafter.

But I’ll be moderate with you, for I see

Great things within you. You shall have no bond

But your own will, no contract save your deeds.

Are you content?

ARNOLD. I take thee at thy word.

(I. i. 140-53)

Arnold’s desire to merely ‘wear the form of heroes’ betrays a reliance on hollow theatrics that increases as the play progresses, suggesting a vanity confirmed by his later rejection of Julius Cæsar’s form on the grounds that ‘the Phantom’s bald; myquest is beauty’ (I. i. 190). It also reveals Arnold’s failure to heed his previous sense of the disjunction between assuming another’s ‘form’ and assuming another’s ‘power’ (I. i. 42). Yet the notion of ‘wear[ing] the form of heroes’ is attributed to Arnold by the Stranger rather than voiced by Arnold himself, and its echo of Manfred’s bemoaned existence as ‘a stranger; though I wore the form’ of ‘breathing flesh’ (*Manfred*, II. ii. 56-7) again shows the Stranger casting Arnold as a protagonist in Manfred’s mould while remaining fully aware of Arnold’s inadequacy. As he proclaims that Arnold shall have ‘no bond / But your own will, no contract save your deeds’, slyly articulating the mantra by which Manfred aimed to live and die, the Stranger relishes the ill-fitting quality of this characterisation. Arnold’s inability to assume the directorial control embodied by Manfred is clear. His assertion that ‘I must not compromise my soul’ attempts to drum up surety but displays an anxiety conspicuously absent from his previous attempt to commit suicide, as this pretence of moralising only half-heartedly opposes the Stranger’s offer. As Arnold’s vapid responses tamely cede argumentative ground to his adversary, Byron presents a Mephistophelean figure that need not deploy his full powers of persuasion since purpose is, as the Stranger is all too aware, exactly that which Arnold lacks. Anne Barton emphasises the Stranger’s equivocation concerning his own devilish identity,[[295]](#footnote-295) but Arnold’s need for the Stranger’s supernatural intervention prompts him to ignore any such doubt. Lacking a quest of his own to embark on, such is Arnold’s dearth of direction that it is he, rather than the Stranger, that instigates a typical Mephistophelean arrangement, questioning the conditions of his choice and whether a blood pact is required.[[296]](#footnote-296) These suggestions are casually dismissed by the Stranger, who, rather than initiating any contract, seems content to let Arnold steer himself into error.[[297]](#footnote-297)

The most significant of these errors is evident in Arnold’s declaration to the Stranger that ‘I take thee at thy word’ (I. i. 153). The line cuts to the heart of the play’s interest in the disparity between rhetoric and achievement, with Arnold voicing the fallacy that comes to define his shortcomings as the play’s protagonist. The response is strange in its terse sidestepping of the Stranger’s question and its feigned worldliness, both of which make it difficult to determine Arnold’s tone. The audience is left with the impression that something remains unsaid in what is an oddly empty response to a flimsy proposition. As the Stranger casually fends off any further discussion of the terms of his contract, telling Arnold ‘we will talk of that hereafter’ (I. i. 148), the line makes it clear that the word of the Stranger defers if not entirely disguises the truth of the matter. With the Stranger making little effort to conceal the fact that his words do not contain any convincing truths, Byron places the thinness of the proposed agreement centre stage. Yet Arnold refuses to conduct the interrogation that the Stranger’s dubious overtures demand. Knowingly lacking the willpower required of an aspiring quester, Arnold’s decision to place absolute faith in the authority and the incorruptibility of the Stranger’s word seems the product of a willed ignorance. This reification of the word as truth recalls Byron’s disdain for the canting that enraged him throughout his career,[[298]](#footnote-298) sowing the seeds for the reliance on a hollow rhetoric of quest that marks Arnold’s character throughout the remainder of the play.

Gleefully recognising Arnold’s failings, the Stranger spotlights these shortcomings in denouncing Arnold as an undistinguished hero. Initially, Arnold cites his deformity as that which makes him remarkable compared to other men, declaring:

Deformity is daring.

It is its essence to o’ertake mankind

By heart and soul, and make itself the equal—

Aye, the superior of the rest.

(I. i. 313-16)

Despite his loathing of his form, Arnold believes this will facilitate the goals of his ‘mislodged’ soul (I. i. 146) by affording him the ability and the motivation ‘to become / All that the others cannot’ (I. i. 317-18). Yet the play twists Arnold’s words and turns this claim against him. *The Deformed Transformed* centres not on the protagonist’s successful quest to become what others cannot, but on his flailing attempt to embody the rhetoric of quest and become the kind of quester that he lacks the power to be. Though Peter Manning identifies Arnold’s distinction from Manfred, he argues that Arnold’s unlikeness testifies to the poet’s newfound ability ‘to face his audience without the obfuscating and self-aggrandising postures of the oriental tales, *Manfred*, and *Childe Harold*’.[[299]](#footnote-299) Byron does not entirely strip Arnold of such postures; rather, by having him gesture towards these guises but ultimately fall short, the poet stresses Arnold’s inability to match up to the feats of previous questers.

Where the intensity of the focalisation in *Manfred* affords the play’s protagonist with a sense of ‘impregnable loftiness’,[[300]](#footnote-300) introducing values other than those of Manfred but preventing them from taking precedence in the drama, *The Deformed Transformed* offers numerous alternative images of the quester. If Arnold’s words read as a vacuous recasting of Manfred’s rhetoric, the Bourbon’s preparation for the sack of Rome more convincingly evokes the potential grandeur of quest:

BOURBON. …were those hoary walls

Mountains, and those who guard them like the Gods

Of the old fables, I would trust my Titans;—

But now—

PHILIBERT. They are but men who war with mortals.

BOURBON. True: but those walls have girded in great ages,

And sent forth, mighty spirits. The past earth

And present Phantom of imperious Rome

Are peopled with those warriors; and methinks

They flit along the eternal city’s rampart,

And stretch their glorious, gory, shadowy hands,

And beckon me away!

PHILIBERT. So let them! Wilt thou

Turn back from shadowy menaces of shadows?

BOURBON. They do not menace me. I could have faced,

Methinks, a Sylla’s menace; but they clasp

And raise, and wring their dim and deathlike hands,

And with their thin aspen faces and fixed eyes

Fascinate mine. Look there!

PHILIBERT. I look upon

A lofty battlement.

BOURBON. And there!

PHILIBERT. Not even

A guard in sight; they wisely keep below,

Sheltered by the grey parapet, from some

Stray bullet of our lansquenets, who might

Practise in the cool twilight.

BOURBON. You are blind.

PHILIBERT. If seeing nothing more than may be seen

Be so.

(I. ii. 184-207)

Byron teases out the Bourbon’s difference from Arnold, with the latter lacking not just the strength of will but also the resourcefulness to conceive of quest, by restaging the procession of phantoms seen in the play’s opening scene. While Arnold relied on the Stranger to conjure up the phantoms of Julius Cæsar, Alcibiades, Socrates and others in order to instigate self-transformation, the Bourbon populates the ramparts with the forms of his military precursors through the potency of his own imagination.[[301]](#footnote-301) In opening with the conditional ‘were those hoary walls / Mountains’, the Bourbon reveals his heightened appreciation of the world not as it is but as it might be, an appreciation shared by no other character in *The Deformed Transformed*. His ability to conceive of an alternative reality and desire to achieve it stands in stark contrast to Arnold, who is unable to shape his own destiny, as well as the pragmatism of Philibert who, accused of being blind, replies ‘If seeing nothing more than may be seen / Be so’. Despite the wittiness of the retort, the audience is drawn into the Bourbon’s vision, sharing his feeling of being ‘beckon[ed] away’ as opposed to Philibert’s rationalism. The speech has a dazzlingly incantatory air, as the short vowel sounds of ‘wring’, ‘dim’, ‘thin’, and ‘fixed’ give way to the transfixing long vowel sounds of ‘fixed eyes / Fascinate mine’. The Bourbon’s oration compellingly testifies to his grandiose conception of war and his determination to follow his forbears. His defiant claim that ‘they do not menace me’ and refusal to turn away from the vision shows him incorporating the prospect of dying valiantly in action into his conception of the noble quest.

While Byron forwards the Bourbon’s military aspirations as the play’s foremost model of the idealised quest-narrative, he places equal emphasis on probing the gap between the Bourbon’s rhetoric and his achievements. Although Philibert shares the Bourbon’s sense that death is part of the ongoing journey for the aspiring self, remarking ‘In such an enterprise to die is rather / The dawn of an eternal day, than death’ (I. ii. 215-16), Cæsar’s entrance to the scene shows him poisoning the words of the mortals and exposing the vulnerability of man’s conceptions. Mockingly asking ‘And the mere men—do they too sweat beneath / The noon of this same ever-scorching glory? (I. ii. 217-18), he derails their envisioned quest by converting this ‘eternal day’ into an ‘ever-scorching’ inferno. By pointing out the alarming similarities between their conception of heaven and his image of hell, Cæsar stresses both the corruptibility of language and the ease with which the quest of the mortals might be steered off course. When the Bourbon is prematurely killed during the sack of Rome, Byron has the idealised rhetoric of quest jostle with a counter sense that his death represents the ultimate undercutting of quest-narrative:

[BOURBON *plants his ladder*, *and begins to mount*

Now, boys! On! on!

[*A shot strikes him, and BOURBON falls*

CÆSAR. And off!

ARNOLD. Eternal Powers!

The host will be appall’d. - But vengeance! vengeance!

BOURBON. ’Tis nothing - lend me your hand.

[*BOURBON takes ARNOLD by the hand, and rises; but as he puts his*

*foot on the step, falls again*

BOURBON. Arnold! I am sped.

Conceal my fall—all will go well—conceal it!

Fling my cloak o’er what will be dust anon;

Let not the soldiers see it.

ARNOLD. You must be

Removed; the aid of—

BOURBON. No, my gallant boy;

Death is upon me. But what is *one* life?

The Bourbon’s spirit shall command them still.

Keep them ignorant that I am clay,

Till they are conquerors—then do as you may.

(II. i. 126-36)

The passage offers conflicting meditations on the ability of language to transcend death. The usurpation of the Bourbon is foreshadowed when Arnold, a character possessing the mould but not the inherent qualities of the quester, drives on beyond his leader: ‘BOURBON. Hold, Arnold! I am first / ARNOLD. Not so, my Lord’ (II. i. 123). Although Arnold’s words and body present him as little more than a hollow carapace, he fares better than the play’s primary believer in quest, the Bourbon, who is fatally wounded and immediately falls. The urgency with which he compels Arnold to ‘conceal’ his damaged body, twice repeating the command, reveals the Bourbon as an oblique counterpart to the Arnold of act one who wishes to conceal the ‘dull, deadly, / Discouraging weight’ (I. i. 330-31) of his own physical form. For both characters, physical infirmity threatens to stymy their quests for something beyond their reach. However, where Arnold aims to discard his ‘hopeless’ (I. i. 344) shape in aid of personal advancement, the Bourbon hides his broken form so as not to demoralise his soldiers, demonstrating a regard for others that Arnold does not show. The Bourbon believes that concealing his broken form will allow his soul to transcend it, proclaiming that his power will continue through the everlasting potency of words: ‘the Bourbon’s spirit shall command them still’. Yet Byron places this sentiment under strain when the Bourbon declares ‘I’ll lead them still / In spirit. Cover up my dust, and breathe not / That I have ceased to breathe’ (II. i. 150-52), where the repetition of the verb ‘breathe’ entangles the lines in the dual senses of breathing as the act of living and breathing as the act of telling. If the Bourbon’s belief in his transcendence relies on a slippage between these notions, claiming he will live on through the power of his past oratory, Byron’s juxtaposition of the two also foregrounds the shortcomings of rhetoric by stressing the disjunction between the breath of words and the breath of physical vitality.

The futility of the Bourbon’s fall is heightened in his final instructions to Arnold. As he begs ‘keep them ignorant that I am clay, / Till they are conquerors—then do as you may’ (II. i. 135-36), the lines assume an air of finality by falling into the rhyming couplet of ‘clay’ and ‘may’. The neatness of the rhyme, appearing suddenly in a play dominated by blank verse, carries with it an air of artificiality. This sense of artifice, as well as the act of articulating a swift demise through rhyme, has a dark affinity with the final undercutting couplet that so often marks the *ottava rima* of *Don Juan*.[[302]](#footnote-302) The rhyme that marks the extinguishing of the Bourbon’s life reads as a high-stakes recasting of the device and as an all too forceful undercutting of idealism, one that lacks the jocular quality typically embedded into Byron’s *ottava rima* couplet. As Byron’s epic often uses the couplet to puncture the sentiments that come before it, here rhyme threatens to undercut the grandiose rhetoric of quest, with the turn to stylistic adornment in the Bourbon’s final moments pinpointing the futility of his heroic conceptions.

Cæsar’s climactic accusation of dishonour completes this destruction of quest:

CÆSAR. Would not your Highness choose to kiss the cross?

We have no priest here, but the hilt of a sword

May serve instead:—it did the same for a Bayard.

BOURBON. Thou bitter slave! to name *him* at this time!

But I deserve it.

(II. i. 137-41)

Contradicting Arnold’s previous characterisation of the Bourbon as a ‘goodly rebel’ (I. ii. 174), he taunts the dying general by reminding him that Bayard, previously his comrade, condemned the Bourbon’s decision to change allegiance and war against his fellow Frenchmen and Christians.[[303]](#footnote-303) As the Bourbon feebly concedes ‘But I deserve it’, the charge transforms him from noble quester in control of his own destiny to passive acceptor of his unworthiness, and the clash of registers is powerfully bathetic. As Peter Manning suggests,[[304]](#footnote-304) Cæsar’s inability to take the scene seriously also poses a problem for the audience. The pithiness of his ‘and off!’ (II. i. 26), which follows the Bourbon’s command ‘Now, boys! On! on!’ (II. i. 26), spotlights the dissatisfactory prematurity of the Bourbon’s death, while the theatricality of the remark is dramatically out of kilter with the passage’s heroic cadences, injecting the scene with a farcical undercurrent. Though the death of the Bourbon does not entirely undermine the valour of his previous rhetorical flight, the rapidity with which Byron cuts down this flight forcefully prohibits him from achieving his questing goals, despite his status as the play’s sole convincing model of questing aspiration.

Byron’s depiction of Olimpia offers an alternative perspective on the dichotomy of rhetoric and achievement. In a play dominated by quests, where almost every character seems to long for something other than their current lot, Olimpia is an unusual figure, one forced to respond to changes that are thrust upon her rather than instigate a quest of her own. The audience is granted no access to Olimpia prior to her entering the play in the midst of the sacking of Rome, and she is not afforded the soliloquies of Arnold or the Bourbon as a means of outlining her desires. Her abrupt entrance to the drama, fleeing pursuers and springing upon the altar, comes less with a sense of a quest beginning *in medias res* than the air of a character being ensnared in a narrative that is not her own. Threatened with the prospect of being reduced to a passive instrument of Arnold’s quest towards personal greatness, Olimpia’s only represented desire is to avoid living the life dictated to her by those who wish to conquer her person as well as her homeland. Consequently, though everyone bar Cæsar seems subject to aspiration in *The Deformed Transformed*, the initial sense of Olimpia is of a character that suffers as a result of the relentless ambition of others. If this seemingly constructs Olimpia in the mould of Byron’s earliest heroines, with Caroline Franklin describing the likes of Leila, Zuleika, Francesca, and Medora as ‘characterised chiefly by their passivity, sensibility, and tragic deaths’,[[305]](#footnote-305) Byron reject any such characterisation. Franklin writes of how ‘the function of such a heroine is to be, not do’,[[306]](#footnote-306) but Olimpia is no mere subject of the male gaze, representing a convincing though ambiguous model of achievement that, bar Cæsar, is conspicuously absent from the remainder of the play.[[307]](#footnote-307)

In emerging from the desolation of Rome as a staunch defender of both her morals and the remnants of her father’s house, Olimpia exhibits strength, defiance, and a steadfast refusal to yield. Confronted by a set of assailants, Olimpia vanquishes the first by casting down a crucifix upon him within eight lines of her entrance to the play. In such a decisive act of self-defence Olimpia is immediately put forth by Byron as a woman of action, rather than of words, and as a character free from the procrastination that so hinders Arnold in the play’s opening scenes. Arnold cites Olimpia’s bravery as a virtue that makes her his ideal partner, characterising her as ‘a woman / Worthy a brave man’s liking’ and dismissing the soldiers who pursue her with the rebuke ‘Were ye such, / Ye would have honoured her’ (II. iii. 78-80). Yet these words pinpoint how Arnold’s desire for Olimpia is motivated, in part, by his arrogantly conceived sense of self. Arnold sees in Olimpia what he wrongly considers himself to be and believes that a union with Olimpia will solidify the identity he himself craves, exemplifying that which Diane Long Hoeveler considers to be a consistent feature of Romanticism: ‘the Romantics cannibalistically consumed […] female characters, shaped them into ideal alter egos, and most of the time destroyed them by the conclusion of the poem’.[[308]](#footnote-308) Olimpia resists this impulse, refusing to accede to Arnold’s definition of her as damsel in distress and himself as vanquishing knight-errant:

ARNOLD [*to* OLIMPIA]. Lady! you are safe.

OLIMPIA. I should be so,

Had I a knife even; but it matters not—

Death hath a thousand gates; and on the marble,

Even at the altar foot, whence I look down

Upon destruction, shall my head be dashed,

Ere thou ascend it. God forgive thee, man!

ARNOLD. I wish to merit his forgiveness, and

Thine own, although I have not injured thee.

OLIMPIA. No! Thou hast only sacked my native land,—

No injury!—and made my father’s house

A den of thieves—No injury!—this temple—

Slippery with Roman and with holy gore.

No injury! And now thou wouldst preserve me,

To be—but that shall never be!

(II. iii. 104-118)

Later in the play Arnold laments how Olimpia ‘endures my love—not meets it’ (III. [Text of Fragment] 52) and complains that ‘I saved her life too—and her Father’s life—/ And her father’s house from ashes’ (III, [Text of Fragment] 56). However, Olimpia’s incisive summary of Arnold’s actions, punctuated by her incredulous cries of ‘no injury!’, cuts through his cant. If Cæsar is the only other character in the play that convincingly sees through Arnold’s questing pretences, Cæsar’s callous detachment from humanity and indifference to every character he meets undermines any sense of him as an astute interpreter; it is of little consequence to Cæsar what happens to those around him. Olimpia, on the contrary, makes a reasonable judgement of Arnold on the basis of his actions. This reveals her as the play’s most discerning character, and, in turn, as a potential model for the interpretative efforts of the audience. To Olimpia, Arnold is, as he is to Cæsar, no different to those who have destroyed her native land:

OLIMPIA. Spare thine already forfeit soul

A perjury for which even Hell would loathe thee.

I know thee.

ARNOLD. No, thou know’st me not; I am not

Of these men, though—

OLIMPIA. I judge thee by thy mates;

It is for God to judge thee as thou art.

I see thee purple with the blood of Rome;

Take mine, ’tis all thou e’er shalt have of me!

And here, upon the marble of this temple,

Where the baptismal font baptised me God’s,

I offer unto him a blood less holy

But not less pure (pure as it left me then,

A redeemed infant) than the holy water

The saints have sanctified!

[OLIMPIA *waves her hand to* ARNOLD *with disdain, and*

*dashes* *herself on the pavement from* *the Altar*

(II. iii. 119-31)

In choosing to die for her beliefs, Olimpia recalls the efforts of Arnold in the play’s opening scene, as well as the suicidal resolution of Manfred. Yet this ability to conceive of a line of action and swiftly act upon it distinguishes Olimpia’s character from any other in *The Deformed Transformed*, presenting rhetoric as a needless adornment to the tangible impact of physical action. By confessing her faith in God’s judgement and leaping from the altar Olimpia commits wholeheartedly to self-annihilation in a way that Arnold never could, all the while refusing the grandiose rhetoric of suicide that marks Manfred’s death. In this moment the play, which is so concerned with the hollowness of words and the physical form alike, cuts through any air of superficiality. If, for Cooke, ‘invincible defiance’ forms the qualification for Byron’s version of the successful quester,[[309]](#footnote-309) Olimpia comes closest to achieving this model of all the characters in *The Deformed Transformed*. Yet Byron disrupts any impulse to laud Olimpia for so efficiently achieving what she desires. That the drama’s most effective quest is one of self-destruction demonstrates *The Deformed Transformed*’stendency to skate on the brink of nihilism, as Byron rejects any straightforward image of achievement.

Despite committing suicide, Olimpia’s swift revival at the hands of Cæsar means she is only temporarily granted what she desires. Imke Heuer traces allusions to Roman and Greek mythology in the character of Olimpia, citing her similarities to Lucretia, Penthesilea, and Polyxena to conclude that this ‘point[s] at a major consequence of war and pillage: violence towards women’.[[310]](#footnote-310) But Byron’s insistence on Olimpia as a more active presence than her male counterparts means the disruption of her quest seems motivated less by issues of gender than by the play’s refusal to allow any quest to come to fruition. While her status as a model of action and conviction is met with morbid admiration from Cæsar, who remarks ‘she hath done it well; / That leap was serious’ (II. iii. 133-34), Olimpia is not immune from his compulsion to prevent the mortals of the play from achieving their goals:

CÆSAR. …Where shall we bear her?

I say she lives.

ARNOLD. And will she live?

CÆSAR. As much

As dust can.

ARNOLD. Then she is dead!

CÆSAR. Bah! bah! You are so,

And do not know it. She will come to life—

Such as you think so, such as you now are;

But we must work by human means.

(II. iii. 155-59)

It is typical of Cæsar’s tendency to counter quest that in appearing to meet the demands of one character he denies the desires of another; if reviving Olimpia satisfies Arnold, it also forces Olimpia, against her will, to live the life from which she longed to escape. As with the death of the Bourbon, Cæsar’s insistence on the theatricality of the scene confirms that to him the lives of the mortals are merely sport. Bewildering Arnold with riddles, Cæsar demonstrates his utter disregard for matters of life and death, declaring that all mortals are dead but ‘do not know it’ and that Olimpia will come to life ‘such as you are now’. The quick-fire exchange ‘I say she lives’ / ‘And will she live?’ is the farcical fallout of Arnold’s resolve to ‘take thee at thy word’ (I. i. 153), where Cæsar’s teasing ‘I say’ knowingly sets itself up as subjective opinion rather than objective fact. At this stage, it seems less significant to Arnold that Olimpia lives than that Cæsar says she lives, as Cæsar flaunts Arnold’s ludicrous over-reliance on his eminently untrustworthy word. In doing so he reduces the scene from tragedy to farce. If the stakes are dizzyingly high for each of the characters throughout *The Deformed Transformed*, this is definitively not the case for Cæsar, an individual who remains irrevocably separated from humanity and sneeringly looks down on ‘human means’.

In spite of this distance, Cæsar’s capacity to so consistently nullify quest makes him the most successful character in *The Deformed Transformed*. When the Bourbon complains to Arnold that ‘your / Slight crooked friend’s as snake-like in his words / As his deeds’ (I. ii. 236-38), he reveals Cæsar’s ability to efface the gap between rhetoric and achievement that stymies so many characters throughout the drama. That Cæsar is able to so easily deny each character what they desire serves to unsettle the audience, who, after witnessing the stifled quests of Arnold, the Bourbon, and Olimpia, are denied a single positive perspective in which they might believe. By painting Arnold as a dissatisfactory protagonist and allowing the Bourbon and Olimpia only brief appearances, Byron allows Cæsar, the play’s anti-questing voice, to emerge in this void and lay claim to authority. Though Elfenbein rightly suggests that Cæsar represents ‘Byron’s vehicle for gaining a perspective on the action that the other characters do not have’,[[311]](#footnote-311) Cæsar’s perspective is, at times, an unsatisfactory one. Though Cæsar’s disregard for the lives of Olimpia and the Bourbon demand that we oppose his views, Byron refuses to explicitly dismiss his stance. In presenting audiences with a surfeit of foiled quests and unsuccessful questers, *The Deformed Transformed* tempts readers to adopt Cæsar’s belief that quest is a futile exercise, seeming to substantiate Cæsar’s impassive view of human experience:

They are gone,

And others come: so flows the wave on wave

Of what these creatures call eternity,

Deeming themselves the breakers of the ocean,

While they are but the bubbles, ignorant

That foam is their foundation. So, another!

(II. iii. 52-57)

Cæsar’s tone is compelling and commanding, condemning the myopia of mortal man. Arnold’s earlier choice to ‘take thee at thy word’ (I. i. 153) resounds through the lines and is seen as symptomatic of a wider existential ignorance, as what mortals ‘call’ eternity and what they ‘deem’ themselves to be are dismissed as divorced from reality. As in Cæsar’s wry declaration that ‘I cannot find my hero; he is mixed / With the heroic crowd that now pursue / The fugitives’ (II. ii. 1-3), the lines blur crowd and hero into an indistinct mass, bringing the insignificance of human lives to the fore. For Cæsar, the living are merely the latest in line to wander inconsequentially through the grand span of eternity, despite the importance that they attribute to the quests that define their lives. Though dispiriting, the lines possess an aesthetic power that eclipses even the valiant imaginings of the Bourbon. Byron’s characterisation of Cæsar resonates with William Empson’s sense of Milton’s Satan who, for Empson, spoke all of the poem’s strongest lines.[[312]](#footnote-312) Byron’s imagery also recalls his address to the ocean at the climax of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* IV, where the poet describes how he ‘wantoned with thy breakers […] And trusted to thy billows far and near, / And laid my hand upon thy mane – as I do here’ (184: 1651-56). Aesthetic grandeur and an air of mastery are common to both poems. But read against Byron’s earlier productions, Cæsar’s words stand as a critique of the speaker of *Childe Harold* and the misguided belief that man might ever achieve such command over elemental forces. Unlike Arnold, whose rhetoric is shown to be the hollow words of an inadequate quester, and the Bourbon, whose dreams of military glory are exposed as a web of inaccessible idealisms, Cæsar’s voice seems to rise above all others in *The Deformed Transformed*, as if setting out to usurp the heights of Byron’s previous aesthetic successes.

The prospect of Byron’s audience being seduced by sin is compounded by the poet’s insistence on extinguishing any other source of rhetorical splendour. Even if audiences are able to resist the allure of Cæsar’s language, the play deliberately lacks any sustained alternative that might captivate them to the same extent, or any sustained dissenting voice.

This combination tests an audience’s resolve, nudging them towards even as they instinctively draw away from the nihilism of Cæsar’s vision. Daniel Watkins downplays the complexity of this movement when he argues for Cæsar’s status as a ‘satirical practical consciousness, remaining throughout essentially as a truth-representing force […] who offers […] commentary on the limited views that perpetuate strife and injustice’.[[313]](#footnote-313) Though Byron grants Cæsar the opportunity to stake his claim to be a ‘truth-representing force’, Cæsar’s position is not as stable as Watkins argues. Cæsar’s authority is tempered by Byron’s frequent undermining of Cæsar’s readings of events, even as the poet seems to afford them precedence over those of the play’s other characters. Cæsar’s ability to critique the ‘limited’ worldview of others is compromised by the fact that his perspective is limited in its own right, and in that regard, Bloom’s sense that Byron’s later writing produces an increasingly ‘ironic’ quest comes under strain.[[314]](#footnote-314) If the possibility of adopting Cæsar’s nihilism is dangled before the audience, Byron demands that we look beyond the excessive detachment of a worldview that is not and can never be akin to our own:

…And these are Men, forsooth!

Heroes and chiefs, the flower of Adam’s bastards!

This is the consequence of giving Matter

The power of Thought. It is a stubborn substance,

And thinks chaotically, as it acts,

Ever relapsing into its first elements.

Well! I must play with these poor puppets: ’tis

The Spirit’s pastime in his idler hours.

When I grow weary of it, I have business

Amongst the stars, which these poor creatures deem

Were made for them to look at.

(I. ii. 314-24)

Cæsar’s claim to have diagnosed the flaws of humanity is refuted by his inability to recognise the motives behind man’s actions. Witnessing endless struggle, Cæsar reads this as evidence of man’s tendency to think and act ‘chaotically’, showing no awareness of the aspiration towards questing that drives the characters of *The Deformed Transformed*. Yet Cæsar draws too cleanly the line between ‘the stars’ and the quotidian, and his sense that humanity believes the stars were merely ‘made for them to look at’ reveals his lack of understanding. The lines recall Byron’s description of Harold’s stargazing in *Childe Harold* III, stanza 14. There, the stanza’s clash between transcendental aspirations and the limitations of poetic form foregrounds a tension between freedom and constraint that pervades Byron’s depiction of quest,[[315]](#footnote-315) but Cæsar only recognises one side of this equation. Anne Barton argues that Cæsar’s ‘commentary on human ignorance and folly […] is that of the narrator of *Don Juan*’,[[316]](#footnote-316) and this proposed doubling recalls the remarks of Mary Shelley who, while copying the drama, tells Byron that ‘the Critics, as they used to make you a Childe Harold, Giaour, & Lara all in one, will now make a compound of Satan & Cæsar to form your prototype’.[[317]](#footnote-317) Yet the lines quoted from *The Deformed Transformed* deliberately show Cæsar at his least Byronic. In emphasising man’s limitation without appreciating the surge of human aspiration,[[318]](#footnote-318) Cæsar’s analysis betrays his inability to comprehend the complexities of the human condition. By inviting his audience to scrutinise these failings, Byron ensures that Cæsar’s nihilism, rather than offering any definitive perspective on events of the play, represents a further aspect of his effort to problematise quest and manipulate the responses of his audience.

Jane Stabler argues that Byron steers *The Deformed Transformed* towards the brink of nihilism, remarking that the play’s ‘multiple plot lines, doubling heroes and plots that become shadowed by alternative action […] debar the possibility of a single hero ever emerging’.[[319]](#footnote-319) Though the negativity of the play’s vision of failed quests and frustrated questers lends weight to Cæsar’s stance, the power of *The Deformed Transformed* lies not in its debarring of possibility but in the way it makes us long for something more. Byron creates in his audience the same longing that motivates his characters but, in declining the opportunity to explicitly reject Cæsar’s anti-quest rhetoric and by making him the play’s most successful character, he refuses to satisfy their demands. Regardless, if the singularity of *Manfred* means the play tentatively offers alternatives to its protagonist’s questing rhetoric but refuses to ever fully invalidate his claims to absolute autonomy, the abundance of quests in *The Deformed Transformed* offers a more flexible conception of quest to the audience, with this plenitude confirming that there will always be a way other than that of Cæsar.

**Part Two:** **‘Pavilioned upon chaos’: Purposeful Precariousness in the Shelleyan quest**

**CHAPTER THREE:**

**‘We will meet in vision’: Self, Other, and Quest in *Epipsychidion* and *Adonais***

*Epipsychidion* and *Adonais* investigate the relationship between the quester and the other, foregrounding the Shelleyan quest as one defined by risk-taking. As poems of ‘close imaginative rapport’,[[320]](#footnote-320) these worksunite in their mutual willingness to explore the extent to which quest represents ‘a going out of our own nature and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own’ (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 682). Shelley’s version of quest creates its drama out of seeming to exist on the brink of failure, as both poems remain alert to the possibility of an isolated and alienated questing self. When Simon Haines cites *Epipsychidion* and *Adonais* as examples of a Shelleyan ‘style of poetic thought’ in which ‘the self is not the agent of the thought […] but an object of the thought’,[[321]](#footnote-321) he offers a more overtly critical recasting of Harold Bloom’s suggestion that the Romantics privileged an ‘internalized’ quest-romance: ‘the quest is to widen consciousness as well as to intensify it, but the quest is shadowed by a spirit that tends to narrow consciousness to an acute preoccupation with self’.[[322]](#footnote-322) Rather than being ‘destructive of the social self’,[[323]](#footnote-323) however, *Epipsychidion* and *Adonais* consider and attempt to overcome the difficulties of reconciling the quester with others, battling against any conception of the quester as a solitary figure.[[324]](#footnote-324) In each case, Shelley’s ability to manipulate form and genre prove vital in depicting quests that hover between affirming the connection and the disconnection of self and other. *Epipsychidion* is a poem that strains to reconcile the poet’s desired romantic union between self and other with its respect for alterity, using the echoic structure of the rhyming couplet to reinforce a sense of doubleness that seems contrary to the poem’s goals. Refracting *Epipsychidion*’s emphasis on the centrality of self-other relations in quest through the generic paradigm of the elegy, *Adonais* considers the ways in which the reader of an elegy might be distanced by the elegist, more explicitly rebutting Bloom’s suggestion that the Romantic quest exists in the ‘arena of self-consciousness’ through its self-consciousness of the demands that the elegy places on its audience.[[325]](#footnote-325) The poem suggests, only to complicate and challenge, M. H. Abrams’s belief that in Romantic poetry, ‘the audience gradually receded into the background, giving place to the poet himself, and his own mental powers and emotional needs, as the predominant cause and even the end and test of art’.[[326]](#footnote-326) In both *Epipsychidion and Adonais*, the writing wins tension and complexity from the way Shelley presents quest as a drama of self and other even as he depicts voyages that seem constituted by and contingent on the individuality of the questing self.

**I.**

When Daniel J. Hughes argues that *Epipsychidion* ‘is more self-reflexive than referential; it is about itself, its attempt to become and its attempt to be’,[[327]](#footnote-327) he outlines a state that the poem knowingly approaches but also tries to keep at bay. *Epipsychidion* is a quest of the self, but it is also one that charts the self’s strained attempt to participate in ‘an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own’ (*A Defence*, p. 682). The poemcentres on the poet’s desire for the self and the other, like ‘two meteors of expanding flame’ (*Epipsychidion*, 576), to ‘become the same’ (577), ‘one / Spirit within two frames’ (573-74).[[328]](#footnote-328) The chief tension of the poem lies in the way that this effort to make two into one, to merge the poet’s self with Emily’s, co-exists alongside Shelley’s insistence on maintaining the independence and autonomy of the questing self, as well as the poetry’s respect for otherness, for ‘the glory of [Emily’s] being’ (91). Harold Bloom argues that ‘the poem violently alternates between the quest for relationship and the quest for destruction, a sweet, mystical annihilation. The two quests are antithetical: the first is rational and poetic; the second is less rational and attempts to destroy the poem’.[[329]](#footnote-329) Throughout the poem, however, destruction represents less something sought after than a possible result of the quest for relationship, as Shelley pursues unification while nursing the fear that merging two into one will result in the ‘annihilation’ (587) of both the self and the other with whom he seeks to unite. Consequently, *Epipsychidion* represents an attempt to expand the contours of the self through romantic union while ensuring that the self, as the agent of quest, and the other, as the object of quest and an individual in its own right, remain intact.

Shelley’s constantly shifting attempts to define such a union at times resembles a form of logic-chopping, a quality that lends the writing its sense of momentum and thrust, but also the precariousness that looms large throughout *Epipsychidion*. Drawing on Roland Barthes’s sense that romantic love is ‘a dust of figures stirring according to an unpredictable order’,[[330]](#footnote-330) an experience that the self must assign with a ‘settled course’ in order to recast these uncertainties as ‘a romance, an adventure’,[[331]](#footnote-331) as well as the deconstructionist accounts of Derrida and De Man,[[332]](#footnote-332) Angela Leighton describes *Epipsychidion* as a poem dominated by conflict, a work that possesses:

a doubleness which the poem everywhere betrays. Between idealism and history, love and life, feeling and fact, there is an awkward split, which seems to spoil the poem’s very courtly ideals. The work is, indeed, though not quite as Shelley intends it, a “centaur”.[[333]](#footnote-333)

Shelley’s quest to merge the self with the other within an inherently ‘split poem’ invites further discussion, as this paradoxical design appears to be a conscious artistic decision.[[334]](#footnote-334) Characteristic of *Epipsychidion* is its self-consciousness of both the impossibility and the danger of the poet’s desire for absolute unity, as if the quester of this ‘split poem’ is deliberately hindered by the vehicle in which he seeks to quest. Even as Shelley moves towards bridging the divide between self and other, *Epipsychidion* reveals itself as a poem of contraries that cannot and will not be dissolved, so that the poem’s quest contains the germ of its own defeat.

Central to this ‘doubleness’ is Shelley’s ability to manipulate poetic form.[[335]](#footnote-335) By mediating his quest to make two into one through a form that juxtaposes two echoic sounds, the heroic couplet, Shelley utilises a verse structure that is intricately related to the poetry’s thematic concerns. Since a rhyme is itself a ‘relational event’,[[336]](#footnote-336) deriving its meaning from the interplay of two sounds, the couplet functions as a vital tool in the poem’s efforts to define and redefine relationship. In *On Life* Shelley declares that ‘the words *I*, *you*, *they* are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind’ (*On Life*, p. 635-36). *Epipsychidion* tests these ideas through the formal apparatus of the couplet. Shelley often treats pairs of rhyming terms as if they too might be ‘marks employed to denote the different modifications of one mind’, but throughout the poem, rhyme shifts between representing a harmonious ‘one mind’, a ‘difference without discord’ (*Epipsychidion*, 144), and an insurmountable split. Michael O’Neill writes that the poem’s heavily enjambed open-couplets provide Shelley with ‘a default position for his longing for harmony; its very existence as sonic echo provides a provisional ballast after the intricacies of aspiration mimed [throughout the poem]’.[[337]](#footnote-337) That this ballast is only provisional is significant; *Epipsychidion*’s rhyming couplets simultaneously point up the potentiality of the form as a means of blending two entities and affirm the form’s limits, so that the couplet becomes a way of enacting a drive towards merging that will always fall short of being unequivocally achieved. With subtle variations in rhyme, including the use of half-rhyme, allowing the couplet to evoke connection and similarity as well as separation and difference at varying stages of the poem, the flexibility of Shelley’s rhyming affirms the extent to which the couplet is attuned to the poetry’s shifting conceptualisations of relationship.

In *Epipsychidion* the difficulty of conceiving of and sustaining unity comes to the fore, and the poetry gains its power from the way that Shelley scrutinises this ideal. The most striking example of this occurs in the couplet which concludes Shelley’s dreamt encounter with one ‘who seemed / As like the glorious shape which I had dreamed’ (277-78):

I stood, and felt the dawn of my long night

Was penetrating me with living light:

I knew it was the Vision veiled from me

So many years—that it was Emily.

(341-44)

Withheld until this point, though suggested by an earlier rhyme of ‘me’ and ‘thee’ (51-52), the rhyme of ‘me’ and ‘Emily’ stands out as one of the most significant in *Epipsychidion*. Though G. Wilson Knight does not elaborate upon his belief that the name Emily is ‘scarcely suitable’ for the poem,[[338]](#footnote-338) Bloom cites what he considers to be Shelley’s ‘hardly justified’ parallel of the work with Dante’s *Vita Nuova*: ‘Beatrice, as a name, has public, in this case Christian, meaning; Emily, as a name, has not’.[[339]](#footnote-339) However, while the Shelleys did refer to Teresa Viviani as ‘Emilia’,[[340]](#footnote-340) Shelley’s conversion of Teresa Viviani ‘from an actual person to a rhetorical personification’,[[341]](#footnote-341) ‘Emily’, seems to have been at least partially motivated by the name’s sonic affinities with the words ‘me’ and ‘thee’, with a later rhyme of ‘me’ and ‘melody’ (255-56) affirming Shelley’s alertness to the musical potential of the long ‘e’ vowel sound. Though Edward Bostetter insists that ‘the confusion between the real and the ideal Emily, which literalists are always accused of stirring up, existed quite simply in Shelley’s mind and was built into the poem’,[[342]](#footnote-342) the self-consciousness with which Shelley rhymes ‘me’ and ‘Emily’, and the way this crucial rhyme appears so belatedly in the poem, suggests that his use of the name is a technique designed to create tension rather than a product of confusion.

In the quoted lines, the writing’s emphasis on an act of unveiling affords the poetry a metapoetic, theatrical quality. As line 344’s caesura parades its suspenseful move towards the completion of the couplet, the initial iteration of ‘me’ seems to yearn for its rhyming partner immediately upon its introduction. If, for Ezra Pound, ‘a rhyme must have in it some slight element of surprise if it is to give pleasure’,[[343]](#footnote-343) the effect of this rhyme relies less on its capacity to surprise, given its anticipated and clearly forecasted arrival, than on the surprising sense of faltering that accompanies its introduction into the poem. The shift from the earlier pairing of ‘me’ with ‘thee’ (51-52) to the more specific ‘Emily’ subjects the rhyme with ‘me’ to an audible pressure, with this strain complicating the poem’s later declaration that ‘we shall become the same’ (573). Even as the sounds of ‘me’ and ‘Emily’ suggest synthesis, the metrical dissonance of pairing a stressed single monosyllable with a dactylic polysyllable makes the rhyme only a qualified success, so that the couplet recalls Leighton’s sense of *Epipsychidion* as a poem of ‘awkward split[s]’.[[344]](#footnote-344) The rhyme juxtaposes sounds that are alike but not quite ‘twins of the same Mother’ (45), and the couplet stops short of total unity even as it points towards the achievement of such a state. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi interprets the rhyme differently, noting the frequency with which the poem uses line-endings that rhyme with ‘Emily’ and declaring that ‘the chime between “me” and “Emily” closes the circle around “proper Paradise”, the *propre* or property of a fulfilled “mine and me”’.[[345]](#footnote-345) Yet the fact that the rhyme of ‘me’ and ‘Emily’ is so often suggested but appears on only one occasion in the poem, and that its ‘chime’ is only partial, implies that the couplet is instead Shelley’s means of conceding the impossibility of making two into one. The rhyme is a forcible attempt to overcome separation, but its failure to mesh cleanly flags up unity as an ideal that *Epipsychidion* must strive towards but may never wholly achieve.

*Epipsychidion*’s broader struggle to dissolve contraries comes to the fore in the following lines, which depict a poetic self thrown back upon its own resources amidst the difficulty of its desired quest:

Ah, woe is me!

What have I dared? where am I lifted? how

Shall I descend, and perish not? I know

That Love makes all things equal: I have heard

By my own heart this joyous truth averred:

The spirit of the worm beneath the sod,

In love and worship, blends itself with God.

(123-29)

The passage confirms *Epipsychidion*’s distinctness from Yeats’s notion of ‘character isolated by deed’ (W. B. Yeats, ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’, 29).[[346]](#footnote-346) Here, ‘deed’ is not just pushed to the background but completely obscured amidst a flurry of first person pronouns, forcibly bringing ‘character’ to the fore. Questions about the quest take precedence over the quest itself, or even seem to become the quest. Emily recedes from gaze amidst the impersonality of the reference to ‘love’, with the actions of the quester and the landscape in which he quests also concealed behind the quester’s desperate outcry. Read alongside Mark Sandy’s assertion that ‘self-introspection’ and ‘self-destruction’ are closely aligned throughout Shelley’s quest poetry,[[347]](#footnote-347) the danger of the lines becomes clear. With the first rhyme ‘me’ offset from its rhyming partner at the end of the previous verse paragraph, ‘anatomy’ (122), the effect is to depict a rhyme and in turn a self in isolation, a ‘me’ that is an ends unto itself. Yet the third line of the passage shows the poetry attempting to steady itself, outlining a commitment to ‘love’ as a means of transcending this isolation. The declaration that ‘Love makes all things equal’ (126) resonates with *On Love*’s emphasis on the reciprocity of love, where Shelley describes

the meeting with an understanding capable of clearly estimating our own, an imagination which should enter into and seize upon the subtle and delicate peculiarities which we have delighted to cherish and unfold in secret; […] this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends.

(*On Love*, p. 632)

Most significant is the final sentence, which posits this reciprocity as something love tends towards but perhaps never fully achieves, outlining the fundamental condition of *Epipsychidion*’s existence. If Shelley’s earlier, rejected draft of the poem’s ending was confident enough to declare that ‘how, why, or where, or when—it matters not’ (“Fragments”; “If day should part us—night will mend division”, 7),[[348]](#footnote-348) the opening three lines of the quoted passage reveal the difficulty of straining after an ‘invisible and unattainable point’, with the orienting principles of ‘what’, ‘where’, and ‘how’ unavailable to the quester. The poet’s only recourse is his belief that ‘Love makes all things equal’, which in this context acts less a suggestion of a democratic, un-hierarchical relationship than as an affirmation of a unified self and other. Even with this inference, however, the specifics of what it means to be ‘equal’ hang in the air as a ‘truth’ that needs to be unpicked. The passage scrutinises this ‘joyous truth’ as quickly as it affirms it, blending this quasi-philosophical observation on the nature of love, itself reminiscent of the insights of *On Love*, with a suggestion that knowledge is derived solely from subjective experience. The poet claims to ‘know’ that ‘Love makes all things equal’, but ‘I know’ points up the doubt it attempts to dismiss, and this certainty comes under pressure in the subsequent line’s claim to ‘have heard / By my own heart this joyous truth averred’. ‘Know[ing]’ slides into something close to hearsay, a form of speculation that derives from the ‘heart’, suggesting that this ‘joyous truth’ may be based less in objective reality than in the poet’s wishes and desires. That the rhyming partner of ‘know’ is ‘how’, a half-rhyme fraught with uncertainty, explicitly juxtaposes states of knowing and not knowing, tugging at the poet’s claims to ‘know’ the unifying potential of love. The final couplet, too, at once flags up the potential for disunity and works towards the merging of two entities. In emphasising the ability of the worm ‘beneath the sod’ to practice ‘love and worship’ and blend with ‘God’, the rhyme’s vertiginous movement between an earthly low and a heavenly high emphasises distance as much as it does connection. Even so, the experiential quality of the poetry means these couplets maintain a helter-skelter feel, one that captures the exhilarating, near intoxicating effect of this quasi-religious ‘lift[ing]’. If *Epipsychidion*’s quest to ‘make all things equal’ and dissolve the contraries of ‘me’ and ‘thee’ is an act of ‘straining after impossibilities’,[[349]](#footnote-349) proposed by William Hazlitt as the hallmark of Shelley’s style, there remains something rapturous about the poem’s attempt to ‘dare’.[[350]](#footnote-350)

‘I know / That Love makes all things equal’ (125-26) is a statement that raises more complications than it resolves, seeming to reveal the target of the poet’s questing but also exposing the problems of pursuing an ‘invisible and unattainable point’ (*On Love*, p. 632) that lacks any coherent definition or precedent. Despite the poem’s claims to ‘know’ the unifying potential of love, the strained couplet of ‘me’ and ‘Emily’ (343-44) is suggestive of the way that Shelley’s desired unification cannot easily be accommodated within existing structures of thought, whether the formal framework of the rhyming couplet or existing understandings of the relationship between self and other. The result is a sense of Shelley continually defining and redefining the specifics of what he quests after even as he embarks upon quest. This is evident in the address to Emily as ‘Spouse! Sister! Angel! Pilot of the Fate / Whose course has been so starless!’ (130-31), where Emily is transformed from a romantic partner into a blood relation, both of which posit her as an earth-bound individual of the familial and domestic sphere, then into an other-worldly ‘Angel’, and finally into an abstraction. The difficulty of defining the relationship ironically risks severing the connection between self and other by staging Emily’s drifting away from the earthly poet. In an early passage that marks Shelley’s first juxtaposition of ‘me’ and ‘thee’ in rhyme (51-52), the chiming of the matching masculine line-endings threatens to add a misleadingly clean-cut, almost Popean sheen to the ongoing struggle to define the connection between ‘me’ and ‘thee’:

Would we two had been twins of the same mother!

Or, that the name my heart lent to another

Could be a sister’s bond for her and thee,

Blending two beams of one eternity!

Yet were one lawful and the other true,

These names, though dear, could paint not, as is due,

How beyond refuge I am thine. Ah me!

I am not thine: I am a part of *thee*.

(45-52)

Though Paul Vatalaro claims that ‘Shelley defines his bond with Emily as incestuous’,[[351]](#footnote-351) the passage eschews any singular definition by virtue of its rapid cycling through possibilities as well as the first line’s optative ‘would’. The concession ‘were one lawful and the other true’ openly acknowledges the difficulty of trying to convey the closeness of Shelley’s connection with Emily, which seems the motivating factor behind the poem’s reference to familial relationships. If, taken out of context, the closing rhyme of ‘me’ and ‘thee’ might have a calculated or at least predictable feel, as if designed as a straightforward delineation of the binary of self and other, the final two lines of the passage lurch unpredictably between affirmation and self-correction. The statement ‘how beyond refuge I am thine’ is dismissed as a hollow and inaccurate rhetorical gesture, and as Shelley rejects the possessive ‘thine’ in favour of a partitive connection with the other, reiterated later in the poet’s description of Emily as ‘not mine but me’ (392), it is as if the couplet form denotes a binary opposition that the verse, in its envisioning of a shared subjectivity, is desperately trying to collapse. The effort recalls ‘Ode to the West Wind’s desperate entreaty ‘Be thou me, impetuous one!’ (‘Ode to the West Wind’, 62). In its logical twists and turns, however, the passage from *Epipsychidion* invites the question of whether form or content is dictating its progression.[[352]](#footnote-352) The poetry arrives at the couplet of ‘me’ and ‘thee’, but it also it reveals Shelley’s wilful striving towards this point. Without the staged self-correction of ‘Ah me!’, it seems as if the opportunity to end the verse paragraph with this cleanly chiming rhyme may have slipped beyond the poet’s grasp. The rhyme invites scepticism even as it sounds out cleanly, openly displaying the poem’s emphasis on hypothesising and exploring possibilities.

Discussing the above lines, Stuart Sperry argues that despite Shelley’s claims to be part of Emily, she ‘remains a being whom he cannot identify except in terms of himself and those relationships that make up the most meaningful part of his past’.[[353]](#footnote-353) Sperry’s reading is prompted by his belief that *Epipsychidion* moves from a centrifugal to a centripetal conceptualisation of Emily where ‘the effort to externalize Emily, to see her as an influence governing nature and humankind, a power concentrated in the universe of sun, moon and stars’ is superseded by ‘the recognition that Emily and her power are constituents of the self’.[[354]](#footnote-354) Yet Sperry’s suggestion that it requires ‘effort’ to see Emily as extraneous to the self and that this is eventually replaced by ‘recognition’ of her as a product of interiority implies a progression from a naïve to a mature understanding that is not wholly borne out by the poetry.[[355]](#footnote-355) *Epipsychidion* refuses any definitive statement on the nature of Emily’s being, and less than twenty lines later, the poetry evokes only to pointedly turn away from the rhyme of ‘me’ and ‘thee’:

I measure

The world of fancies, seeking one like thee,

And find—alas! mine own infirmity.

(69-71)

As in the personal emphasis of the earlier exclamation ‘What have I dared?’ (124), the ‘infirmity’ of the quester takes precedence over Emily herself. The poet’s desire to ‘seek one like thee’ may suggest that Emily’s actual presence cannot be replicated by the imagination, or concede that she exists solely within ‘the world of fancies’. In either case, what stands out is the way rhyme acts as a means of simultaneously suggesting and severing connection, and of depicting a link that might yet be instated but hangs precariously in the balance. Having foregrounded the ‘me’ and ‘thee’ rhyme in lines prior to this (51-2), Shelley encourages readers to anticipate its recurrence throughout the remainder of the poem, as if to make them complicit in his own striving towards unity. This is compounded by the assonance of ‘fancies’ and ‘seeking’, which allows the ‘e’ sound to dominate the passage. Yet the way the lines refuse to repeat the couplet, replacing ‘me’ with ‘infirmity’, reveal Shelley’s previous use of the rhyme—‘Ah me! / I am not thine: I am a part of *thee*’ (51-2)—as establishing only a provisional position. The poem’s repeated rhyming on long ‘e’ vowel sounds that evoke but depart from ‘me’ and ‘thee’ allows it to enact a series of near-misses, of moments where an opportunity to solidify its sense of the unity of self and other through rhyme is suggested only to remain teasingly unfulfilled.

Later the poem overtly departs from the statement ‘I am not thine: I am a part of *thee*’ (52) by describing Shelley’s relationship with Emily in terms that directly contradict those used previously, further challenging Sperry’s implication of a clean-cut progression in the poem’s thinking:[[356]](#footnote-356)

We—are we not formed, as notes of music are,

For one another, though dissimilar;

Such difference without discord, as can make

Those sweetest sounds, in which all spirits shake

As trembling leaves in a continuous air?

(142-46)

In its opening ‘we’ the passage embarks on assertion, as if to state confidently ‘we are formed’, only to hold itself back, instead recasting affirmation as a question: ‘are we not formed?’ This hesitation seems symptomatic of the poem’s exploratory movements towards a coherent conception of the relationship between poet and Emily, one that respects individual identity while doing justice to the blending of two selves in romantic union. Here this steers Shelley towards a definition that differs starkly from descriptions elsewhere of the poet as ‘part of *thee*’ (52) and Emily as ‘not mine but me’ (392). ‘Difference without discord’ suggests two entities that possess their own unique characters but achieve full harmonic potential when combined, recalling Shelley’s envisioning in *On Love* of ‘the chords of two exquisite lyres strung to the accompaniment of one delightful voice’ (*On Love*, p. 632), as well as *Prometheus Unbound*’s description of ‘weav[ing] harmonies divine, yet ever new, / From difference sweet where discord cannot be’ (*Prometheus Unbound*, III. iii. 38-39). Both images present a pair of contraries that are brought together but not dissolved, with *On Love* exhibiting careful restraint in its image of ‘nerves’ that ‘vibrate with the vibrations of our own’ without ever converging (*On Love*, p. 632). In the passage from *Epipsychidion*, Shelley’s manipulation of rhyme again supports his thinking, with the half-rhyme of ‘are’ and ‘dissimilar’ quietly put forward as an example of the ‘difference with discord’ valorised by the passage. In playing up the distinction between masculine and feminine line-endings the half-rhyme acts as if it were the formal counterpart of a harmonious self-other relationship that retains a respect for otherness. The technique anticipates the later, vital rhyme of ‘me’ and ‘Emily’ (343-44), but context suggests that the ‘are’ / ‘dissimilar’ half-rhyme is less haunted by a potential dissonance and more comfortable in acknowledging the positive qualities of difference. Even with this acknowledgement of otherness in mind, however, the fact that half-rhyme is by its very nature a stopping short of full rhyme means the technique comes dangerously close to introducing the very ‘discord’ that Shelley insists is absent. The poem’s attempt to mimic the non-linguistic phenomenon of ‘notes of music’ through language and poetic form holds together,[[357]](#footnote-357) but the precariousness of the effort threatens to destabilise the passage’s idealised image of relationship, revealing the continued fragility of the poem’s effort to define a union that allows for the independence and autonomy of both self and other. If, read in isolation, Shelley’s sense of himself and Emily as two ‘notes of music’ stands out as a moment of clarity and plausibility amidst the poetry’s wave upon wave of conceptions, this affirmation of a ‘difference without discord’ (144) is conspicuously unsustained. The extent to which this image differs from those which come before as well as those which follow reveals the poet’s continued difficulty to conceptualise the union after which he quests to his satisfaction. While the partitive and possessive conceptualisations of relationship are revisited and redeveloped throughout *Epipsychidion*, it is as if an emphasis on ‘difference’, however harmonious, is rejected for its inability to accurately capture the desired closeness of the poet and Emily.

The difficulty of reconciling this respect for alterity with *Epipsychidion*’s drive to overcome separation risks fracturing the poem, giving it the sense of ‘divided purpose’ identified by Angela Leighton.[[358]](#footnote-358) This ambivalence is seemingly the result of Shelley testing out ideas explored in *On Love*, which asserts that ‘we dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise’ (*On Love*, p. 632). Shelley describes love as operating as ‘a mirror whose surface reflects only the forms of purity and brightness: a soul within our own soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise which pain and sorrow and evil dare not overleap’ (*On Love*, p. 632). The essay suggests a distinction between total sameness and mere similarity, just as *Epipsychidion* hovers between suggesting total union and only near-connection in the relationship between ‘me’ and ‘thee’. If the ‘miniature […] of our entire self’ and the image of the ‘mirror’ suggest sameness, that the other is ‘deprived of all that we condemn or despise’ to reflect only ‘purity and brightness’ subverts this possibility. This shifting between complete mirrorings and partial mirrorings depicts the other as a refraction of the self, close enough to spur the self’s quest ‘after its likeness’ (*On Love*, p. 632) but distinct enough so as not to compromise its own identity. Yet the ambiguity of the description also strays precariously close to depicting the other as a duplicate of the self that lacks an identity in its own right, a risk that Shelley incorporates into the quest of *Epipsychidion* and opts to face head on.

The climax of the poemhovers between the two possibilities implied by *On Love*. The writing desperately wills itself towards a union the poet desires but has not yet been able to define, displaying signs of running on its final reserves:

Let us become the overhanging day,

The living soul of this Elysian isle,

Conscious, inseparable, one. Meanwhile

We two will rise, and sit, and walk together

(538-41)

William A. Ulmer argues that ‘simultaneous drives towards spirit and body generate [*Epipsychidion*] out of their powerful antagonism’,[[359]](#footnote-359) and this passage affects an oddly assured stance towards the prospect of becoming a unified ‘one’ even as it affirms the presence of two corporeal forms, emphasised in the reference to acts of rising, sitting and walking. ‘Conscious, inseparable, one’: the pacing of the line, with its careful management of caesurae and shift from polysyllables to monosyllable, exhibits a restful, almost lulling cadence. Compelled by the need to rhyme on ‘isle’, however, ‘meanwhile’ exhibits an air of restlessness that accelerates beyond this apparent conclusion, with the terseness of the ‘Meanwhile / We two’ transition partially glossing over the strangely abrupt shift from ‘one’ to ‘two’. Though the odd tone of ‘meanwhile’ seems understatedly convinced that ‘one[ness]’ is achievable while remaining two distinct bodies, the description subtly intensifies the tensions that pervade *Epipsychidion*, setting the stage for the poem’s breathless climax:

We shall become the same, we shall be one

Spirit within two frames, oh! wherefore two?

One passion in twin-hearts, which grows and grew,

Till, like two meteors of expanding flame,

Those spheres instinct within it become the same,

Touch, mingle, are transfigured; ever still

Burning, yet ever inconsumable:

In one another’s substance finding food,

Like flames too pure and light and unimbued

To nourish their bright lives with baser prey,

Which point to Heaven and cannot pass away:

One hope within two wills, one will beneath

Two overshadowing minds, one life, one death,

One Heaven, one Hell, one immortality,

And one annihilation. Woe is me!

(573-87)

At this stage the couplet seems to assert the impossibility of Shelley’s quest, affirming an enduring commitment to process even as the poet expresses his desire to reach the sought-after terminus of his efforts. In the rhyme of ‘still’ and ‘inconsumable’ Shelley again pairs masculine and feminine line-endings such that ‘inconsumable’ propels the poetry beyond any possibility of ‘still[ness]’ or satiation. Similar tensions are evident in the subtle repetitions of the opening five lines. The movement from ‘we shall become the same’ to ‘till […] those spheres instinct within it become the same’ seems to shift from stating an aspiration to envisioning its fulfilment, while the repetition of ‘grows and grew’ oddly fluctuates between present and past tense as if to look back retrospectively on a completed process of growth. ‘We shall be one / Spirit within two frames’, the poet states, yet the way ‘one’ and ‘two’ occur teasingly close to one another in adjacent line-endings but as two separate rhyming sounds acts as a formal reflection of the impossibility of merging. The emphasis on becoming ‘the same’ seems borne out of desperation. It shows the poet experimenting with a new language of union, going further than the partitive and possessive conceptions of love expressed previously. The mirroring of sounds between ‘the same’ and ‘two frames’, with each occupying the sixth syllable of their respective lines, has the effect of a displaced rhyme, with the sound patterning pointing up Shelley’s conflicted desires. The way ‘the same’ is paired with a reminder of the inexorable conditions of division, ‘two frames’, holds the two possibilities in tension; the poetry suggests an inability to commit fully to sameness, lest it subsume two distinct identities into a single undifferentiated mass. The long ‘e’ sounds that feature so prominently in the poem’s meditations on the link between ‘me’ and ‘thee’ give way to an echoic ‘two’ sound. After the rhyme of ‘two’ and ‘grew’ the sound recurs in the rhyme of ‘food’ and ‘unimbued’, as well as the phrases ‘flames too pure’, ‘to nourish’, and ‘point to Heaven’, lurking within the lines as a counterbalance to the dangerous surge towards oneness. As Jerrold Hogle claims, ‘as right as both the lovers in *Epipsychidion* are to say “I am a part of *thee*” (52) in a mirror-relation that keeps expanding into multiple refractions of it, they can never “become the same” to the point of eliminating all difference or opposition’.[[360]](#footnote-360) To juxtapose the description of the meteors as ‘inconsumable’ with the declaration that the two are ‘in one another’s substance finding food’ is to confirm *Epipsychidion* as a poem in which contraries cannot be dissolved, typifying Shelley’s now frantic need to define the relationship. In the final four lines the poet envisages a universal oneness, but the disappearance of the word ‘two’ after the previously pervasive sound patterning suggests less a merging of contraries than the notion of ‘two frames’ being forcibly banished from the poem, with the repetition of ‘one’ giving the lines a tyrannical quality. The poem both acknowledges the inevitability of separation and, in the image of ‘one annihilation’, offers an ambivalent glimpse of what might occur to the identities of self and other were Shelley’s quest towards unity ever achievable.

**II.**

*Adonais* intensifies *Epipsychidion*’s emphasis on quest as catalysed by a response to otherness,[[361]](#footnote-361) considering whether the elegy represents a viable medium by which to enact a ‘going out of our own nature and an identification of ourselves with […] thought, action, or person not our own’ (*A Defence*, p. 682). Peter M. Sacks’s reading of Shelley’s elegy stresses the necessity of engaging with others in the response to grief,[[362]](#footnote-362) and if the conventions of the elegy suggest the self invoking a community of fellow mourners to commemorate an absent other, *Adonais* tests this generic paradigm.[[363]](#footnote-363) Susan J. Wolfson proposes that *Adonais* ‘court[s] effect with a deliberate resistance to popularity’, citing the poem’s ‘erudite references, and conspicuously untranslated Greek texts on the title page (Plato) and at the top of the Preface (Moschus)’ as examples.[[364]](#footnote-364) Such observations are responsive to Shelley’s comment to Charles Ollier that the poem was ‘little adapted for popularity’,[[365]](#footnote-365) as well as his description of John and Maria Gisborne as ‘some of the very few persons who will be interested in it and understand it’.[[366]](#footnote-366) Though these remarks conceive of the poet as alienated from any readership beyond his close confidants, the power of Shelley’s elegy stems not from its abandonment of a potential readership, as Bloom’s emphasis on an ‘internalized’ quest-romance implies,[[367]](#footnote-367) but from its ability to put the notions of ‘we’ and ‘us’ under pressure. By pointing up the elegist’s blend of association with and alienation from his readers, Shelley examines the way in which the demands of the elegy might reinforce otherness even as the elegist attempts to bridge division. Kelvin Everest and Madeleine Callaghan’s contrasting emphases on the way that Shelleyuses allusion to sustain Keats’s presence in the poem can be developed by considering the impact of this, as well as Shelley’s other mourning techniques, on the poem’s reader.[[368]](#footnote-368) *Adonais* is at times less concerned with directly addressing readers than with staging the elegist’s encounters with reviewers, fellow poets, and Keats’s own poetry alike.[[369]](#footnote-369) Such an approach plunges the role of the poem’s readers into question, demanding that they carve out their own space within the elegising landscape. M. H. Abrams’s view that Romantic poetry shows the ‘audience gradually reced[ing] into the background’ so that the poet emerges ‘as the predominant cause and even the end and test of art’ is challenged by *Adonais*,[[370]](#footnote-370) which places its reader in a less clear-cut position than Abrams’s statement allows. Though the goal of the poem can seem less to provide consolation to its reader than to integrate them into a community of trust and understanding, one capable of appreciating Keats’s work and preserving his memory,[[371]](#footnote-371) Shelley’s elegy also holds open the prospect that the reader might be troublingly alienated by the poem. *Adonais* posits the elegising self as embodying the ‘awful apartness’ that is typically attributed to the elegised subject,[[372]](#footnote-372) distanced not just from the individual they seek to commemorate but from those they seek to console. For Shelley, the elegy becomes the ideal arena for exploring the tensions of a quest that is driven by the poet’s response to otherness even as it is constituted by and contingent on the individuality of the questing self.

Earl Wasserman’s suggestion that *Adonais* converts Shelley’s ‘basic open-ended scepticism into a kind of poetics of assertion’ can be developed in two vital ways: [[373]](#footnote-373) as well as foregrounding Shelley as a poet of unstable, ambiguous assertion, the poem implies that the elegist’s ability to assert his questing intent is predicated on his distance from all others. *A Defence of Poetry*, written immediately prior to *Adonais*, sheds light on the elegy’s exploration of the reader as a potential other:

In the infancy of the world, neither poets themselves nor their auditors are fully aware of the excellence of poetry: for it acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness: and it is reserved for future generations to contemplate and measure the mighty cause and effect in all the strength and splendour of their union. […] A poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.

(*A Defence*, p. 680)

The conflicting pulls of community and solitude manifest themselves in the twists and turns of Shelley’s prose; the transition marked by the semi-colon after ‘sweet sounds’, where Shelley moves from depicting the poet as living in ‘solitude’ into affirming the presence of his auditors, is strangely abrupt. The poet and his ‘auditor[s]’ are initially united in their inability to discern the ‘excellence’ of a force that acts ‘in a divine and unapprehended manner’. Yet the image of the poet as a nightingale subverts this connection. That the poet sings ‘to cheer [his] own solitude’ implies that the poet is motivated by personal desires rather than external demands, but subsequent lines leave open the prospect that this singing will alleviate the poet’s isolation. The passage is assured that an audience exists for the poet, desired or not, but it also acknowledges the precariousness of the bond between an ‘unseen musician’ and his auditor, veering between constructing a community with the poet at its centre and stressing the poet’s alienation from those around him. Acknowledging the complexity of this dynamic, Earl J. Schulze affirms the inevitability and the necessity of a poet remaining distant from his reader, emphasising the paradox of the poet’s position: ‘the poet is thus, paradoxically, unique among men, while at the same time their chief spokesman’.[[374]](#footnote-374) Refracting the ideas explored in *A Defence of Poetry* through the troubled arena of the elegy, *Adonais* makes poetic capital out of its hovering between two versions of the elegist’s role. Shelley considers whether the elegist is an individual empowered to lead his readership by virtue of his position ‘neglected and apart’ (33: 296) from all others, or whether the elegist instead represents a ‘companionless’ (31: 272) quester undertaking a solitary foray into the unchartered territories of grief.

The uncertainty of the relationship between elegist and reader comes to the fore in the following lines:

Alas! that all we loved of him should be,

But for our grief, as if it had not been,

And grief itself be mortal! Woe is me!

Whence are we, and why are we? of what scene

The actors or spectators? Great and mean

Meet massed in death, who lends what life must borrow.

As long as skies are blue, and fields are green,

Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow,

Month follow month with woe, and year wake year to sorrow.

(21: 181-89)

In addition to their recalling of *Epipsychidion*’s ‘woe is me!’ (*Epipsychidion*, 123, 587), the lines anticipate Rousseau’s instruction to the poet of *The Triumph of Life*: ‘but follow thou, and from spectator turn / Actor or victim in this wretchedness’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 305-6). There, the repetition of the ‘or’ sound in ‘actor or victim’ possesses a sardonic edge that complicates the possibility of adhering to its own ‘either/or’ formula. In *Adonais*, the absence of ‘victim’ from the equation ostensibly foregrounds a more straightforward binary between active and passive roles. Yet the elegy’s reliance on the first person pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ rather than the second person ‘thou’ introduces a further complication. Amidst the turbulence of these lines, with their frantic blend of exclamations, interrogatives, and staccato monosyllables, the poetry takes for granted the universal nature of this experience. ‘We’ is subtly accentuated through the assonance of ‘we’ with ‘be’, ‘grief’, and, more problematically, ‘me’, the closeness of the Spenserian stanza’s *a* and *b* rhyming sounds contributing to the effect. If questions such as ‘whence are we, and why are we? of what scene / The actors or spectators?’ tap into the profound uncertainties of grief, these first person pronouns also risk eliding the distinction between elegist and reader. They prompt the reader to consider the possibility that the two parties may in fact occupy different roles, united in their shared mortality and their mutual powerlessness to understand death but divided by virtue of the elegist seeming closer to the status of an ‘actor’ than the reader,[[375]](#footnote-375) assigned the comparatively passive role of ‘spectator’. In that regard, Michael O’Neill’s description of *Adonais* as ‘an opportunity for the elegist to display his poetic power’ seems apt.[[376]](#footnote-376) If one aspect of Shelley’s poetic power is the ability to unite a community of like-minded readers and grievers, such remarks nevertheless draw attention to the possible imbalances of the relationship, with the elegist aligned with yet simultaneously distinct from the grievers described in and addressed by *Adonais*.

After the tumult of the stanza’s opening lines, Shelley’s response to these questions has a strangely muted air. The syntax and the technique of pivoting on the medial caesura—‘As long as skies are blue, and fields are green, / Evening must usher night, night urge the morrow’ (21: 187-88)—recall the response to division in the earlier ‘Fragments Connected with *Epipsychidion*’—‘And if life parts us—we will mix in death, / Yielding our mite of unreluctant breath’ (‘Fragments’, 3-4). In *Adonais*, the repetitiveness of the phrasing and the predictability of the ‘borrow’/ ‘morrow’/ ‘sorrow’ rhyme progression means the closing lines fall oddly flat, with the seasonal cycle depicted as less like the redemptive progression typical of pastoral elegy than a mundane repetition. Richard Cronin suggests that the ‘utterly drab’ quality of the lines makes them ‘the most important in the whole poem’,[[377]](#footnote-377) arguing that they are designed ‘to persuade the reader that such a conclusion is not, and cannot be, a proper ending for the poem. They work to enlist the reader as the poet’s accomplice in the poem’s continuation’.[[378]](#footnote-378) The account resonates with Sacks’s assertion that the poem depicts a series of ‘inadequate mourners’ that allow Shelley to ‘distance himself from various forms of unsuccessful grieving’.[[379]](#footnote-379) Cronin’s argument has in mind Shelley’s climactic voyage to ‘the abode where the Eternal are’ (55: 495), and this stanza’s effort to ‘enlist’ the reader relies on its coming after the emphasis on shared experience in ‘whence are we, and why are we?’ (21: 184). However, even if the reader shares Shelley’s sense of the inadequacy of these consolatory remarks, as Cronin implies, the possibility his reading downplays is that Shelley might struggle to make the reader into his ‘accomplice’, and that the elegist might remain a lone quester when he casts off ‘far from the shore, far from the trembling throng / Whose sails were never to the tempest given’ (55: 489-90). If the poet deliberately includes this example of ‘inadequate grieving’ as a rhetorical strategy designed to influence his readers, part of the poem’s drama stems from the way it never fully convinces us that Shelley’s approach to grief is something to which the reader can fully assent.

Cronin’s account is valuable for its attentiveness to the way *Adonais* seeks to direct the responses of its readers,[[380]](#footnote-380) in keeping with Stephen Behrendt’s depiction of Shelley as a ‘skilled rhetorician’ who ‘routinely and deliberately attempted to manipulate his audiences into positions favourable to him and his designs’.[[381]](#footnote-381) Shelley’s desire to instruct his readers how to respond to Keats’s life and work initially appears to be the motive behind stanzas 27 and 28,[[382]](#footnote-382) which James Heffernan cites as evidence of Shelley portraying Keats ‘as scarcely more than a victim in the first half of the poem’.[[383]](#footnote-383) Though Heffernan’s reading is alert to the potentially disquieting elements of Shelley’s attempts to generate sympathy amongst his readership, the poem’s intentions seem more complex than ‘deliberately fabricat[ing]’ the circumstances of Keats’s death.[[384]](#footnote-384) Both stanzas show Shelley establishing common ground with his readers while simultaneously undercutting any sense of his similarity to others:

‘Oh gentle child, beautiful as thou wert,

Why didst thou leave the trodden paths of men

Too soon, and with weak hands though mighty heart

Dare the unpastured dragon in his den?

Defenceless as thou wert, oh where was then

Wisdom the mirrored shield, or scorn the spear?

(27: 235-40)

While this portrayal of Keats consciously attempts to direct the response of readers, Shelley subtly keeps the reader at a remove from the situation by situating it within the context of a private dialogue between himself and Keats. In addition to their allusions to Bion’s *Lament for Adonis* and the ‘mirrored shield’ used in Perseus’s defence against Medusa,[[385]](#footnote-385) the lines also revel in Spenserian allusion, recalling Redcrosse’s encounter with the dragon Error: ‘But full of fire and greedy hardiment, / The youthfull knight could not for ought be staide, / But forth unto the darksome hole he went’ (*The Faerie Queene*, I. i. 14).[[386]](#footnote-386) Kelvin Everest stresses the fact that ‘Keats’s favourite poet in the period when Shelley knew him personally was not Milton, but Spenser’,[[387]](#footnote-387) and though the lines are spoken by Urania, this allusion shows Shelley consciously positioning the stanza within the context of his and Keats’s shared appreciation of Spenser,[[388]](#footnote-388) as exemplified by Keats’s letter urging Shelley to ‘serve Mammon’ by ‘curb[ing] your magnanimity’ and ‘load[ing] every rift of your subject with ore’.[[389]](#footnote-389) There, a mutual familiarity with Spenser’s Cave of Mammon establishes common ground between the poets even as Keats meditates on the divergences of their contrasting approaches to composition, with Spenser utilised as a mediating force that helps one poet to pass judgement upon the other. In *Adonais*, Shelley redeploys Keats’s strategy but without the prospect of a response. Greg Kucich’s observation that Shelley discovered ‘something reassuring, even relaxing, about shouting down to the mighty dead with Spenser by his side’ takes on a more disquieting edge when the object of address is Keats.[[390]](#footnote-390) The description of Keats as a ‘child’ seeks to prompt the sympathy of readers by painting Keats as a young, vulnerable poet, but the term also gestures towards only to pointedly withhold the designation of ‘childe’. Keats is markedly not a ‘childe’ in the manner of Byron’s Childe Harold, lacking the questing credentials of the Spenserian hero. For all the pathos of the stanza, to consider it alongside the quoted letter is to read it in the context of a verbal jousting that has been reduced to a one-sided dialogue. With the stanza knowingly opening up the question of who will protect Keats, Shelley draws upon a common interest in Spenser to point up his own suitability for the role of ‘childe’ that Keats was unable to fulfil. Similarity and difference intermingle as Shelley affirms that he, unlike Keats, is able to put into practice the lessons learned in their shared experiences of Spenser’s verse.

Developing Shelley’s image of a vulnerable, immature Keats, the subsequent stanza continues this attempt to foster community with the reader in an altogether more forceful manner:

‘The herded wolves, bold only to pursue;

The obscene ravens, clamorous o’er the dead;

The vultures to the conqueror’s banner true

Who feed where Desolation first has fed,

And whose wings rain contagion;—how they fled,

When like Apollo, from his golden bow,

The Pythian of the age one arrow sped

And smiled!—The spoilers tempt no second blow,

They fawn on the proud feet that spurn them lying low.

(28: 244-52)

The intensity of the opening condemnation of the ‘herded wolves’ and ‘obscene ravens’ throws down the gauntlet to readers, demanding that they assent to Shelley’s rhetoric. At this stage there seems little space within the poem for any reader who does not concur with Shelley’s sense of Keats as being ‘among the writers of the highest genius who have adorned our age’ (‘Preface to *Adonais*’, p. 528). In the criticism of reviewers as ‘bold only to pursue’ and quick to flee in the face of opposition, Shelley condemns critics on the grounds that they live a purely reactionary existence, lacking the capacity to lead others. The way in which the critics react to Byron’s counter-attack to the negative reviews of his *Hours of Idleness* volume, ‘fawning on the proud feet’ and ‘tempt[ing] no second blow’, not only suggests the changeability of critics but also, perhaps more significantly, accuses them of valuing displays of great pride over great art. Later in his career, Byron himself implies that *English Bards* *and Scotch Reviewers* was more the former than the latter.[[391]](#footnote-391) While *Adonais* praises Byron’s power, this stanza also implies Shelley’s determination to formulate an elegising power distinct from that displayed by the Byron of *English Bards*, one more akin to that prized by the later Byron when he positions himself as an ‘ethical poet’ in the mould of Alexander Pope.[[392]](#footnote-392) Though the precise nature of the elegist’s power remains unclear,[[393]](#footnote-393) what stands out is the way *Adonais* defines this power through the elegist’s subtle opposition to and difference from all others.

While stanzas 27 and 28 strive to construct a community of readers sympathetic to Keats, they also reveal early traces of Shelley depicting the elegist as a self at a remove from society. For Jeffrey N. Cox, *Adonais* attempts to preserve Keats by constructing ‘an idealised version of the real circle of writers of which Keats had been a part’;[[394]](#footnote-394) crucially, however, it does so while remaining deeply sceptical of the elegist’s own ability to exist within any community. The subtlety with which Shelley stages his encounters with the poem’s other poet-mourners ensures that the poem does not ask its reader to take sides. The elegist’s movement in and out of the mourning community is motivated less by a Sacks-style binary between ‘adequate’ and ‘inadequate’ approaches to grief than by Shelley’s suspicion that whatever power the elegist may assume is contingent on his separateness.[[395]](#footnote-395) When Shelley portrays Byron as a poet who arrives ‘veiling all the lightnings of his song / In sorrow’ (30: 267-68), the allusion to the lightning bolts of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III jostles with the word ‘veiling’,[[396]](#footnote-396) so often a source of ambiguity in Shelley’s own imaginings,[[397]](#footnote-397) to suggest that Byron’s talents cannot flourish within the medium of elegy, as if grief might conceal the qualities responsible for Byron’s greatness. Far from representing an inadequate approach to mourning, however, Byron’s self-effacement marks him out as a noble and respectful griever, and Shelley’s difference from Byron lies elsewhere. Significantly, given *Adonais*’s fixation on the elegist’s complicated relationship with his readership, the portrait of a figure ‘whose fame / Over his living head like Heaven is bent’ (30: 264-65) denies Byron the mobility so often present in and prized by Byron’s own poetry.[[398]](#footnote-398) The bond between the celebrity poet and his doting readership becomes a bind, one that Shelley, by implication, seems to evade.

Thomas Moore, too, represents less an example of inadequacy than a way of mourning other than Shelley’s:

from her wilds Ierne sent

The sweetest lyrist of her saddest wrong,

And love taught grief to fall like music from his tongue.

(30: 268-70)

With their delicate sibilance and the gracefully measured rhythm of the alexandrine, the lines pay tribute to Moore’s ‘music’ in a way that bespeaks Shelley’s admiration. Yet the portrait also stresses the extent to which Moore’s voice is bound to and shaped by the plight of Ireland. If ‘love’ of his country ‘taught grief to fall’, the connotations of ‘taught’ contribute to a sense that Moore is less a poet who might imaginatively meditate on and potentially move beyond grief than one for whom grief has become studied and habitual. Among the procession of mourners, Shelley’s depiction of Leigh Hunt is the most challenging for the elegist:

What softer voice is hushed over the dead?

[…]

If it be He, who, gentlest of the wise,

Taught, soothed, loved, honoured the departed one;

Let me not vex, with inharmonious sighs

The silence of that heart’s accepted sacrifice.

(35: 307-15)

Hunt’s silence marks him out as a model of propriety, with Shelley’s final couplet seemingly invoking Samuel Johnson’s remarks on Milton’s *Lycidas*: ‘it is not to be considered as the effusion of real passion; for passion runs not after remote allusions and obscure opinions. […] Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief’.[[399]](#footnote-399) In his dignified reticence, it is as if Hunt were enacting the grieving strategies advocated by Johnson.[[400]](#footnote-400) Despite the positive qualities of this account, Shelley’s sharp distinction from Hunt is affirmed by the jolting transition between stanzas 35 and 36, where praise of Hunt’s silence shifts into a resumption of the attack on critics seen in stanza 28:

Our Adonais has drunk poison—oh!

What deaf and viperous murderer could crown

Life’s early cup with such a draught of woe?

(36: 316-18)

The ‘our’ pronoun reaches outwards to the fellow-feeling of the reader and the community of mourning poets, but coming after the previous stanza’s praise of Hunt’s silent, unartful grieving, stanza 36’s deliberate eschewal of silence, along with the self-consciously stylised quality of the ‘oh!’ exclamatory, seems disorientating. After the procession of mourners, the stanza shows Shelley forcibly stepping away from all previous perspectives, though he refuses to dismiss completely any response to Keats other than that motivated by the reviewer’s ‘envy, hate, and wrong’ (36: 321). The elegist’s relationship with Hunt and the other mourning poets is ambiguous in a way that proves difficult for the reader:

All stood aloof, and at his partial moan

Smiled through their tears; well knew that gentle band

Who in another’s fate now wept his own;

As in the accents of an unknown land,

He sung new sorrow; sad Urania scanned

The Stranger’s mien, and murmured: ‘who art thou?’

He answered not, but with a sudden hand

Made bare his branded and ensanguined brow,

Which was like Cain’s or Christ’s—Oh! that it should be so!

(34: 298-306)

Resisting Sacks’s binary between ‘adequate’ and ‘inadequate’ approaches to mourning,[[401]](#footnote-401) *Adonais* takes its momentum from Shelley’s belief that the elegist must do more than retrace the paths laid out by other poets, however appropriate or effective those routes may be, and further their attempts to formulate new and unique responses to the complex questions of grief. Shelley places great emphasis on the opening ‘all’, imbuing it with additional weight by virtue of the stress-shift to show the elegist excluded from the community he has invoked. The gently mocking response of his fellow poets poses a problem for readers that the self-awareness of the lines only partially resolves, forcing readers to question their own reaction to the elegist. If one accepts Cronin’s emphasis on the necessity of *Adonais* ‘enlist[ing] the reader as the poet’s accomplice’,[[402]](#footnote-402) the stanza adopts a dangerous strategy. Having forced readers to take the side of those seeking to protect Keats, rather than those who condemn him, and having carefully distinguished himself from the mass of fellow mourners, Shelley faces up the possibility that the reader may be included within the ‘all’ who stand ‘aloof’ from the elegist, a possibility borne out by readings of the poem that intensify the bemused reaction of the shepherds, centring their criticisms of Shelley around these lines.[[403]](#footnote-403) Yet Shelley refuses to accept any definition of the elegist as living a purely solitary existence. The lines subtly redefine the elegist’s position, hovering between the solitary and the communal in a manner reminiscent of *A Defence of Poetry*’s account of the poet’s distant ‘auditors’ (*A Defence*, p. 680). Shelley may stand apart from other approaches to mourning, but the poet rejects the possibility of standing entirely alone. The construction of ‘all stood aloof’ attributes the aloofness to the procession of mourners, as opposed to Shelley himself, and the move bespeaks an effort to reorient the elegy around the elegist, placing Shelley at the centre of the procession rather than at its outskirts. In the syntactical arrangement of ‘well knew that gentle band / Who in another’s fate now wept his own’, the delaying of ‘his’ means that the object of ‘who’ is initially unclear. The ambiguity momentarily leaves open the prospect that a singular experience might become collective, as if the line might instead describe a ‘gentle band / Who in another’s fate now wept [their] own’.

The stanza’s final image of the elegist as like Cain or Christ has been described as ‘one of the most riddlingly vexed in Shelley’s poetry’.[[404]](#footnote-404) Attempting to resolve these tensions, Judith Chernaik argues that ‘Cain serves, like Christ, as an example of the greatest human suffering imaginable. Shelley had the likeness in mind rather than the differences: [the fact] that both are forsaken by God and hunted by men, and marked out from all others’.[[405]](#footnote-405) Though this is attentive to Shelley’s cultivating of apartness throughout the elegy, the image resists any straightforward reconciliation. The line seems more an attempt to depict an elegising figure that cannot easily be defined, and the artificiality of the closing lament—‘Oh! that it should be so!’ (34: 306)—bespeaks its status as a deliberate performative gesture.[[406]](#footnote-406) While Andrew Epstein preserves the paradox of the image to read it as revealing Shelley’s ‘double conception’ of the elegist as both a ‘Christ-like redeemer and his brother’s jealous murderer’,[[407]](#footnote-407) the image is also suggestive of Shelley’s double relationship with his readership. As one who is like Cain or Christ, Shelley may be either an exile or an agent of salvation; embedded within the construction is the possibility that the two roles, when considered in the context of Shelley’s role as an elegist ‘neglected and apart’ (33: 296), may not be mutually exclusive. To sing ‘new sorrow’ in ‘the accents of an unknown land’ is to elude both convention and definition, and the final line reflects the way that Shelley forces himself as elegist into a near-paradoxical position, both alienated from all others and the leader of this elegy.

Far from constructing an identity for Shelley that is ‘coming apart at the seams’ or rendering *Adonais* a ‘drama of impasse’,[[408]](#footnote-408) the tensions of this self-portrait seem motivated by a belief that the elegist’s paradoxical position might allow him to outsoar any sense of ‘impasse’ and effectively influence his readership. The stanzas following the self-portrait show Shelley’s self-consciousness of his reader’s role in the elegy rising to its highest pitch, subverting Bloom’s argument that the Romantics prioritise an ‘internalized’ quest-romance.[[409]](#footnote-409) In stanza 39 the elegist’s tone soars to new heights in its determination to command and direct the reader:

Peace, peace! He is not dead, he doth not sleep—

He hath awakened from the dream of life—

’Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep

With phantoms an unprofitable strife,

And in mad trance, strike with our spirit’s knife

Invulnerable nothings.—*We* decay

Like corpses in a charnel; fear and grief

Convulse us and consume us day by day,

And cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay.

(39: 343-51)

Coming after the previous stanza’s uncertain declaration that ‘he wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead’ (38: 336), these lines are set forth as exemplifying the power of affirmation.[[410]](#footnote-410) The repeated imperative of ‘peace’ posits the independent poet as an authority figure capable of silencing all others. This allows Shelley’s elegising voice and the stanza’s effort to reconceptualise death to take centre stage,[[411]](#footnote-411) with Richard Cronin emphasising the fact that Shelley, ‘deprived of theological support, must construct the heaven to which he may consign Keats’.[[412]](#footnote-412) As an ‘unacknowledged legislator’ (*A Defence*, p. 701) from whom ‘all stood aloof’ (34: 298), the poet is capable of offering insights that others cannot. As well as raising the question of ‘how to celebrate poetic power without that power seeming to be a form of despotism’,[[413]](#footnote-413) this also recalls the image of the poet suspended between solitude and community in *A Defence of Poetry*. While the poet’s ability to console is predicated on his independence from other approaches and perspectives, the lines also bring to the fore the problems of this position. Though the stanza’s attachment of the definite article to ‘the dream of life’ is, as O’Neill suggests, as though Shelley is ‘brooking no argument about the phrase’s accuracy’,[[414]](#footnote-414) it also calculatedly universalises life by referring to it as a shared process rather than a personal experience unique to its agent. The tension recurs in the italicised ‘*We*’ in ‘*We* decay / Like corpses in a charnel’, wrenching in both its rhetorical effect and in its delivery, the sharp monosyllable jolting the reader after the onerous polysyllables and heavy caesura that come before. The line risks heavy-handedness, with its tone suggesting a distinctly personal moment of awakening even as the pronoun forcibly includes the reader in the experience described by the poet. ‘Awaken’ is a vital and pervasive verb in *A Defence of Poetry*; in addition to the declaration that poetry ‘awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought’ (*A Defence*, p. 681), the term is central to Shelley’s praise of Dante, a figure celebrated as a ‘philosopher of the very loftiest power’ (*A Defence*, p. 679): ‘Dante was the first awakener of entranced Europe; he created a language, in itself music and persuasion, out of a chaos of inharmonious barbarians’ (*A Defence*, p. 693). However, even as *Adonais* styles the elegist as one capable of following Dante’s lead in ‘creat[ing] a language’ capable of ‘awaken[ing]’ the minds of his readers, the poemremains aware of the possibility that a troubling disjunction might emerge between the elegist and his reader.

Building on this tension, the second half of the stanza assumes an increasingly claustrophobic air. It is as if the elegist were somehow leading the reader into the charnel house he describes, with the poem threatening to seal shut behind the reader as soon as they involve themselves in the elegist’s experience, but all the while refusing to allow the reader the safety of detachment. Heightening the effect is the recurrence of the Spenserian stanza’s *c* rhyme, constantly reminding the reader of the inevitability of their ‘decay’ (39: 348), along with the smothering repetition of sounds in the proclamation that ‘fear and grief / Convulse us and consume us day by day’ (39: 349-50). There, the insistent alliteration and sibilance imply the impossibility of the reader disentangling himself or herself from Shelley’s repeated ‘us’. The physicality of the line ‘cold hopes swarm like worms within our living clay’ (39: 351), with its clogging internal rhyme of ‘swarm’ and ‘worms’, comes close to the grotesque. If, for Shelley, one of poetry’s greatest virtues is its ability to provide its reader with ‘a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought’ (*A Defence*, p. 681), *Adonais* poses the prospect that these ‘unapprehended combinations’ might prompt ‘horror’ as well as ‘exultation’ (*A Defence*, p. 698). Despite their shared bonds of mortality, however, the relationship between elegist and reader continues to blend similarity with difference; ‘’Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep / With phantoms an unprofitable strife’ (39: 345-46), Shelley declares, but the metapoetic undertones of the reference to ‘stormy visions’ remind the reader that these ‘stormy visions’ are, to an extent, the creation of the poet, and that their own progression through this ‘highly wrought *piece of art*’ is in the hands of the elegist as quester.[[415]](#footnote-415) Capitalising on Shelley’s position ‘neglected and apart’ (33: 296) to cast the poet as a unique authority on navigating the ‘stormy visions’ of life and death, the stanza earns the reader’s assent even as it offers a grim stance on mortality that, accurate or not, the reader cannot help but recoil from. Laying the foundations for the problematic commitment to quest that forms the poem’s climax, the depiction of Shelley ascending to a position of elegising power jostles with the suspicion that this may be inextricable from the elegist becoming cut adrift from his readership.[[416]](#footnote-416)

Andrew Epstein remarks that ‘the question of where Keats is now, and where Shelley would be if he joined him, is the unresolved issue that drives the last movement’ of the poem,[[417]](#footnote-417) but Shelley’s climactic commitment to quest subjects the reader to a similar sense of irresolution. When Shelley asks ‘Who mourns for Adonais? oh come forth / Fond wretch! and know thyself and him aright’ (47: 415-6), the questions show the elegist’s address of his reader becoming intertwined with his address of the self. In the ambiguity the quester comes close to affirming his own entrapment in ‘the arena of self-consciousness’.[[418]](#footnote-418) Yet the reader does retain a kind of agency at this stage of the poem, though the extent of this agency remains unclear. When Shelley commands the reader ‘Go thou to Rome,—at once the Paradise, / The grave, the city, and the wilderness’ (49: 433-4), he recounts a journey he himself has already undertaken, recasting the description of the Protestant Cemetery in the poem’s Preface in experiential form: ‘John Keats […] was buried in the romantic and lonely cemetery of the protestants in that city, under the pyramid which is the tomb of Cestius, and the massy walls and towers, now mouldering and desolate, which formed the circuit of Ancient Rome’ (‘Preface to *Adonais*’, p. 529). The poetry’s tone turns instructive—‘the Spirit of the spot shall lead / Thy footsteps to a slope of green access’ (49: 438-39)—but the poem’s earlier cry of ‘whence are we, and why are we? of what scene / The actors or spectators?’ (21: 184-5) still resonates through the lines. Shelley’s references to Rome strive to involve the reader in what now resembles a personal quest that the reader might observe and empathise with, but will be unable to partake of:

Here pause: these graves are all too young as yet

To have outgrown the sorrow which consigned

Its charge to each; and if the seal is set,

Here, on one fountain of a mourning mind,

Break it not thou! too surely shalt thou find

Thine own well full, if thou returnest home,

Of tears and gall. From the world’s bitter wind

Seek shelter in the shadow of the tomb.

What Adonais is, why fear we to become?

(51: 451-59)

Timothy Webb argues that ‘even the well-informed reader tends to confuse Shelley’s life with his poetry’, declaring that Shelley’s ‘is not the poetry of self-expression nor is it autobiographical in any simple sense’.[[419]](#footnote-419) Yet the tugs and pulls of biography serve to enrich, rather than distort, the meaning of the quoted lines, and consideration of contextual details proves vital in appreciating the impact of the writing on the poem’s readers. With ‘Here pause’ continuing the directions offered in previous stanzas, guiding the reader towards the cemetery’s ‘slope of green access’ (49: 439), the poetry’s effect relies on the illusion that the poem’s reader can join with Shelley. Mark Sandy writes that ‘Shelley’s emotive description admits into the public discourse of his elegy a personal note of grief’,[[420]](#footnote-420) but the lines preserve rather than resolve a tension between the public and the personal. The way the writing combines instructions to the reader with thinly veiled biographical reference exemplifies a technique in Shelley’s poetry identified by Stephen Behrendt: ‘in practice, Shelley normally preserves the distinctions between himself and his audiences even while claiming through his language to overcome them’.[[421]](#footnote-421) In alluding to the presence of William Shelley in the Protestant Cemetery,[[422]](#footnote-422) Shelley’s apparent direct address of his audience masks how the reader is being guided through a memory that is personal to the poet. Shelley appears to become a lone quester with the reader invited to retrace his steps but unable to replicate his experience, instead being left trailing in his wake. But for all the way that ‘Break it not thou!’ seems to reveal itself as a form of self-address, with Shelley imploring himself to retain his composure, the urgency of the exclamation and the accusatory nature of the tone retain the ability to startle the reader, denying them any distance and making it near-impossible to avoid being drawn in by the poetry. At this juncture, ‘actors or spectators’ (21: 185) is an inadequate binary to apply to the role of the reader. Even as the stanza’s simultaneous reference to and refusal to expand on personal trauma appears to hold the poem’s audience at a remove, such is the emotional intensity of the lines that it seems impossible for the reader to be detached from Shelley’s quest. In commanding his reader ‘Go thou to Rome’ (49: 433), Shelley presents his experience as one the elegy’s readership cannot help but follow but one in which it cannot easily become involved.

The climax of *Adonais* is dominated by equivocation. Challenging Ross Woodman’s argument that Shelley embarks on a ‘psychic suicide’,[[423]](#footnote-423) Madeleine Callaghan asserts that ‘the final stanzas of the elegy do not read like a suicide note; they read as if Shelley’s narrator is attempting to write a suicide note against an equally powerful desire to remain subject to the glorious mutability of life’.[[424]](#footnote-424) These conflicting impulses resound through the poetry; the poem’s reader is in thrall to a quester who is unable to make a definitive statement on where he quests or what it is he quests after:

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,

Stains the white radiance of Eternity,

Until Death tramples it to fragments.—Die,

If thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!

(52: 460-65)

This dazzling imagery prompts wonder in the reader but also bespeaks Shelley’s refusal to settle on any single position. The staining of ‘Life’ is simultaneously an act of disfigurement and of decoration, the verb imbued with additional power by virtue of its trochaic stress, while ‘death’ tramples with an impudent carelessness that suggests the fragility of the brittle though beautiful ‘glass’ of life. The abrupt movement from ‘Death’ as noun to ‘Die’ as heavily stressed imperative reminds the marvelling reader that they are no mere ‘spectator’ (21: 185) to Shelley’s quasi-Platonic assertions, ensuring that the stanza is as much an experience as it is a spectacle. O’Neill is right to say that the phrase ‘that which thou dost seek’ has a ‘yearning, impersonal openness that makes it impossible to gloss it as meaning simply “Adonais”’,[[425]](#footnote-425) but this ‘impersonal openness’ has a peculiarly disconcerting effect. The air of inclusiveness jars with the way the imperative simultaneously corners the recoiling reader, demanding that they become an ‘actor’ (21: 185). With the stanza being devoid of first-person pronouns, lacking the ‘we’ that concludes stanza 51, the implication is of an elegist momentarily stepping back from the action of the poem. The reader is suddenly and unexpectedly afforded space from which to consider their own personal desires, but the loss of the elegist’s guidance has a disorientating effect, almost forcing them to become a quester in their own right.

In the transition between stanzas 52 and 53, however, the pervasive ‘thou’ is seemingly revealed as the poet’s own ‘Heart’:

Why linger, why turn back, why shrink, my Heart?

Thy hopes are gone before: from all things here

They have departed; thou shouldst now depart!

(53: 469-71)

It is unclear whether this marks a shift in the target of address, so that the ‘thou’ which previously addressed the reader is now the poet himself, or instead a revelation that all previous iterations of ‘thou’ were directed towards the self. The uncertainty intensifies the feeling of the reader lurching between proximity and distance in their relationship with the elegist, and of their unsettling vacillation between the roles of ‘actor’ and ‘spectator’ (21: 185). In the final stanza, the sense that the reader and the elegist might be of the same questing party comes under its greatest strain:

The breath whose might I have invoked in song

Descends on me; my spirit’s bark is driven

Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng

Whose sails were never to the tempest given;

The massy earth and spherèd skies are riven!

I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;

Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,

The soul of Adonais, like a star,

Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

(55: 487-95)

The writing knowingly runs the risk that the reader might either disassociate from or outright oppose the poem. Shelley’s lines throb with defiance but also seem to relish that which is treacherous. Singular first person pronouns abound, and the implication is that the reader is among ‘the trembling throng / Whose sails were never to the tempest given’, of those who cannot or will not embark on such a quest. Shelley’s gaze appears to be fixed on ‘the inmost veil of Heaven’, but the poetry takes care to map out a voyage that retains one eye on the ‘throng’ that incorporates the poem’s readership, even as this connection becomes, as the stanza progresses, increasingly fragile. The apartness of the poet is undeniable, but neither the precise terms nor the extent of his separation from society are made apparent. Shelley gestures towards only to hold back from any endorsement of a ‘psychic suicide’,[[426]](#footnote-426) aware that the reader could never assent to such a flight. This ambiguity ensures that the writing bewilders in a way that makes interpretation more complicated than a case of being attracted or repelled. Despite the uncertainties surrounding his quest, Shelley nevertheless writes with a belief that it would be impossible for the elegy’s reader to follow him, as the specificity of the directions that followed the earlier instructions of ‘Go thou to Rome’ (49: 433) give way to a voyage defined by its equivocation. The Spenserian stanza’s interlocking *c* rhyme pairs the hazily described destination ‘afar’ (55: 492) with affirmation that a guiding ‘star’ beacons from where the eternal ‘are’, such that the contours of form hold the questing poet in suspension, apart from the ‘massy earth’ but without definitely entering the distant ‘abode’. Instead, where Shelley quests to is described only through relative terms, being ‘far from the shore, far from the trembling throng’. Crucially, to define the poet’s position relative to the ‘trembling throng’ who cannot embark on such a quest is to affirm the presence of a continued connection between the two parties, regardless of how precarious both the connection and the affirmation may be. Shelleyembodies the distance between a poet and his audience that *A Defence of Poetry* sees as both the necessary and the inevitable condition of poetry. But what makes this the most exhilarating and disconcerting stanza of the poem is its emphasis on poetic composition as a precarious quest in itself, one inseparable from risk-taking, as Shelley openly courts the prospect that this distance might become the kind of dislocation and despotism that would alienate the elegist from his readership.

Adapting the concerns of *Epipsychidion*, a poem that sought to reconcile a respect for alterity with a desire to join self and other in romantic union, *Adonais* embarks on a quest that is self-conscious of how the individuality of the quester might impact upon the elegist’s relationship with his readers. Sacks argues that by writing a poem that ‘surely concludes on a suicidal note’, Shelley has ‘somehow burst beyond the elegy as a genre’.[[427]](#footnote-427) However, it seems more fitting to read *Adonais* as an exploration of what Shelley considers to be one of the primary tensions of the elegy as genre, rather than as a poem that transcends it, as well as *A Defence of Poetry*’s conception of the paradoxical role of the poet. With quest refracted through the demands of the elegy, *Adonais* explores the difficulty of reconciling the poet with others in a genre that demands the poet engage with and influence his readers. The elegist’s ability to assume the role of an empowered quester capable of directing his reader is contingent on a separateness that simultaneously risks severing the link between the elegist and society. Like *Epipsychidion*, *Adonais* presents a quest built upon paradox and ‘pavilioned upon chaos’ (*Hellas*, 772), one that contains the germ of its own defeat. But while both works place the quester ‘neglected and apart’ (*Adonais*, 33: 296) at the centre of the poetry, they also affirm the extent to which quest is galvanised by the self’s conflicted though enduring alertness to ‘thought, action, or person not our own’ (*A Defence*, p. 682).

**CHAPTER FOUR:**

**‘Forever sought, forever lost’: Commencements and Conclusions in the Scrope Davies Notebook and *The Triumph of Life***

Shelley’s poetry exhibits an often dizzying pursuit of quest, quest subjected to intense questioning throughout his oeuvre. These questions often cluster around issues of movement, and this chapter explores how Shelley’s quest poetry wins its blend of purpose and precariousness from a deliberate interplay between journey and destination, or between the act of arriving at a specified target and a commitment to travelling as an end unto itself. Such issues come to the fore in the essay *On Life*, which asks: ‘For what are we? Whence do we come, and whither do we go? Is birth the commencement, is death the conclusion of our being? What is birth and death?’ (*On Life*, p. 634). In its insistent compounding of questions, the essay stands as an example of Shelley’s assertion, reported by Edward Trelawny, that ‘I always go on until I am stopped, and I never am stopped’.[[428]](#footnote-428) The interrogative salvo of *On Life* implies that such proliferated questioning might not bring the poet any closer to coherent answers; Shelley’s prose rides the waves of uncertainty, revelling in the way a state of not knowing becomes conducive to imaginative mobility.[[429]](#footnote-429) Yet while the remark recorded by Trelawny captures a characteristically Shelleyan impulse, *On Life* and Trelawny’s claim also exert subtle tensions upon one another.[[430]](#footnote-430) If ‘always go[ing] on until I am stopped’ represents a potential response to the existential uncertainty of ‘whence do we come, and whither do we go?’, the questions posed in Shelley’s essay suggest a desire to direct and orientate the potentially untargeted momentum of ‘I never am stopped’, and to reconcile movement with an awareness of the ‘commencement[s]’ and ‘conclusion[s]’ that lend shape not just to quest-narrative, but to all human experience. This interplay between untargeted voyaging and a preoccupation with commencements and conclusions is central to Shelley’s quest poetry. Focusing on ‘Upon the wandering winds’, ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, and *The Triumph of Life*, this chapter will present the earlier lyrics of the Scrope Davies Notebook as establishing an approach to motion, commencements, and conclusions that is subtly refined in the final, unfinished quest of *The Triumph of Life*.[[431]](#footnote-431)

**I.**

Like the poetry of the Scrope Davies Notebook, Shelley’s July 22 1816 letter to Thomas Love Peacock abounds with movement,[[432]](#footnote-432) with critics such as Judith Chernaik and Timothy Burnett,[[433]](#footnote-433) Michael O’Neill,[[434]](#footnote-434) and Angela Leighton,[[435]](#footnote-435) attesting to the shared thematic concerns of both letters and poetry from the summer of 1816. In its depiction of a region where ‘every thing changes & is in motion’ (*Letters of PBS*,I, 500), as well as its emphasis on the perpetuity of this motion,[[436]](#footnote-436) Shelley’s account of Chamonix’s glacial activity reveals the poet developing ideas that prove vital to his later writing on quest:

The glaciers perpetually move onwards at the rate of a foot each day with a motion that commences at the spot where, on the boundaries of perpetual congelation they are produced by the freezing of the waters which arise from the partial melting of the eternal snows. They drag with them from the regions whence they derive their origin all the ruins of the mountain, enormous rocks, & immense accumulations of sand & stones. These are driven onwards by the irresistible stream of solid ice & when they arrive at a declivity of the mountain sufficiently rapid, roll down scattering ruin.

(*Letters of PBS*,I, 498)

Subtle qualifications and shifts of thought abound, with the writing exhibiting an awed response to nature’s eschewal of fixity. Shelley courts paradox in the passage’s juxtaposition of apparently antithetical states as ‘freezing’ and ‘melting’ become interlinked and simultaneous processes in the construction of the glacier. The waters are engaged in a continuous process of ‘freezing’, rather than being ‘frozen’, and just as the present continuous tense of ‘freezing’ allows the verb to exist in perpetuity, transcending the stasis that the process of ‘freezing’ seems destined to reach, the ‘melting’ of the snows is qualified by their designation as ‘eternal’, and the fact that this melting is only ever ‘partial’. Vital to the description, however, is the attention Shelley affords to the ‘spot’ at which this movement ‘commences’ even as he presents these sites becoming obscured in the midst of motion. The glaciers are destructive of their own points of origin, dragging the mountain’s ‘immense accumulations’ of sand and stone until their origins are rendered ‘ruins’ by the force of this ‘irresistible stream’. The shift from active to passive construction in the final two sentences, such that the glaciers which first ‘drag’ the ‘ruins of the mountain’ are ultimately ‘driven onwards’ by their own gathered stream of ice, implies a motion that cannot be controlled. This is affirmed in the passage’s closing reference to an ‘arrival’, which marks not the glacier’s reaching of a point of terminus, but instead a ‘declivity of the mountain’ where movement is renewed and acceleration increased. When Shelley later offers the letter’s most definitive reference to the conclusion of a glacier’s existence, stating that ‘the glaciers must augment, & will subsist at least until they have overflowed this vale’ (*Letters of PBS*,I, 499), the qualifier ‘at least’ steers the description away from any forecasting of finality.

This account of glaciation as a process of eternal movement and perpetual becoming, with the glaciers both untethered from as well as destructive of their own sites of commencement and conclusion, teasingly seems to anticipate the concerns of deconstructive criticism, an approach that is often productively applied to Shelley’s writings.[[437]](#footnote-437) Amongst some deconstructive thought is a tendency to posit nihilism as the inevitable outcome of interminable motion, as in Paul de Man’s suggestion that ‘*The Triumph of Life* warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought or text, ever happens in relation, positive or negative, to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence’.[[438]](#footnote-438) de Man presents experience as a disorganised and potentially chaotic set of events, where the movement between different states or occurrences proceeds without any stable structuring principle. Yet Shelley’s letter blends his recognition of the scenes as ‘inexpressibly dreadful’ (*Letters of PBS*,I, 498) with his ‘excess of satisfied expectation’ (*Letters of PBS*,I, 495), revealing a tendency towards exhilaration as much as unease. The poet prizes motion rather than recoiling or retreating from it, as when Shelley evokes scientific discourses only to reject them in light of their perceived tendency to impose upon nature a more linear, regular pattern of movement:[[439]](#footnote-439)

Saussure the naturalist says that [glaciers] have their periods of increase & decay—the people of the country hold an opinion entirely different, but, as I judge, more probable. It is agreed by all that the snow on the summit of Mt. Blanc & the neighbouring mountains perpetually augment, & that ice in the form of glacier subsists without melting in the valley of Chamounix during its transient & variable summer.

(*Letters of PBS*,I, 499)

The passage prioritises first-hand experience of this ‘transient & variable summer’ as the ultimate authority in understanding the valley of Chamonix. For Shelley, movement is a force best understood through direct encounter and subjective response rather than detached study or objective description. This attitude is implicit in Shelley’s previously quoted suggestion that ‘the glaciers must augment’ (*Letters of PBS*,I, 499), where the modal ‘must’ retains an air of compulsion and even desire on the part of the poet. There, ripples of a barely concealed excitement threaten to break the surface of what elsewhere resembles more objective discussion. Likewise, in the opening of the letter, Shelley celebrates experiencing ‘the very excess of satisfied expectation, where expectation scarce acknowledged any boundary’ (*Letters of PBS*,I, 495), before moving on to ponder whether the act of writing ‘is to impress upon your mind the images which fill mine, even until it overflows?’ (*Letters of PBS*,I, 495). In its imagery of ‘overflow[ing]’, the statement recalls the glaciers and their own tendency to overwhelm ‘any boundary’ (*Letters of PBS*,I, 495). While this implied synchronicity between poet and observed scene confirms Shelley’s appreciation of motion as an example of ‘all that is majestic or beautiful in nature’ (*Letters of PBS*,I, 495), it also reveals the compelling power of movement in Shelley’s imagination, with the letter suggesting the poet’s desire to harness the energy of motion first hand.

The approach to movement defined within the letter is also evident in the poetry of the Scrope Davies Notebook. Shelley’s portrayal of Chamonix’s ‘transient & variable summer’ (*Letters of PBS*,I, 499) informs his development of an increasingly transient and variable poetics, which, in its insistent rejection of stillness, possesses affinities with the summits of Chamonix themselves, those pinnacles ‘whose overhanging steepness will not even permit snow to rest upon them’ (*Letters of PBS*,I, 500). The sonnet ‘Upon the wandering winds’, written contemporaneously to the letter,[[440]](#footnote-440) shares this eschewal of ‘rest’, but Shelley’s depiction of ceaseless movement also subordinates the questions of commencement and conclusion that shaped the poet’s understanding of Chamonix. Though the poem remains relatively under-examined since its discovery,[[441]](#footnote-441) Michael O’Neill offers a valuable account of its ‘miming [of] a sinuous drama of thought and feeling that is the more engrossing for never fully resolving into a final embrace or dismissal of the poet’s dreamed-of imaginative power’.[[442]](#footnote-442) The description hints towards the sonnet’s ability to wed its accelerating and shifting movements with a sense of irresolution, a quality of the writing that requires greater emphasis:

Upon the wandering winds that thro’ the sky

Still speed or slumber; on the waves of Ocean,

The forest depths that when the storm is nigh

Toss their grey pines with an inconstant motion,

The breath of evening that awakes no sound

But sends its spirit into all, the hush

Which, nurse of thought, old midnight pours around

A world whose pulse then beats not, o’er the gush

Of dawn, and whate’er else is musical

My thoughts have swept until they have resigned

Like lutes inforced by the divinest thrall

Of some sweet lady’s voice that which my mind

(Did not superior grace in others shewn

Forbid such pride) would dream were all its own.

(‘Upon the wandering winds’, 1-14)[[443]](#footnote-443)

The lines exemplify the kind of onward drive implied by ‘I always go on until I am stopped, and I never am stopped’.[[444]](#footnote-444) Any sites of commencement or conclusion are ‘swept’ aside in the constant motion of Shelley’s single sentence. Only two of the fourteen lines are lightly end-stopped with commas, and none are end-stopped after the opening four lines. By opening on what appears to be a subject-less preposition, the poem has the air of beginning in the midst of a rapidly unfolding process. The propulsive effect of the iambic ‘upon’ is enhanced by the assonance of the subsequent stressed syllable in ‘wandering’, and as the opening line skips through its sibilant and alliterative links, the word ‘still’ in line two emphatically lacks the pun on temporal and physical stasis that troubles Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ (‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, 1 & 26). Even in nature’s moments of silence and apparent stillness, Shelley’s emphasis remains on the continuous emergence of new atmospheres and states of existence. Sound and motion may appear to be at one, but the poem subtly stresses how as sound diminishes, movement consistently remains.[[445]](#footnote-445) Though the ‘breath of evening’ is said to ‘awake no sound’, the phrasing of ‘awake’ points up the beginning of a new state of ‘no sound’, rather than a suppression of previous music. Similarly, when midnight ‘pours around’ a hush and dawn arrives in a ‘gush’, the poem retains its sense of activity even in describing ‘a world whose pulse then beats not’. Temporal references to evening, midnight, and dawn act less as indicators of commencing and concluding days than a sign of nature’s commitment to perpetual change, a quality that the poetry itself embodies. The sonnet’s movements are all the more dazzling for their eschewal of straightforward linear progression. Neither the presence of human ‘thoughts’ nor the sentence’s main verb ‘swept’ are revealed until line ten, but that line serves to complicate as much as clarify the course of Shelley’s thought. Upon nature ‘my thoughts have swept until they have resigned’, Shelley declares, where ‘they’ might equally denote the scenes listed in lines one to nine or the poet’s ‘thoughts’ that sweep upon nature. ‘Resigned’, too, contributes to the ambiguity, with the term suggestive of either surrender or recreation, depending on the referent of ‘they’. The poet makes it unclear whether the line describes thoughts abandoning their belief that nature’s music is a product of the mind, or instead whether nature surrenders its claim to exist independently of human consciousness.

The rapidity with which the sonnet unfurls ensures that these uncertainties remain unresolved, a technique that is, in part, the result of Shelley’s control over poetic form. Stuart Curran points out that ‘Shelley is always conscious of the traditions against which his sonnets resonate and masterful in his use of form’,[[446]](#footnote-446) and the observation is borne out by the way that after line four, the poem’s enjambments partially skim over the quatrain divisions implied by the Shakespearean rhyme scheme,[[447]](#footnote-447) spinning the syntactical arabesque that drives the sonnet’s onward glide. When the run-on lines arrive at what is seemingly a *volta-*like shift into qualifying thought at line thirteen,[[448]](#footnote-448) recognising the ‘superior grace’ of others as a stay against Shelley’s own ‘pride’, the parentheses denote less the turn of a conventional *volta* than a site where separate strands of thought become swept up and intertwined in the poetry’s motion. Once the parentheses close, the poem’s prior clause surges on, ending the sonnet with affirmation of the poet’s capacity to ‘dream’, rather than the undercutting gesture contained within Shelley’s parentheses. To that end, the parenthesised statement also acts to partially obscure the clinching effect of the Shakespearean sonnet form’s final couplet, as if any air of closure or finality were unavailable in the midst of the poetry’s increasing pace.[[449]](#footnote-449) Shelley’s syntax disrupts epigrammatic resolution by segmenting the conclusion of the poem’s main clause—‘that which my mind/ […] / […] would dream were all its own’—across lines twelve and fourteen. It is testament to the sonnet’s zigzagging forward movements that this is not the only possible *volta* within the fourteen lines. Line nine, too, with its belated categorisation of all the scenes preceding it as ‘musical’, represents a further site where Shelley utilises a *volta­*-like shift as a means of subtly reorienting the poetry’s course. In each case, Shelley’s single sentence works to soften firm *voltas* and dampen the conclusive couplet in favour of a more fluid glide through the sonnet’s formal framework, one where, as in the letter to Peacock, ‘every thing changes & is in motion’ (*Letters of PBS*,I, 500).

‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’,[[450]](#footnote-450) composed like the letter and sonnet in the summer of 1816, represents a transitional text in tracing the evolution of Shelley’s approach to movement throughout 1816. Shelley’s account of the comings and goings of a ‘fleeting power’ (83) is consonant with the emphasis on movement seen throughout the Scrope Davies Notebook.[[451]](#footnote-451) However, distinctions between the 1816 fair copy transcribed in the Notebook (hereafter *1816*) and the 1817 version published in the *Examiner* (hereafter *1817*) reveal subtle variations in approach,[[452]](#footnote-452) with comparison between the two suggesting the developing role of motion in Shelley’s poetry.[[453]](#footnote-453) O’Neilldeclares that the ‘Hymn’ presents ‘Intellectual Beauty’ less as a ‘concept’ than as ‘an ideal inseparable from a process of questing’,[[454]](#footnote-454) and the poem’s two versions show Shelley consciously refining this emphasis on ‘process’ over ‘concept’, sharpening his depiction of movement into an enactment of quest. *1817* brings out what is implicit in *1816*; if, in *1816*, the ‘inconstant’ (*1816* & *1817*, 3) manifestations of Intellectual Beauty represent an exemplar of the kind of motion prized in the Scrope Davies Notebook, the refinements of *1817* show this movement becoming more explicitly attuned to quest-narrative. While *1816* implies the poet’s desire to give chase to that which is ‘fled’ (*1816* & *1817*, 10), the alterations of *1817* affirm Shelley’s determination to spotlight the experiential quality of movement, and to craft a poetics governed not just by alertness to motion, but also by the act of pursuit. Contrasts between the two versions of stanza 5, where the poet recounts his boyhood encounter with Intellectual Beauty, show this at work in the poetry:

While yet a boy I sought for Ghosts, and sped

Thro’ many a lonely chamber, vault and ruin

And starlight wood, with fearful step pursuing

Hopes of strange converse with the storied dead.

I called on that false name with which our youth is fed;

He heard me not—I saw them not—

When musing deeply on the lot

Of Life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing

All vocal things that live to bring

News of buds and blossoming—

Sudden thy shadow fell on me,

I shrieked and clasped my hands in extasy.

(*1816*, 49-60)

These lines bring variations in speed and motion to the fore. The surge of the opening line, owing to the burst of monosyllables as well as the proximity of caesura and enjambed line-ending, affirms the poet’s status as quester by using the first-person pronoun for the first occasion in the poem. The initial *abba* stanza revels in this rapidity in its vacillation between monosyllabic and polysyllabic rhymes. With the masculine rhymes ‘sped’ and ‘dead’ enclosing the comparatively hectic feminine rhyme of ‘ruin’ and ‘pursuing’, Shelley’s varied deployment of end-rhyme aids his orchestration of the poetry’s pace. In lines 56-59, the converging of the *b* and *d* rhyming sounds creates the effect of a triple rhyme in the run of ‘wooing’, ‘bring’, and ‘blossoming’. The suffix also recurs within this sequence in ‘musing’ (55) and ‘things’ (57), and this proliferation of similar sounds mimics the lulling of intensity that occurs in the poet’s act of ‘musing deeply’. The syntactical ambiguity of ‘when musing deeply on the lot’, which might either begin a new sentence or mark a continuation of ‘he heard me not—I saw them not’, compounds this sense of the poem swirling in the mists of contemplation. Amidst this lull, it is the rhyme on ‘blossoming’, almost Keatsian in the way it enacts the immediate bursting of the ‘buds’ described previously,[[455]](#footnote-455) that steers the stanza towards its ecstatic conclusion.

Compared with the final couplet of *1817*, however, the above lines dampen the climactic qualities of this closing movement, operating more as description than enactment. For William Keach, ‘Shelley’s language is often carefully articulated to convey the idea and the experience of speed’, but the two versions of the ‘Hymn’ suggest a division between idea and experience.[[456]](#footnote-456) By contrast, *1817* maximises the pay-off of the accelerations and decelerations that come before, with Shelley heightening the intensity of this encounter through his careful management of syntax and caesurae:

Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;

I shrieked, and clasped my hands in extacy!

(*1817*, 59-60)

Cian Duffy follows Angela Leighton in arguing that the moment draws ‘directly—albeit histrionically—on the language of the sublime’.[[457]](#footnote-457) Rather than being histrionic, *1817* revels in aesthetic pleasure and dramatic articulation in a way that *1816* does not. The addition of the caesura after ‘sudden’ magnifies the jolt of this opening trochaic substitution, and likewise, the semi-colon at the line-ending, only a comma in *1816*, strengthens the pause between lines, forcing the poem to hang in the bewilderment of the shadow’s ‘fall’. The addition of a comma after ‘shrieked’, too, points up the dramatic qualities of the poet’s outburst, allowing Shelley’s cry to echo through the caesura. Compared with *1816*, this shorter, more heavily-punctuated phrasing presents a sharper contrast with the longer run-ons of preceding lines, magnifying the shift from measured contemplation into exhilarating discovery. The precision with which the *1817* couplet renders these stops and starts captures the furore of the encounter and makes this a performative quality of the poetry, as what was previously a retrospective account of movement becomes a dizzying and altogether more enlivening enactment of quest.

Elsewhere across the two versions, Shelley’s differing depictions of Intellectual Beauty situate his preoccupation with motion within a context of questing. In both poems, the elusive ‘Power’ (*1816* & *1817*, 1) is defined by the teasing quality of its movements, and stanza 3 of *1817* strives to portray the object of pursuit in a way that best elicits the poet’s commitment to chase:

Thy light alone—like mists o’er mountains driven,

Or music by the night wind sent

Thro’ strings of some still instrument,

Or moonlight on a midnight stream,

Gives grace and truth to life’s unquiet dream.

(*1817*, 32-36)

The most vital amendment in the above lines is the address to ‘thy light alone’, which replaces *1816*’s reference to ‘thy shade alone’ (*1816*, 32). Shelley’s substitution of antonyms across the two versions is less a means of steering the stanza in divergent directions than a way of teasing out nuance. If describing the earthly manifestations of Intellectual Beauty as a ‘shade’ is in keeping with references elsewhere to the power as a ‘shadow’ (*1817*, 1), the use of ‘light’ renders this presence comparatively more legible. After the scepticism of the stanza’s previous lines, where Shelley affirms the ‘vain Endeavour’ (*1817*, 28) of seeking meaning in conventional religious doctrine, the glimmering quality of ‘light’ also offers a stronger note of optimism. Yet this luminosity is immediately placed under scrutiny in the similes that follow, which, in stressing this ‘light’ as flickering and wavering rather than a stable source of illumination, suggest the potential for ‘light’ to diminish, and for the antonyms of ‘light’ and ‘shade’ to slide into one another. In this context, *1817* prizes the word ‘light’ over ‘shade’ not for its additional clarity or for its ability to make the ‘unseen Power’ more visible (*1817*, 1), but rather for how light can be inconstant in a way that ‘shade’ cannot.

Shelley’s use of ‘light’ (*1817*, 32) gestures towards the heightened visibility of Intellectual Beauty only to introduce tensions between legibility and accessibility, a usage that is consonant with occurrences of ‘light’ elsewhere in the poet’s writing on quest.[[458]](#footnote-458) While the concordance to Shelley’s poetry outlines the various ways in which the poet uses ‘light’,[[459]](#footnote-459) the definitions offered fail to capture Shelley’s sense of light as mingling an alluring, compelling quality with an air of ethereality and remoteness. Though ‘light’ is frequently a means for Shelley to point up the dangerous though enticing possibility of quest, notably in *Alastor* and *Adonais*, most strikingly, the cross-version interplay of ‘light’ and ‘shade’ in the ‘Hymn’ anticipates the effects of *The Triumph of Life*’s ‘shape all light’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 352). The ‘shape all light’ is a force that ‘blot[s]’ (383) as much as it illuminates the poet’s consciousness, but also the light that inspires even as it tortures the ‘triumphal pageant’ (118), those who yearn ‘to reach the car of light which leaves them still / Farther behind and deeper in the shade’ (168-69). There, with ‘still’ hanging perilously on a enjambed line-ending that emphatically rejects ‘still[ness]’, the interplay between the run-on syntax and the stasis implied by ‘still’ becomes imitative of the way the poem pits desire against the prospect of its own thwarting. If, for Paul de Man, images of glimmering light are pivotal in establishing *The Triumph of Life*’s ‘condition of indetermination’,[[460]](#footnote-460) the *1816* and *1817* versions of the ‘Hymn’ show Shelley exploring these ideas in their nascent form, developing ideas that are integral to his later writing on quest. In abandoning *1816*’s reference to ‘shade’, *1817* uses ‘light’ not as a means of straightforwardly illuminating Intellectual Beauty but as a way of drawing the poet into engaging with its uncertain movements. The ambiguous blend of visibility and remoteness suggested by ‘light’ allows for a careful placement of Intellectual Beauty at a point seemingly within touching distance of the poet yet tantalisingly beyond his grasp, a quality that spurs the poem’s commitment to a process of continuous questing.

Shelley’s alertness to the value of inconstancy in stimulating quest-narrative is similarly evident in the train of similes that concludes stanza 1. Describing the appearances and disappearances of Intellectual Beauty, Shelley writes:

Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower

It visits with a wavering glance

Each human heart and countenance;—

Like hues and harmonies of evening—

Like clouds in starlight widely spread,

Like memory of music fled,

Like aught that for its grace might be

Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.

(*1817*, 5-12)

The passage’s veering away from totalising definition enables the continuation of Shelley’s chase, as Karen Weisman suggests when she argues for the presence of a Shelleyan ‘rhetoric that enables us to confront, if only tentatively, the process of displacement itself—but where displacement is understood as an elision of direct confrontation, not as an effacement of presence’.[[461]](#footnote-461) This subtly develops Tilottama Rajan’s work on the poem, which affirms that Intellectual Beauty ‘is a presence that can be conceived only as absence and shadow, a being that is accessible only as nothingness’.[[462]](#footnote-462) While both accounts are valuable for their sensitivity to Shelley’s refusal to dismiss the prospect of the shadow’s accessibility, each also risks downplaying the relish with which Shelley frames his chase for an object that remains ‘dearer for its mystery’, where the lightness of touch in the feminine rhyme of ‘might be’ and ‘mystery’ refuses fixities and definites, valorising the uncertainty of what something ‘might be’ over the definitiveness of what something is. Rajan’s sense of Intellectual Beauty as an absence or a shadow is complicated by Shelley’s insistence that the power represents a kind of ‘light’ (*1817*, 32), as in stanza 3, and likewise, the above passage retains an air of enlightenment even as it stops short of defining a fixed or stable image. In the self-consciousness of the sequence each simile draws attention to the speed with which it revises what comes before and is itself revised by what follows,[[463]](#footnote-463) an effect that is heightened by the stanza’s shift into shorter tetrameter lines. As the poetry cascades through its catalogue of possible likenesses, the movement into the firmer end-stops of lines seven to ten and the precise placement of the anaphoric ‘like’ has a deliberate, systematic air that exonerates the passage from any charge of uncontrolled profusion. Instead, Shelley strives for the deliberate and rapid involvement of various new angles of approach. Jerrold Hogle’s emphasis on the ‘hypothetical’ status of Intellectual Beauty is a useful lens through which to view the technique; following Richard Cronin,[[464]](#footnote-464) Hogle argues for the poem’s engagement in a process ‘that demands a sceptical hypothesis about the unknowable while insisting that what is hypothesised remain unknown’.[[465]](#footnote-465) The remark reflects the status of Shelley’s simile train as neither an emptying out of all potential stores of meaning nor an accretive building up to a final, stabilised image. Instead, Intellectual Beauty functions as ‘a “messenger” of interchange’ and an agent of coercion,[[466]](#footnote-466) recalling *A Defence of Poetry*’s description of ‘all high poetry’ as a site where ‘veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed’ (*A Defence*, p. 693). The tone of the passage is dictated by the concession that the object of comparison is ‘Like aught’, which seems balanced somewhere between an awed acceptance of ineffability and a playfulness that approaches teasing. The carefully managed syntax of lines eleven to twelve, where the caesura following the trochaic substitution of ‘dear’ allows Shelley to linger over ‘dear[ness]’ and ‘grace’, suggests the former as a more apt description. In either case, the impression is that without such a concession, the poem’s chain-reaction of similes might have continued indefinitely, and the value of Intellectual Beauty lies in its ability to spark this repeated renewing of perspective and approach. The effect is typical of the way in which Shelley’s ‘Hymn’ assimilates movement into a process of questing. Though the poem plaintively asks ‘where art thou gone?’ and ‘why dost thou pass away[?]’ (*1816* & *1817*, 15-16), it also prizes the inconstancy of Intellectual Beauty as that which allows the poet to partake in quest, and to engage in endlessly renewed efforts at following ‘the path of its departure’ (‘Mutability’, 14).

**II.**

Discussing his reading of Goethe’s *Faust*, a work alluded to in the opening of *The Triumph of Life*,[[467]](#footnote-467) Shelley’s letter to John Gisborne on April 10 1822 describes a play that ‘deepens the gloom & augments the rapidity of ideas, & would therefore seem to be an unfit study for any person who is a prey to the reproaches of memory, & the delusions of an imagination not to be restrained’.[[468]](#footnote-468) The remarks shed light on the development of *The Triumph of Life*, also composed in 1822, a poem that ‘deepens the gloom and augments the rapidity’ of Shelley’s earlier experiments in movement. Critics such as Donald Reiman,[[469]](#footnote-469) Michael O’Neill,[[470]](#footnote-470) Jerrold Hogle,[[471]](#footnote-471) and William Keach have considered *The Triumph of Life* as a poem of speed and process.[[472]](#footnote-472) As O’Neill writes, the poem ‘affects one as a process unfolding at speed; the lines one has read seem like the dazzling wake left by some tireless, onward-moving energy’.[[473]](#footnote-473) Yet Keach anticipates and dismisses any suggestion that Shelley might ‘habitually and indiscriminately pursue speed as an end in itself’, instead pointing up Shelley’s ability to turn ‘critically and even satirically against speed even as his writing evokes it’.[[474]](#footnote-474) While *The Triumph of Life* does, as Keach suggests, desire more than speed alone, the writing foregrounds the difficulty of determining a definitive end for its movements, lacking the clearly demarked sub-circles, levels, or spheres that structure the quest of its most obvious precursor, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.[[475]](#footnote-475) Where the two versions of ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ show Shelley assimilating the untargeted motion of ‘Upon the wandering winds’ within a quest towards a clearly specified albeit elusive target, *The Triumph of Life* resists any such assimilation.[[476]](#footnote-476) Teasing out the peril of the Shelleyan approach to motion, *The Triumph of Life* derives its power from being suspended between movement and quest.

Shelley’s response to John Gisborne’s continued meditations on *Faust* affirms the play’s significance as a context for *The Triumph of Life*. Having lamented ‘the narrow good we can attain in our present state’,[[477]](#footnote-477) Shelley counters his pessimism with the supposition that

Perhaps all discontent with the *less* (to use a Platonic sophism) supposes the sense of a just claim to the *greater*, & that we admirers of Faust are in the right road to Paradise.—Such a supposition is not more absurd, and is certainly less demoniacal than that of Wordsworth—where he says—

This earth,

Which is the world of all of us, & where

*We find our happiness or not at all*.

As if after 60 years of suffering here, we were to be roasted alive for 60 million more in Hell, or charitably annihilated by a coup de grace of the bungler, who brought us into existence at first.[[478]](#footnote-478)

For Shelley, Wordsworth’s pronouncement, taken from *The Prelude*,rankles for its dogmatic response to any questions of ‘where’, exhibiting a certainty that risks suppressing other-worldly aspirations. By contrast, Shelley’s belief that he and his fellow admirers of Faust are on ‘the right road to Paradise’ remains hedged in guarded phrasing and suppositions, providing evidence of a fragile yet persistently held commitment to searching. The terrain of the letter is also that of *The Triumph of Life*. In Shelley’s final poem, movement becomes a process of Faustian striving, governed chiefly by the compulsion that lay implicit though comparatively unstressed in ‘Upon the wandering winds’ and ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’. In this landscape the poet’s most effective recourse is his continued desire to seek, and to pursue the kind of targets and trajectories that might allow motion to crystallise into quest, even as Shelley entertains the prospect that these guiding principles represent something ‘forever sought, forever lost’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 431).

‘Forever sought, forever lost’: with its emphasis on an apparently interminable process of seeking, Shelley’s pronouncement is testament to the lure *The Triumph of Life* holdsfor deconstructive critics. In focusing on the poem’s tantalising ‘play of veiling and unveiling’, [[479]](#footnote-479) and on the way that ‘questions of origin, of direction, and of identity punctuate the text without ever receiving a clear answer’, Paul de Man’s reading is a case in point.[[480]](#footnote-480) Yet in doing so de Man tends towards an affirmation of the impossibility of succeeding in the ‘interpretative labour,[[481]](#footnote-481) where the phrasing suggests something of the way his analysis, occasionally instrumental in delineating the poem’s figures of ‘signification’,[[482]](#footnote-482) downplays the aesthetic potential uncovered in its own discussion. This chapter seeks to redress the balance. Writing in de Man’s wake, Tilottama Rajan’s comparatively optimistic account acts as a partial corrective to the nihilism often inseparable from deconstructive manoeuvres: ‘as a dream-vision in the medieval tradition, *The Triumph of Life* stands beyond irony and the desacralization of language: its gaze into the abyss is nevertheless a visionary act, and its fallen hero is privileged because he suffers’.[[483]](#footnote-483) In making this argument, however, Rajan risks overstatement in affirming the poetry’s power to ‘triumph over its own deconstruction of a visionary poetics’.[[484]](#footnote-484) I wish to consider how *The Triumph of Life* develops the tensions of Shelley’s earlier approach to movement rather than triumphing over them or acting as palinode.[[485]](#footnote-485) J. Hillis Miller, too, inhabits the territory laid out by de Man in foregrounding the poetry’s embodying of the ‘inexhaustible power of continuation’.[[486]](#footnote-486) Yet Hillis Miller’s ability to spotlight the desire underpinning *The Triumph of Life*, an experience shared by poet and reader alike,[[487]](#footnote-487) as well as his suggestion that the poetry’s self-erasures are ‘never total’,[[488]](#footnote-488) represent useful starting points for considering the ways in which Shelley might outflank de Man’s emphasis on ‘the randomness of […] occurrence’.[[489]](#footnote-489) Embodying Faustian striving in its suspended position between movement and quest, *The Triumph of Life*’s self-consciousness of both the power and pitfalls of desire allows Shelley to question the relationship between motion and quest while resisting the nihilism implied in de Man’s account.

Movement occupies a curious position in *The Triumph of Life*, seeming both constituent of and yet also distinct from teleological quest-narrative. The potential for friction between movement and quest comes to the fore in the poet’s observations of the ‘great stream’ (44) in thrall to a chariot at once dazzling and despotic:

Old age and youth, manhood and infancy,

Mixed in one mighty torrent did appear,

Some flying from the thing they feared and some

Seeking the object of another’s fear,

And others as with steps towards the tomb

Pored on the trodden worms that crawled beneath,

And others mournfully within the gloom

Of their own shadow walked, and called it death…

And some fled from it as it were a ghost,

Half fainting in the affliction of vain breath.

But more with motions which each other crossed

Pursued or shunned the shadows the clouds threw

Or birds within the noonday ether lost,

Upon that path where flowers never grew;

(52-65)

In depicting the frenetic crowd of revellers, the lines show their confusion as the product of entangled and contrasting desires. The second line of the second tercet is a case in point, where bookending the line with ‘some’ parades the logical twist of ‘some’ being lured towards the very object that others are driven away from. When Shelley describes a set of motions ‘which each other crossed’, the distinction between those who ‘pursue’ and those who ‘shun’ shadows seems close to arbitrary. While the movements of those that make up the crowd are not without reason, a quality that allows this motion to transcend any sense of movement for movement’s sake, the acts of pursuing and fleeing are presented as purely reactive endeavours. The scene depicts less a considered quest than a set of individuals in thrall to baser human instinct, evident in the passive construction that precedes the above passage, where Shelley describes those ‘borne amid the crowd’ (50). The implication is that to be ‘borne’ is very different than to enter life bearing questing ambitions of one’s own. As the crowd dances upon the barren, flowerless path, suggestive of their entwinement in unproductive patterns of motion, the poet implies his own desire to resist the ‘senseless’ (160) movement of the ‘perpetual flow’ (298).

Yet Shelley also acknowledges the potency of the desire that drives those among the procession. The group are shown to

Mix with each other in tempestuous measure

To savage music. . . .Wilder as it grows,

They, tortured by the agonising pleasure,

Convulsed and on the rapid whirlwinds spun

Of that fierce spirit, whose unholy leisure

Was soothed by mischief since the world begun,

Throw back their heads and loose their streaming hair,

And in their dance round her who dims the Sun

Maidens and youths fling their wild arms in air

As their feet twinkle;

(141-50)

Shelley adapts his own ‘tempestuous measure’ to shift between breakneck acceleration and carefully controlled syntax, capturing the power of the procession while avoiding succumbing to its ‘savage music’. The thrill of the writing lends complexity to what might otherwise resemble a more straightforward indictment of lust.[[490]](#footnote-490) Noting the self-consciousness of Shelley’s *terza rima*, Reiman suggests that while ‘Dante tends to make the tercet a closed unit like a couplet of Pope, Shelley emphasizes the interweaving of rhymes to develop long periods, the meaning rushing breathlessly from tercet to tercet’.[[491]](#footnote-491) Here, breathless rushing co-exists with measured consideration. There is a wry self-consciousness in the sequence of feminine rhymes ‘measure’, ‘pleasure’, and ‘leisure’, where the shift from the metapoetic resonances of ‘measure’ into ‘pleasure’ and ‘leisure’, terms that approach knowing understatement amidst the chaos of the scene, affirm Shelley’s own control while remaining in touch with the passions that the lines describe.[[492]](#footnote-492) When Shelley depicts those who ‘convulsed and on the rapid whirlwinds spun’, the position of ‘spun’ on the enjambed line-ending momentarily imbues this act of spinning with an air of intransitivity, as if the motion might continue interminably, before the run-on syntax introduces the object of ‘that fierce spirit’. Shelley rhymes on the plosive ‘spun’ with a tangible excitement that resurfaces in the onward rushing syntax of ‘maidens and youths fling their wild arms in air’. Spilling over from the previous tercet, the line’s subsequent elision of the definite article preceding ‘air’ contributes to the hurrying of the monosyllables. As O’Neill asserts, the fact ‘that life has conquered its victims is indisputable’.[[493]](#footnote-493) Yet Shelley’s use of form to ride the waves of the crowd’s incessant motion implies a determination to harness the energy of ‘the rapid whirlwinds’ of desire, albeit in a way that transcends the ‘savage[ry]’ of mindless movement. Even in apparent critique, Shelley valorises movement and desire as forces that might galvanise quest-narrative.

When Rousseau emerges in the poem like ‘an old root which grew / To strange distortion out of the hillside’ (182-83), the description is suggestive of the Dantescan concept of *contrapasso*, as the naturalist Rousseau harrowingly becomes at one with the landscape he revered. Crucially, the term ‘root’ stays in touch with its homonymic and homophonic relations of ‘root’ as origin as well as ‘route’ as pathway, reminiscent of de Man’s comment on the way that ‘questions of origin, of direction, and of identity punctuate the text’.[[494]](#footnote-494) The portrait of Rousseau shows these questions clustering around his character. Beginning his narrative, Rousseau tells the narrator that ‘Before thy memory / I feared, loved, hated, suffered, did and died’ (199-200). Verbs flood the line, but this intense proliferation of activity begs the question of to what end Rousseau acted, as if Rousseau, despite his status as a former man of action, lacked a coherent quest by which to focus these energies. With ‘died’ growing out of a near internal-rhyme with the previous verb in the list, ‘did’, Shelley comes close to suggesting that to ‘do’ or to act in this apparently untargeted manner is akin to a state near death, even as the pace of the writing enthrals the reader, making them complicit in this surge through the experience of life. Stuart Sperry sees Rousseau’s embodying of desire as Shelley’s primary motive for selecting him as guide for the poet of *The Triumph of Life*,[[495]](#footnote-495) while Richard Cronin cites Rousseau’s status as an ambivalent, potentially unreliable recasting of the comparatively ‘reliable’ guides of *The Divine Comedy*.[[496]](#footnote-496) Most significantly, Rousseau becomes emblematic of the way the poem forces desire to mingle with and rub up against uncertainties of quest, origin, and direction, as when Rousseau later declares himself to have been ‘overcome’ by his ‘heart alone’, which ‘neither age / Nor tears nor infamy nor now the tomb / Could temper to its object’ (241-43).

If Shelley’s proliferated verbs suggest that Rousseau is, as the narrator remarks, ‘indeed one of that deluded crew’ (184), Rousseau’s responses to the narrator’s questions suggest his distinction from the chaos of the dance:

‘Whence camest thou and whither goest thou?

How did thy course begin,’ I said, ‘and why?

‘Mine eyes are sick of this perpetual flow

Of people, and my heart of one sad thought.—

Speak.’—‘Whence I came, partly I seem to know,

‘And how and by what paths I have been brought

To this dread pass, methinks even thou mayst guess;

Why this should be my mind can compass not’

(296-303)

‘Whence I came, partly I seem to know’: the qualifiers ‘partly’ and ‘seem’ epitomise *The Triumph of Life*’s liminal position between movement and quest. For all its tentativeness, the remark posits an origin, however obscured, for Rousseau’s existence. It also demonstrates the poem’s tendency to comprehend movement in before and after terms, recalling ‘To a Skylark’: ‘We look before and after, / And pine for what is not’ (‘To a Skylark’, 86-7). Shelley’s entrusting to notions of ‘before and after’ shows his poem stopping short of teleological narrative even as it problematises Paul de Man’s overstatement that *The Triumph of Life* ‘warns us that nothing […] ever happens in relation […] to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence’.[[497]](#footnote-497) In Rousseau’s commentary, the potentially arbitrary quality of human experience remains a looming threat, but Shelley avoids any total embrace of ‘the randomness of […] occurrence’.[[498]](#footnote-498) Rousseau meditates on but seems unable to clarify the paths by which he has ‘been brought / To this dread pass’, but in affirming the license of the narrator and reader to ‘guess’, Shelley shows that the obscuring of these paths does not necessarily equate to their absence.[[499]](#footnote-499) For de Man, the structure of *The Triumph of Life* ‘is not one of question and answer, but of a question whose meaning, as question, is effaced from the moment it is asked. The answer to the question is another question, asking what and why one asked, and thus receding ever further from the original enquiry’.[[500]](#footnote-500) Here, the poem’s inability to offer an unqualified response to the poet’s queries represents less a linear recession away from meaning than an adaption of the simile-trains of ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’. Like Shelley’s earlier lyric, the passage from *The Triumph of Life g*estures towards an opening up of new angles of approach, of new windows that might shed light onto the routes and pathways that give shape to human experience. Yet Rousseau’s response leaves these doors only partially open. Whereas the ‘Hymn’, in the precision of its anaphoric repetition of ‘like’, is capable of moving cleanly from vantage point to vantage point, in *The Triumph of Life*,any opening is never straightforwardly accessible.

Shelley’s manipulation of *terza rima* becomes the contrapuntal technique to the anaphora of the ‘Hymn’. In deviating from the comparatively ordered tercets of Dantescan and Petrarchan models,[[501]](#footnote-501) Shelleyan *terza rima* becomes the ideal vehicle for statements such as ‘whence I came, partly I seem to know’ (300), and for the poem’s approach to movement in before and after terms.[[502]](#footnote-502) If, as Richard Cronin observes, Shelley ‘exploits the continuity of […] a verse form in which each stanza is connected by rhyme both with its predecessor and its successor’,[[503]](#footnote-503) the passage’s half-rhymes simultaneously embrace the continuity afforded by the sequential and place continuity under strain. Questioned ‘whither goest thou?’ in the midst of the ‘perpetual flow’, Rousseau reveals this as a truth he can only partly ‘know’. Similarly, as Rousseau focuses his ‘thought’ on the issue of from whence he was ‘brought’, this is revealed to be a truth his mind can compass ‘not’. ‘Thou’ / ‘flow’ / ‘know’ and ‘thought’ / ‘brought’ / ‘not’ (296-303): where the ‘Hymn’ moves between openings, the half-rhymes of *The Triumph of Life* stage a near yet never total unravelling of Rousseau’s grasp on issues of origin and direction.[[504]](#footnote-504) When Cronin describes the poem as ‘a sequence of carefully constructed uncertainties’,[[505]](#footnote-505) his remarks reflect the way that Shelley entrusts to the sequential, for all of its precariousness, as a way of avoiding nihilism amidst the uncertainty of movement, even as a reliance on the sequential seems to consciously fall short of fully-formed, causally motivated quest.

Shelley’s approach is summed up when Rousseau, continuing his narrative, recalls himself asleep amid a grove of ‘soft grass’ and ‘sweet flowers’ (308, 316, 317). Rousseau declares that

‘Whether my life had been before that sleep

The Heaven which I imagine, or a Hell

‘Like the harsh world in which I wake to weep,

I know not’.

(332-35)

The lines acknowledge that the here and now is not a moment of total isolation, instead being preceded by that which came ‘before’, but the precise nature of the previous experience, and exactly how the movement between the two took place, remains uncertain. Yet in Rousseau’s state of ‘know[ing] not’, scepticism is not a means of ruling things out, or of shutting down possibilities. If, for de Man, ‘we have no assurance whatever that the forgotten ever existed’,[[506]](#footnote-506) Shelley also refuses to offer the inverse assurance. Instead, as Rajan affirms, Rousseau ‘does not make a final judgement of the illusoriness of the good’,[[507]](#footnote-507) and this absence of totalising judgement is not of a nihilistic slant, nor is it the product of a ‘mandarin, self-delighting scepticism’.[[508]](#footnote-508) While the lines reveal an even less certain grasp on issues of origin than Rousseau’s previous assertion that ‘whence I came, partly I seem to know’ (300), they also ensure that Rousseau’s capacity to ‘imagine’ persists,[[509]](#footnote-509) opting not for the comparatively pessimistic past tense of ‘imagined’. The poem evokes the binary of Heaven and Hell only to suspend itself between possibilities.[[510]](#footnote-510) Shelley presents uncertainty as a state conducive to outcomes both positive and negative, but also as one capable of mobilising the imagination.

If the crowd are ‘senseless’ (160) in embracing the inherent human inclination towards motion, what distinguishes both Rousseau and the poet is a willingness to pose these potentially unanswerable questions of experience,[[511]](#footnote-511) and to attempt to understand the role of movement in the grander scheme of human lives. The implication is that the poet’s questioning of Rousseau might allow him to work towards a way of living other than merging with the ‘perpetual flow’ (298). Yet the efficacy of this manoeuvre, and its potential to convert movement into quest, remains subject to question, as when Rousseau purports to lay out the ways in which the poet might approach life:

‘But follow thou, and from spectator turn

Actor or victim in this wretchedness,

‘And what thou wouldst be taught I then may learn

From thee’.

(305-8)

The command that the narrator embrace the flux of human life is suggestive of Shelley’s sense of movement as a coercive force, resonating with his earlier sense that the glaciers of Chamonix ‘must’ augment (*Letters of PBS*, I, 499), or, more obliquely, the Promethean notion of ‘Methinks I grow like what I contemplate’ (*Prometheus Unbound*, I. 450). However, the significance of Rousseau’s instruction to ‘turn’ lies in its affinity with a Shelleyan technique identified by Richard Cronin, who affirms the way in which Shelley’s ‘language suggests oppositions and contrasts, but prevents the reader from fixing his attitude towards them’.[[512]](#footnote-512) The almost urbane quality of Shelley’s tone problematises Hugh Roberts’s reading of the scene: ‘it stands as a contingent point of bifurcation, a road not taken that invites us to inquire what it might mean if the narrator did “turn actor of victim” in the dance of which they remain decidedly abstracted narrators’.[[513]](#footnote-513) Shelley’s lines deconstruct the possibility of any stable ‘point of bifurcation’. The construction of ‘actor or victim’, in the double ringing out of ‘or’, draws attention to and invites questions of its own ‘either/or’ formula. The phrasing contains within it a sense of verbal lag, reflecting readings of the poem as a recursive rather than straightforwardly propulsive endeavour.[[514]](#footnote-514) Coming hot on the heels of the enjambed line-ending of ‘turn’, where form gestures towards the poem’s commitment to rapidly shifting states, the internal rhyme of ‘actor or’ creates a stuttering effect, as if to suggest that the transition from ‘spectator’ to ‘actor or victim’ may not be as smooth as the run-on syntax suggests. Though Shelley tempts us into seeing Rousseau’s instruction as an offering up of directions, the phrasing’s sardonic edge implies that this is less a ‘road not taken’ than a potential trapdoor.[[515]](#footnote-515) Consequently, when Roberts asserts that ‘the apparent nightmare of life’s dance is a product of incorrect seeing, or choosing an inappropriate scale’,[[516]](#footnote-516) he follows the line of argument established by Jerrold Hogle, who argues that *The Triumph of Life* ‘highlights a moment of choice, hints at the better choice, and laments the effects of the wrong choice so often made throughout Western history, even as the poem’s organization allows the reader either to see or to ignore the fact that there is a choice’.[[517]](#footnote-517) Yet Shelley builds into the poem a sense that definitively locating the correct approach is a near impossible task, ensuring that possible directions never crystallise into coherent lines of approach. Instead, the closest thing to ‘the right approach’ in *The Triumph of Life* is not to take any apparent pathways, such as those outlined by Rousseau, at face value, but to approach origins and directions as something to be discovered.

As Shelley makes clear, the narrator’s dilemma is not that of a straightforward choice between alternative positions, or a case of opting for the way of Rousseau as opposed to the way of the crowd. When the narrator moves to reject both the dance and Rousseau’s instructions, the description, steeped in grandeur, has the air of a final word on the motion that defines life:

…‘Let them pass’,

I cried, ‘—the world and its mysterious doom

‘Is not so much more glorious than it was

That I desire to worship those who drew

New figures on its false and fragile glass

‘As the old faded.’ — ‘Figures ever new

Rise on the bubble, paint them how you may;

We have but thrown, as those before us threw,

‘Our shadows on it as it passed away.

But mark, how chained to the triumphal chair

The mighty phantoms of an elder day—

(243-53)

Following the grim sight of Napoleon’s ‘destroyed’ greatness (219), the narrator’s pronouncement seemingly shows the poem building to a crescendo, lifting itself beyond the pull of life’s myriad uncertainties. The aesthetic power of the lines makes them more than ‘a sad parody of Shelley’s earlier symbol for life as infinite potentiality’,[[518]](#footnote-518) and such is the potency of this nihilistic turning away from the flux of life that the position seems dangled before readers as a conclusive outlook. Yet the energy and intensity of the writing, along with the presence of Rousseau’s equally potent rebuke, refuses the conclusiveness its tone suggests, preventing the poem from assenting to any fixed stance of detachment. Shelley’s language embodies the movement that its narrator ostensibly rejects, with the verve of the poetry suggesting the possibility of adopting a more positive anti-nihilistic stance. In the account of ‘those who drew / New figures on its false and fragile glass / As the old faded’, Shelley’s enjambment works mimetically, suggesting the writing’s complicity in the stream of life’s ever fading ‘figures’. But the technique operates in conjunction with the internal-rhyme of ‘who drew / New’, where this more insistent repetition of sounds stamps the poetry with an air of affirmation, contrasting with the lightness of touch suggested by the absence of end-stops. Evanescence may be inevitable, but Shelley’s insistent repetition of the ‘drew’ sound keeps in play the option of assuming an active role. The poet valorises the act of ‘drawing’ on life’s ever-changing canvas even as the narrator appears to turn away from it, revealing the possibility of making a more lasting imprint on the ‘glass’ of human life.

For all of the narrator’s resolve, the poetry’s underlying ambivalence makes these lines consistent with Shelley’s ongoing search for an appropriate course, as if the proclamation ‘let them pass’ (243) were the latest in the poem’s series of exploratory positions. If the narrator seems intent on articulating a rejection of life free from ambivalence, and on concluding his quest by rejecting motion, Shelley has Rousseau reiterate the inexorable conditions of his involvement. Amending the narrator’s pronouns from the detached third person to the first person of ‘we’ and ‘us’, he declares that ‘we have but thrown, as those before us threw / Our shadows’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 250-51). The active task of painting life’s figures on a ‘false and fragile glass’ (247) is restaged as a passive casting of shadows, revealing the narrator’s claims to be apart from the mutability of life as a near-foolhardy gesture.[[519]](#footnote-519) Though movement and quest remain, at this juncture of the poem, unnervingly distinct, the pull of movement remains as potent as ever, and the poem’s attitude towards motion continues to be marked by flux.

In a poem that is ‘both labyrinthine and elegantly ordered’ the closest thing to a centrepiece is Rousseau’s dialogue with the ‘shape all light’ (352), [[520]](#footnote-520) though this centrepiece is built on shifting and unstable foundations. Discussing ‘Mont Blanc’, Geoffrey Hartman writes of the way that Shelley ‘aspires to express a metareferential presence, a transcendental signified, the obscure object of desire’,[[521]](#footnote-521) and Rousseau’s encounter with the ‘shape all light’ bespeaks a similar impulse. Hartman’s emphasis on aspiration is appropriate. Much like the grandeur of Shelley’s ‘let them pass’ (243) pronouncement, Rousseau’s encounter with the ‘shape all light’ is climactic without being conclusive. Though framed as a meeting between the quester and the archetypal object of desire, the encounter is marked by Shelley’s awareness of the difficulty of pinning down the shape to any single meaning:

‘And still her feet, no less than the sweet tune

To which they moved, seemed as they moved, to blot

The thoughts of him who gazed on them, and soon

‘All that was seemed as if it had been not,

As if the gazer’s mind was strewn beneath

Her feet like embers, and she, thought by thought,

‘Trampled its fires into the dust of death

(382-88)

Following Angela Leighton,[[522]](#footnote-522) Sperry considers the lines as a revision of *A Defence of Poetry*’s metaphor of the mind as a fading coal.[[523]](#footnote-523) For him, with the shape ‘actively trampl[ing] out the very thoughts she inspires’, ‘the whole task of representation comes to seem hopeless’.[[524]](#footnote-524) Yet the ambivalence with which Shelley renders the shape again steers the poetry away from an acceptance of nihilism. The presence of ‘seemed’ and ‘as if’ cultivate uncertainty. When Sperry suggestively declares that the shape ‘transfigures with delight and at the same time vitiates all attempts to fix or to conceptualise her presence’,[[525]](#footnote-525) his emphasis on ‘all attempts’ throws open the possibility of subverting his own conceptualisation of the shape as embodying representational ‘hopeless[ness]’. The knowingness with which the lines create ambiguity is evident in Shelley’s depiction of the shape’s ‘feet’. Considering these ‘feet’ alongside previous references to musical ‘measure’ (377), de Man states that

since measure is any principle of linguistic organisation, not only as rhyme and meter but as any syntactical or grammatical scansion, one can read “feet” not just as the poetic meter that is so conspicuously evident in the *terza rima* of the poem, but as any principle of signification.[[526]](#footnote-526)

If the ‘feet’ refer to a kind of organising principle, also significant is the way that these feet move around on the page, thwarting the attempts of onlookers to track their motion. Shelley’s use of the term ‘feet’ offers a wry allusion to principles of organisation even as these particular ‘feet’ disorganise the minds of onlookers. The technique is a reminder that if any organising principle is to underpin *The Triumph of Life*, it is the inevitability of flux.[[527]](#footnote-527) The incessant movement of the feet is indicative of their refusal to adhere to any fixed pattern or form, and in that regard, de Man’s suggestion that the shape becomes ‘the figure for the figurality of all signification’ strikingly exemplifies Shelley’s ability to outmanoeuvre critical tendencies towards allegory.[[528]](#footnote-528) The movement of the feet seems alternately like a ‘tread’ (370), a ‘kiss’ (370), a ‘glide’ (371), and a ‘trample’ (388), an ambiguity noted by de Man,[[529]](#footnote-529) and the shifting of the image suggests a set of feet that avoid leaving behind any clear footprint of meaning. Yet any embrace of the ‘randomness of occurrence’ is kept at bay.[[530]](#footnote-530) As Madeleine Callaghan writes, ‘ambivalence, rather than confusion, becomes the hallmark of Shelley’s art’,[[531]](#footnote-531) and this is likewise the case for Shelley’s approach to motion. The shape’s movement is made to seem choreographed rather than arbitrary, trampling ‘thought by thought’. The systematic quality of the repetition paradoxically lends stability and composure to the writing even as Shelley emphasises the disintegration of thought. Consistent with *The Triumph of Life* as a whole is this sense of Shelley offering traces of order in a scene of apparent chaos, such that an inability to comprehend or understand does not necessarily equate to an absence of structure. The lines simultaneously attempt to get to grips with movement and concede the difficulty of doing so. Shelley ensures that the seductive, alluring qualities of motion co-exist with imagery that prompts more disconcerting questions, affirming movement as a state inextricable from uncertainty.

Rousseau’s response demonstrates how the uncertainties of motion prompt potentially unanswerable questions of quest. Fearful that the shape may disappear before it offers any stable truth, Rousseau follows its display with a set of queries that, in their desperation, verge on instruction:

‘[…] and ere she ceased

‘To move, as one between desire and shame

Suspended, I said—“If, as it doth seem,

Thou comest from the realm without a name

‘“Into this valley of perpetual dream,

Show whence I came, and where I am, and why—

Pass not away upon the passing stream.”

(393-99)

As in the ‘let them pass’ (243) speech, Shelley tacitly acknowledges the centrality of motion in human experience, even as he articulates a desire for something more than movement alone. Making his enquiries as ‘one between desire and shame / Suspended’, Rousseau’s questions reflect an innate human ‘desire’ to ask questions of origin and direction that was similarly evident in his first encounter with the narrator—‘“Whence camest thou and whither goest thou? / How did thy course begin,” I said, “and why?”’ (296-7). Yet the presence of ‘shame’ as counter-balance keeps in check the desire to definitively know, and Rousseau’s questions come close to conceding their own inefficacy. His assumption that the shape bears his desired knowledge is predicated on a speculative ‘if’, and the vagueness of the references to ‘the realm without a name’ and the ‘valley of perpetual dream’ spotlights the speculative foundations of his enquiries. The enjambment of ‘desire and shame / Suspended’ works mimetically, a technique that recalls the run-on syntax of Rousseau’s command that the narrator ‘turn / Actor or victim’ (305-6). There, the combination of enjambment and internal-rhyme complicates the possibility of achieving any clearly defined ‘turn’. In the construction of ‘between desire and shame / Suspended’, the propulsion of the enjambment shows that to be ‘suspended’ in a state of irresolution is not to be static, but to enter a realm conducive to further motion.[[532]](#footnote-532) Curiously, the lines ask questions of ‘whence’, ‘where’, and ‘why’ but omit any question of future direction, the ‘whither goest thou?’ (296) aspect of the enquiry voiced earlier by the narrator. Rousseau seemingly concedes that his onward journey will be that which he implores the shape not to take, a succumbing to the experience of the ‘passing stream’ that may, or may not, yield answers to his questions.

Responding to this cry, the shape commands Rousseau to ‘arise and quench thy thirst’ (400), sparking a transformation of consciousness. In this poem full of uncertain pathways, the lines shape a scenario that reflects in miniature Shelleyan concerns with movement, direction, and quest:

‘I rose; and, bending at her sweet command,

Touched with faint lips the cup she raised,

And suddenly my brain became as sand

‘Where the first wave had more than half erased

The track of deer in desert Labrador,

Whilst the fierce wolf from which they fled amazed

‘Leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore

Until the second bursts—so on my sight

Burst a new Vision never seen before.—

(403-11)

Simile, as O’Neill suggests, takes on ‘the burden of locating meaning’,[[533]](#footnote-533) but the burden of navigating towards meaning is also shown to vivify the poetry. On first impression, ‘And suddenly my brain became as sand’ reads as if it were the conclusion of the sentence, a sense enhanced by its position at the end of the opening tercet. Yet the absence of an end-stop suggests that the described dissolution of consciousness is not disabling in any kind of poetic sense, as Shelley immediately moves to extend the comparatively straightforward simile of the brain as sand. Rousseau’s brain is described as sand on a shore ‘where the first wave had more than half erased / The track of deer’, and the lines gain complexity from their subtle qualifications and shifts in thought. That this is only the ‘first’ wave foreshadows the appearance of the second wave later in the passage, and the phrase ‘more than half erased’ works in two ways, emphasising the process of erasure through ‘more’, and partially drawing back from these more emphatic undertones through ‘half’. At this point in the second tercet, with the simile self-contained and apparently concluded, Shelley compounds a further scenario upon the initial formula of the brain as sand marked by ‘track of deer’, attributing these tracks to the deers’ flight from the ‘fierce wolf’ that ‘leaves his stamp visibly upon the shore / Until the second [wave] bursts’. Fittingly, given the figurative language’s chase after meaning, the simile here transforms itself into one of pursuit, a shift that suggests the self-consciousness of Shelley’s method.

While the sequence is, like the feet of the shape all light, difficult to track for onlookers, lacking the organising anaphoric ‘like’ of the simile train in ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, it also works to construct a more continuous pathway through uncertainty than that of the earlier poem. Here, rather than cycling through a catalogue of potential angles of approach, Shelley builds up the precision of the simile through the inclusion of new scenarios that suggest their contingency on and development of those which come before, even as this contingency seems precariously in the balance, at risk of being lost in the pace and complexity with which the description unfolds.[[534]](#footnote-534) To read this intricate simile as it unfurls line by line, beginning with the image of the brain as sand and concluding at the final shoreline, is to become complicit in the state, described earlier by Rousseau, of ‘whence I came, partly I seem to know’ (300). Like Rousseau’s claim, Shelley’s simile relies on the sequential as the anchor capable of wresting significance from the flux of experience. But if this acts as a stay against nihilism, the poem nevertheless exists on the brink of nothingness. Symptomatic of the way *The Triumph of Life* prevents movement from crystallising into fully-fledged teleology is the presence of the line ‘Until the second bursts—’ (410), where the arrival of the second wave abruptly ends the simile’s progression, threatening to cancel out the images that come before. Yet the strength of Shelley’s imagery avoids any sense that the simile has come to nothing. A commitment to constructing rather than merely erasing meaning is evident in the way the sand that initially represents dissolution and disintegration eventually becomes a shoreline ripe for re-inscription.[[535]](#footnote-535) The decision to leave readers with this image recalls Rousseau’s declaration that ‘Figures ever new / Rise on the bubble, paint them how you may’ (248-49), where ‘paint them how you may’ implies humanity’s inability to influence a world of continually passing figures but nevertheless gestures towards the poet’s ability to assume agency and ‘paint’. In the above lines, when Rousseau concludes by announcing ‘so on my sight / Burst a new Vision’, Shelley’s ‘so’ seems peculiarly demonstrative given the near-bewildering description that comes before, drawing attention to itself as a knowing final flourish. The rhyme of ‘erased’ and ‘amazed’ contributes to this air, with ‘amazed’ incorporating the various meanings of ‘bewildered’, ‘struck with sudden terror’, and ‘lost in wonder or astonishment’.[[536]](#footnote-536) While the passage seems on the brink of embracing erasure, the ‘erased’ / ‘amazed’ pairing points up the way this process goes hand in hand with wonderment. The dynamism with which the simile constructs meaning while affirming its own precariousness is characteristic of the way Shelley sustains tensions between movement and quest through poetry replete with aesthetic potential.

In lines near the end of the fragment, Shelley pays homage to Dante in a manner that is simultaneously an affirmation of his poetic independence:

‘Before the chariot had begun to climb

The opposing steep of that mysterious dell,

Behold a wonder worthy of the rhyme

‘Of him who from the lowest depths of Hell

Through every Paradise and through all glory

Love led serene, and who returned to tell

‘In words of hate and awe the wondrous story

How all things are transfigured, except Love’

(469-76)

With ‘rhyme’ parading its status as a rhyming term, the reference to ‘a wonder worthy of the rhyme’ becomes descriptive not just of the onward rushing chariot, but also of *The Triumph of Life* as a poem. The passage is suggestive of qualities that *The Triumph of Life* possesses as well as those which it lacks, revealing both a longing for the stable questing trajectory of Dante and an acknowledgement of the conditions that afford *The Triumph of Life* its unique power. Dante’s quest, led by Virgil and Beatrice, is mapped out in Shelleyan *terza rima* that describes a journey of carefully ordered progression ‘from Hell / Through every Paradise’, where ‘Love’ is the beacon that provides structure to the potential shapelessness of human experience. Such stability is conspicuously absent from *The Triumph of Life*, but the poem also refuses to assent to ‘the randomness of occurrence’.[[537]](#footnote-537) Instead, Shelley crafts a work where the techniques established in the Scrope Davies Notebook achieve their fullest form. While the 1816 and 1817 versions of ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ show the poet exploring the compatibility of movement and quest, repositioning Intellectual Beauty in a manner that incorporates motion into a process of pursuit, *The Triumph of Life* embraces the friction between ‘I always go on until I am stopped, and I never am stopped’ and questions of ‘Whence do we come, and whither do we go?’ (*On Life*, p. 634).[[538]](#footnote-538) By depicting a landscape of shimmering, half-formed potential pathways that proliferate through the writing only to reveal themselves as something ‘forever sought, forever lost’ (431), the poem battles to stay in touch with the questions of origin, direction, and conclusion that risk being swallowed up in motion’s wake. When F. R. Leavis describes a poetic terrain where ‘vision opens into vision, dream unfolds within dream, and the visionary perspectives […] shift elusively and are lost’,[[539]](#footnote-539) his emphasis on ‘loss’ attends to only one side of the ‘forever sought, forever lost’ (431) equation. *The Triumph of Life* is a poem of deliberate ‘open[ing]’ out and ‘unfold[ing]’, as Shelley valorises the act of seeking even as he affirms that ‘veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed’ (*A Defence*, p. 693). In suspending his final, unfinished poem between movement and quest, Shelley’s artistry lies in his ability to show the objects and origins of his questing flicker teasingly in and out of sight, while ensuring that the prospect of their discovery never fully recedes from gaze.

**Part Three: ‘As high a summit in Poetry’: Keats’s Quest towards Capable Poethood**

**CHAPTER FIVE:**

**‘Verses fit to live’: Wielding and Yielding in *Sleep and Poetry* and *Endymion***

*Sleep and Poetry* and *Endymion* present the Keatsian quest as predicated on exploration and innovation, as Keats aspires to a heightening of poetic capability through the production of a longer work of poetry. Though Harold Bloom cites *Endymion* as a key text in the development of the Romantic approach to quest,[[540]](#footnote-540) a mode in which ‘the internalization of quest-romance made of the poet-hero a seeker […] after his own mature powers’,[[541]](#footnote-541) he also argues that the poem reveals quest as a lost, impossible concept: ‘the mazes of romance in *Endymion* are so winding that they suggest the contrary to vision, a labyrinthine nature in which all quest must be forlorn. In this realm, nothing narrows to an intensity, and every passionate impulse widens out to a diffuseness’.[[542]](#footnote-542) Yet *Endymion*’s commitment to an exploratory brand of questing means the poem transcends such a fate, even as Keats’s self-deprecatory Preface presents the poet as struggling under the disappointment of his apparently inadequate verse: ‘it is just that this youngster should die away; a sad thought for me, if I had not some hope that while it is dwindling I may be plotting, and fitting myself for verses fit to live’ (‘Preface to *Endymion*’, p. 505). This concern with the ‘life’ of poetry and the extent to which the poet’s voice is able to ‘live’ within their work is a preoccupation that extends throughout Keats’s quest poetry. But by renouncing *Endymion* as a failed albeit necessary precursor to his future assumption of poetic ‘life’, Keats downplays the formal innovations of a poem that is equally keen to assert its own autonomy, with these references to ‘plotting’ and ‘fitting myself’ pointing up the poem’s status as an exercise in self-fashioning. If *Endymion* is, as Keats frames it, ‘a test, a trial of my Powers of Imagination and chiefly of my invention’, it is the poet’s manipulation of the heroic couplet, a form inextricable from ideas of heroism and the epic, that sustains his quest to ‘make 4000 Lines of one bare circumstance’.[[543]](#footnote-543) While historically dismissed as a work of vulgar or even absent versification,[[544]](#footnote-544) *Endymion*’s capricious couplets suggest a greater achievement,[[545]](#footnote-545) demonstrating the poet’s vacillation betweena wielding of and a yielding to the musicality of rhyme and the structure of poetic form.[[546]](#footnote-546) In pointing up the importance of innovation and exploration in his mastering of a longer work,[[547]](#footnote-547) Keats performs his progression towards ‘capable poethood’ through this attempt to breathe new life into formal traditions.[[548]](#footnote-548) Marjorie Levinson remarks that ‘Keats’s ascent of the poetic ladder has become mythical; one watches him station himself where a great precursor had rested, discover the limitations of that position, step up to the next rung, and finally kick away the ladder altogether’.[[549]](#footnote-549) By refining techniques attempted in the earlier *Sleep and Poetry*, which represents a manifesto for a then unperfected method of composition,[[550]](#footnote-550) *Endymion*’s use of rhyme enacts Keats’s ‘ascent of the poetic ladder’. The poem’s third book foregrounds Keats’s self-consciousness of his embarking on such a progression and demonstrates his ability to dramatise this journey in his poetry. In depicting Endymion’s encounter with the beleaguered Glaucus, proposed as the figure of an outmoded and ineffective poetics, Keats allegorises the formal innovations of *Endymion* as part of a considered quest towards poetic capability.

**I.**

In an 1818 review John Lockhart dismisses Keats’s literary aspirations: ‘so back to the shop Mr John, back to “plasters, pills, and ointment boxes”, &c. But, for Heaven’s sake, young Sangrado, be a little more sparing of extenuatives and soporifics in your practice than you have been in your poetry’.[[551]](#footnote-551) The intermingling references to medical and poetic ‘soporifics’ confirms how *Endymion*’s Tory detractors, in framing Keatsian rhyme as a kind of numbing intoxicant, relied on a similar vocabulary to that bemoaned by Simon Jarvis, who challenges the view that rhyme ‘must be cocoon or stimulant’, that ‘it cannot itself be admitted to be a kind of thinking’, and that it is nothing more than ‘automatism’.[[552]](#footnote-552) Setting out his stall in opposition to such a stance, Jarvis’s analysis of rhyme instead argues for the possibility of:

a musical or a prosodic thinking, a thinking which is not simply a little picture of, nor even a counterpoint to, that more familiar kind of thinking whose medium is essentially semantic and syntactic, but whose medium, instead, is essentially prosodic: a kind of thinking in tunes.[[553]](#footnote-553)

When Jarvis proposes that ‘rhyme is a form of thinking and not merely a species of sensation’,[[554]](#footnote-554) the appearance of that Keatsian word, ‘sensation’,[[555]](#footnote-555) highlights the significance of this approach to *Endymion*. John Wilson Croker is explicit in declaring that *Endymion*’s rhymes preclude ‘thought’:

At first it appeared to us, that Mr Keats had been amusing himself and wearying his readers with an immeasurable game at *bouts*-Rimé; but, if we recollect rightly, it is an indispensable condition at this play, that the rhymes when filled up shall have a meaning; and our author, as we have already hinted, has no meaning, He seems to us to write a line at random, and then he follows not the thought excited by this line, but that suggested by the rhyme with which it concludes.[[556]](#footnote-556)

Despite legitimately highlighting the poem’s willingness to follow the course suggested by sound, this analysis veers towards overstatement in drawing a rigid opposition between ‘thought’ and ‘rhyme’. A. C. Bradley defines Keats as a poet of thoughtfulness and intellectual strength,[[557]](#footnote-557) and Keats, as a poet, and rhyme, as a poetic device, are more than two self-indulgent, myopic ‘species of sensation’ that coalesce in the couplets of *Endymion* in a mindless ‘mental masturbation’,[[558]](#footnote-558) to quote Byron’s complaint. Instead, the poem deploys rhyme as an exploratory device that facilitates Keats’s quest through the realms of poetic possibility.[[559]](#footnote-559) By wavering between wielding the couplet and yielding to sound, Keats sets out to discover the capabilities not only of the poet but of rhyming poetry itself, a technique that suggests his commitment to rhyme as a ‘form of thinking’ as well as a ‘species of sensation’.[[560]](#footnote-560)

The concordance to Keats’s work lists ten instances of ‘yield’ and its variants in his poetry.[[561]](#footnote-561) Four of these examples occur in a militaristic context, as in the fragment *King Stephen*, where Keats describes a King who ‘’sdains to yield to any but his peer’ (*King Stephen. A Fragment of a Tragedy*, I. iii. 43) and ‘will not yield alive / To any but the second man of the realm, / Robert of Glocester’ (I. iii. 24-26). *Hyperion* uses the word in a more abstracted fashion but with similar connotations, as Apollo describes how the ‘liegeless air / Yields to my step aspirant’ (*Hyperion*, III. 92-3). Such examples reflect Keats’s use of ‘yield’ to denote passivity and disempowerment. An example from *Endymion*, however, sheds new light on the term, as Keats describes the comforting presence of Peona: ‘Hushing signs she made, / And breath’d a sister’s sorrow to persuade / A yielding up, a cradling on her care’ (*Endymion*, I. 409-11). The more positive, nourishing connotations of this ‘yielding’ are enhanced by the ambiguity of the word itself, which, as well to cede control, can also mean to produce or provide, typically in agricultural or industrial contexts. Keats’s sonnet ‘To a Friend who sent me some Roses’ utilises this latter sense of ‘yield’ to depict bountiful nature:

I saw the sweetest flower wild nature yields,

A fresh-blown musk-rose; ’twas the first that threw

Its sweets upon the summer: graceful it grew

As is the wand that queen Titania wields.

(‘To a Friend who sent me some Roses’, 5-8)

Given the ambiguity of the term, ‘yielding’ can be both an active and a passive process, an act of giving and an act of succumbing, with the connotations of productivity hinting towards its value as a poetically generative state. By rhyming ‘yields’ with ‘wields’, Keats explicitly draws the two concepts into tension with one another. The lines imply that ‘wielding’, unlike ‘yielding’, is an active process of brandishing. There is only one further instance of the term in Keats’s poetry,[[562]](#footnote-562) when the poet describes the dream of *Endymion*’s sleeping protagonist: ‘Upon his arm he braces Pallas’s shield, / And strives in vain to unsettle and wield / A Jovian thunderbolt’ (IV. 413-15). Again, the term appears in an image of confrontation, denoting an attempt to assert power. In the context of Keats’s poetics, while the term ‘wielding’ ostensibly signifies active empowerment and ‘yielding’ passive disempowerment, these examples suggest a less straightforward hierarchy of poetic techniques. The assertion that one can only ‘strive in vain’ to wield stresses the inevitable difficulty of achieving unqualified mastery, positing poetry as a recalcitrant medium that resists any attempt to harness its power. Although the notion of wielding a couplet connotes control, the term’s association with combat also points towards a potentially heavy-handed, domineering application of form, one that might cause conflict, rather than facilitate composition. On the other hand, while the ambiguity of ‘yield’ hints that ceding control to couplets might allow one access to the bounties of autonomous verse, something that might seemingly act as a spur to quest, the term is also laden with connotations of weakness and passivity. In vacillating between these two approaches to rhyme, *Endymion*’s quest is alert to the ambiguous implications of these slippery yet vital concepts.

This experimental style of rhyming meant that *Endymion* played a controversial role in contemporary debates on versification. Keats’s commitment to heavily enjambed open-couplets was perceived by his detractors as an open expression of rebellion against tradition,[[563]](#footnote-563) one that incited critics and fellow poets alike to respond to his challenge.[[564]](#footnote-564) Lockhart’s aforementioned review is typically excoriating, disparagingly referring to the ‘uneducated and flimsy striplings’ of the Cockney school. Keats, as one of those ‘ignorant unsettled pretenders’, is said to write ‘as might be expected from persons of their education’.[[565]](#footnote-565) These debates on versification stretch back to the Neoclassical poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with William Keach observing how Keats’s style was perceived by Tory traditionalists as ‘an affront to the orthodoxy of the closed Augustan couplet and to the social and moral traditions it symbolises’.[[566]](#footnote-566) Alexander Pope, a poet acknowledged as the standard-bearer of the Augustan style, uses *The Dunciad* to offer a particularly prescient rebuke of the ‘dull’ art that permeates his contemporary England:

Here [Dulness] beholds the Chaos dark and deep,

Where nameless somethings in their causes sleep,

Till genial Jacob, or a warm third day,

Call forth each mass, a Poem or a Play:

How hints, like spawn, scarce quick in embryo lie,

How new-born nonsense first is taught to cry,

Maggots, half-form’d, in rhyme exactly meet,

And learn to crawl upon poetic feet.

Here one poor word a hundred clenches makes.

And ductile Dulness new meanders takes;

There motley images her fancy strike,

Figures ill pair’d, and Similes unlike.

She sees a Mob of Metaphors advance,

Pleas’d with the madness of the mazy dance;

How Tragedy and Comedy embrace;

How Farce and Epic get a jumbled race;

How Time himself stands still at her command,

Realms shift their place, and ocean turns to land.

(*The Dunciad*, I. 55-71)[[567]](#footnote-567)

This apocalyptic vision outlines how defective texts begin life as embyronic ‘nameless somethings’, lying dormant until they are championed by a ‘genial Jacob, or a warm third day’. Pope’s allusions to bookseller Jacob Tonson and the notion of a ‘third day’, which refers to the convention of successful plays being extended to a ‘third day’ where the playwright received the night’s takings, mingle with his reference to the Genesis story. By having the rise of dull literature parody the grandeur of biblical creation, Pope implies that bad verse is not just artistically unworthy, but also a form of blasphemy. The passage is illuminated by comparison with *Paradise Lost*’s account of creation, whichdepicts a Mother Earth who:

Op’ning her fertile womb teemed at a birth

Innumerous living creatures, perfect forms,

Limbed and full-grown: […]

Among the trees in pairs they rose, they walked.

(*Paradise Lost*, VII. 453-9)[[568]](#footnote-568)

While Milton describes the miraculous origins of beings that come into life fully formed and perfectly paired, Dulness relishes how her textual ‘spawn’ grows into texts and rhymes that grotesquely align ‘figures ill pair’d, and Similes unlike’, creating an immature babble of ‘new-born nonsense’. Though the verse’s accumulation of chaotic images means that it risks becoming bogged down in its own ‘mob of metaphors’, Pope’s writing is the model of assurance and control. Condemning poetry that either willingly eschews or is unable to sustain the artistic precision of Augustan couplets, the lines describe how ‘Maggots, half-form’d, in rhyme exactly meet, / And learn to crawl upon poetic feet’. Articulated in firmly end-stopped iambic pentameter that strictly avoids the slackness of disyllabic or feminine rhymes, Pope’s critique relies on the fact that the maggot is, like poor verse itself, a limbless creature, one that cannot draw upon the structural stability of poetic or physical ‘feet’. Rather than suggesting that dull writers are incapable of rhyming, Pope argues that their use of chaotic images and sounds that ‘exactly meet’ in the couplet is a heavy-handed approach, one that defies the principles of logic and good taste.

Condemning ‘dull’ writing as an illegitimate, diseased form of literature in its rejection of regularity, Pope’s account resonates with the way that *Endymion* uses rhyme to galvanise quest. Keats’s knowingly irregular open-couplets relish the very imperfections that Pope derides, co-opting this supposedly hideous style of ‘motley images’ (*The Dunciad*, I. 64) and ‘figures ill-pair’d’ (*The Dunciad*, I. 65) to embrace what *The Dunciad* dismisses as ‘the madness of the mazy dance’ (I. 67). By pointing up the role that these ‘richer entanglements’ (*Endymion*, I. 798) might play in sparking quest, Keats implies that this style can, in the right hands, have literary merit. Crucially, Pope’s attack on dull writing anticipates the way that Keats’s Conservative reviewers, writing nearly one hundred years later, respond to *Endymion*’s rhymes. John Croker remarks that ‘it is not, we say, that the author has not powers of language, rays of fancy and gleams of genius’; rather, Croker suggests, the problem is that Keats ‘is unhappily a disciple of the new school of what has been somewhere called Cockney poetry; which may be defined to consist of the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language’.[[569]](#footnote-569) Yet incongruity plays a positive and productive role in ‘Cockney’ poetics. Leigh Hunt, sneeringly dubbed the ‘King of the Cockneys’ by *Blackwood*’*s*,[[570]](#footnote-570) was Keats’s most significant literary and political influence at this time,[[571]](#footnote-571) with his Preface to *Foliage* declaring that ‘the notions about poetry can no longer be controlled, like the fashions, by a coterie of town gentlemen’.[[572]](#footnote-572) In *The Story of Rimini*, a poem that was the subject of an enthusiastic sonnet by Keats after it was savaged by *Blackwood’s* in early 1817,[[573]](#footnote-573) Hunt uses the Preface to affirm his views on the value of neatness and congruity:

I do not hesitate to say however, that Pope and the French school of versification have known the least on the subject, of any poets perhaps that ever wrote. They have mistaken mere smoothness for harmony; and, in fact, wrote as they did, because their ears were only sensible of a marked and uniform regularity. One of the most successful of Pope’s imitators, Dr. Johnson, was confessedly insensible to music. In speaking of such men, I allude, of course, only to their style in poetry, and not to their undisputed excellence in other matters. […] All these [Dryden, Milton, Spenser, Ariosto, Shakespeare, Chaucer] are about as different from Pope, as the church organ is from the bell in the steeple, or, to give a more decorous comparison, the song of the nightingale, from that of the cuckoo. With the endeavour to recur a freer spirit of versification, I have joined [a school] of still greater importance—that of having a free and idiomatic cast of language.[[574]](#footnote-574)

Hunt’s sense that metrically perfect verse is unmusical and monotonous subversively turns conventional ideas of value on their head, positing imperfection and irregularity as harmonious rather than dissonant. The claim that Pope and the French school mistake ‘smoothness for harmony’ mixes the sensory responses of touch and sound, and by evoking rhyme as a kind of surface that one might physically lay their hand upon, critiques the artificiality of ‘smooth’ Augustan couplets. This depiction of Pope’s intensely glossed couplets suggests their affinities with the sleek, shining surfaces of Belinda’s commodities in *The Rape of the Lock.* In the accusation that Pope favours metrics over poetic substance, Hunt threatens to implicate the Augustan in the very cult of superficiality that Pope’s poetry intends to critique.[[575]](#footnote-575) The playful metaphor of the nightingale and the cuckoo anticipates Keats’s later ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, reflecting the extent of Hunt’s influence on the younger poet.

When *Endymion* entrusts to poetic form as the force that drives Keats’s questto become a capable poet, the poem’s achievements show Keats refining methods that are developed in *Sleep and Poetry*.[[576]](#footnote-576) Building on Hunt’s Preface, *Sleep and Poetry* expresses Keats’s suspicion that a proficient versifier is not necessarily an inspired poet. In doing so it presents a manifesto for Keatsian rhyming:

…with a puling infant’s force

They swayed about upon a rocking horse,

And thought it Pegasus. Ah, dismal souled!

The winds of heaven blew, the ocean rolled

Its gathering waves—ye felt it not. The blue

Bared its eternal bosom, and the dew

Of summer nights collected still to make

The morning precious: beauty was awake!

Why were ye not awake? But ye were dead

To things ye knew not of—were closely wed

To musty laws lined out with wretched rule

And compass vile: so that ye taught a school

Of dolts to smooth, inlay, and clip, and fit,

Till, like the certain wands of Jacob’s wit,

Their verses tallied.

(*Sleep and Poetry*, 185-199)

Keats’s rocking horse is a potent image; the suggestion that Neoclassical poets sway back and forth but ‘[think] it Pegasus’ portrays them as child-like and delusional, charges that were levelled at Keats himself. That this static rocking will never result in progress also presents Neoclassicism as a mode that prohibits both poetic innovation and any kind of imaginative or questing flight, with the successive disyllables in ‘about upon’ locking themselves firmly into the rigid iambic pentameter so that the poem tamely and mockingly rocks along. The description of how a school has been taught ‘to smooth, inlay, and clip, and fit’ condemns rigidly closed couplets as prioritising functionality over expressiveness, mimicked by the jolting rhythm of Keats’s ungainly line. Arguing that the goal of such writing is simply to make verse ‘tally’, the passage indicts the way that versification reliant on the ‘rule’ of ‘laws’ can stifle creativity. The pun on ‘rule’ is highly loaded, with these politically charged terms gesturing towards the stakes of a quarrel that transcended poetry. Keats, in working towards his own wielding of the rhyming couplet, aspires to a style divested of this tyrannical Neoclassical authority, positing the Augustan brandishing of the ‘wretched rule / And compass vile’ as an oppressive act.[[577]](#footnote-577) He presents the free-flowing enjambment of open-couplets as attuned to the rhythms of nature, as in the lines ‘the winds of heaven blew, the ocean rolled / Its gathering waves’ and ‘the blue / Bared its eternal bosom, and the dew of summer nights collected still to make / The morning precious’. By wedging the line ending in between noun and verb, the run on of ‘the blue / Bared’ is particularly defiant. Keats presents his open-couplets as an organic entity, unlike the artificiality of the Augustan rocking horse, an object that echoes Hunt’s criticism of the craftsman who prioritises a deadening ‘smoothness’.[[578]](#footnote-578)

Despite this critique, *Sleep and Poetry* is unclear how exactly a ‘freer spirit of versification’ might be achieved.[[579]](#footnote-579) Having refused conventional standards of poetic value and rejected the roadmap towards capable poethood laid out by his precursors, Keats must forge his own route towards an attaining of his ‘mature powers’.[[580]](#footnote-580) Such a task requires the discovery of alternative techniques, and *Sleep and Poetry* explores whether the unfettered flight of ‘freer’ versification is something a poet might deliberately create by carefully wielding the open-couplet form to avoid Augustan despotism, or whether the desired looseness will naturally occur if the poet trusts to instinct rather than Popean rules, or inspiration, rather than Neoclassical numbers. Keats’s uncertainty resounds through the following lines, where the poet attempts to sustain his vision in a rhyme that stands out for its insistence and defiance:

The visions all are fled—the car is fled

Into the light of heaven, and in their stead

A sense of real things comes doubly strong,

And, like a muddy stream, would bear along

My soul to nothingness: but I will strive

Against all doubtings, and will keep alive

The thought of that same chariot, and the strange

Journey it went.

(155-62)

Demonstrating the kind of self-fashioning that irritated his Conservative opponents, Keats’s allusion to Ezekiel’s vision of God’s chariot shows him aligning himself with the biblical prophet.[[581]](#footnote-581) Lamenting the loss of the fleeing visions, Keats’s complaint that ‘a sense of real things comes double strong’ shows the poet aspiring towards an unfettered imaginative flight, refusing to be tethered to the physical realm. That tangible forces ‘bear along / My soul to nothingness’ aligns reality with ‘nothingness’, suggesting that true substance lies in the realm of imaginative thought. The subsequent rhyme is a bold attempt to ‘keep [vision] alive’, but the pairing of ‘but I will strive’ and ‘will keep alive’ falls oddly flat. Though Keats attempts to drag the poem forwards, the familiarity of the ‘strive’ and ‘alive’ pairing means the rhyme can only lurch back. This obviousness renders it a strangely sterile expression of imaginative flight, a problem compounded by the insistent repetition of ‘will’. The poem proposes but is unable to embody formally this spirit of quest and poetic exploration, and Susan J. Wolfson comments on the poem’s ‘rhythm of hesitation: this poet keeps retracing the plan, the tracing becoming the tale’.[[582]](#footnote-582) Keats’s desperate striving ‘against all doubtings’ is what drives this couplet, which, in its overly forceful attempt to wield rhyme as a mimetic tool, rings hollow. The passage suggests that while an ability to wield rhyme is an effective way to dictate the narrative progress of a poem, the poet who aspires to an unshackled imaginative flight might also benefit from incorporating a degree of yielding into composition,[[583]](#footnote-583) and by reconciling a poetics of deliberated control with a poetics orientated on the course of rhyming sounds.

However, if this implies that a yielding to rhyme might be Keats’s preferred technique in developing an exploratory brand of quest, *Sleep and Poetry* also exemplifies the limitations of this method. An actively passive approach to writing couplets is equally susceptible to failure, and, like an overbearing wielding, can be similarly restrictive to unfettered flight:

The hearty grasp that sends a pleasant sonnet

Into the brain ere one can think upon it;

The silence when some rhymes are coming out;

And when they’re come, the very pleasant rout:

(319-22)

Bloom’s description of *Endymion* is also applicable to these lines, which risk succumbing to a state where ‘nothing narrows to an intensity, and every passionate impulse widens out to a diffuseness’.[[584]](#footnote-584) Given the emphasis on the ‘silence’ of the poet, this passage is unapologetically directed by rhymes. The couplet of ‘sonnet’ and ‘upon it’ relies on a combination of preposition and third-person pronoun, an opportunism that eventually results in the ham-fisted description of the origin of rhymes as a vague kind of ‘coming out’. The way that ‘silence’ makes rhymes ‘come out’ suggests an interplay between activity and passivity that Keats will later profit from in *Endymion*. Here, however, considered in light of *The Dunciad*’s account of how Dulness gives birth to dull art, the inelegance of Keats’s phrasing plays into the hands of Pope’s critique. Performing the process they describe, the lines consider this a ‘very pleasant rout’, but the repetition of ‘pleasant’, a word which appears only three lines prior to this, as well as ‘they’re come’ almost immediately after ‘coming out’, suggests poetry that is content to float in self-perpetuating music, lacking true progression. Inherent in the wilful ‘silence’ of the poet is the suspicion that he might lack control over his work, affirmed by Keats’s passive constructions. The vagueness of ‘some rhymes’, which leaves itself open to the claim that these may not be the correct rhymes, also hints that the poet, in these yielding moments, is overcome by the hypnotic influence of verse. This is an effective example of how any use of open-couplets, to achieve a ‘freer spirit of versification’,[[585]](#footnote-585) must work towards some kind of balance between wielding and yielding. While the poetic manifesto of *Sleep and Poetry* shows Keats telling us precisely what wielding and yielding to rhyme can do, the poemalso fails by its embodiment of these ideas, with these examples of wielding and yielding acting as a counterpoint to Pope’s aphorism: ‘True ease in writing comes from art, not chance, / As those move easiest who have learn’d to dance’ (*An Essay on Criticism*, 362-63). Pope’s lines embody the principles they espouse with startling efficacy. The emphasis on the rhythmic movement of dance makes the metaphor particularly apt, as words have the appearance of flowing freely but are always underpinned by disciplined iambic pentameter. Somewhat paradoxically, Keatsian yielding itself seems to be a technique that requires practise, measure, and a semblance of control, evinced by the way the lines from *Sleep and Poetry* flail in their rash, almost frantic desire to embody the ‘coming out’ that they describe. In advocating an approach that the poet has yet to master, *Sleep and Poetry* can never be the kind of Popean manifesto that Keats wills it to be.[[586]](#footnote-586)

In attempting to counter Neoclassicism while expressing its own commitment to poetic exploration, *Sleep and Poetry* leaves itself open to attack by offering an unperfected alternative to Augustan versification. Unsurprisingly, the poem drew the wrath of Byron and fuelled his involvement in the Bowles-Pope controversy,[[587]](#footnote-587) where he staunchly defended Pope’s literary and moral honour, while dismissing the writing of Keats, among others, as revealing ‘the full extent of human absurdity’.[[588]](#footnote-588) Alluding to this conflict in a letter to Shelley, Byron’s judgements of Keats’s work seem unequivocal:

You know my opinion of *that second-hand* school of poetry. […] I have published a pamphlet on the Pope controversy, which you will not like. Had I known that Keats was dead—or that he was alive and so sensitive—I should have omitted some remarks upon his poetry, to which I was provoked by his attack upon Pope, and my disapprobation of his own style of writing.[[589]](#footnote-589)

Despite his obvious frustrations with Keats’s work, however, Byron’s criticism of *Sleep and Poetry* as Keats’s ‘new “Essay on Criticism”’ also touches on a crucial similarity,[[590]](#footnote-590) as observed by William Keach: ‘Byron recognised Keats’s polemical exploitation of making “the sound […] seem an Echo to the sense” (*Essay on Criticism*, II. 365), and he knew that Keats learned to do that sort of thing from Pope himself’.[[591]](#footnote-591) To draw the relationship between Keats and Pope as one of simple antagonism, or as a clash between open and closed-couplet forms, is to oversimplify Keats’s blending of rejection and emulation. Keats and Pope find common ground in their similarly virtuosic parodying of their opposite, suggesting two poets that are closer than may initially seem apparent. In turn, while Leigh Hunt stands out as Keats’s closest ally in his response to Neoclassicism, even he complained that *Endymion* took the principles of ‘a freer spirit of versification’ too far, that ‘in resolving to be free from all critical trammels, [the poem] had no versification’.[[592]](#footnote-592) Walter Jackson Bate frames the relationship between Hunt and Keats as ‘one of the most graphic examples in literary history of a pupil’s imitating not what the master actually did so much as what the master intended to do’.[[593]](#footnote-593) Such are the idiosyncrasies of how each poet perceives rhyme that the likes of Hunt, Pope, Byron, and Keats, despite the battle lines laid out by their polemic, resist being divided into two clearly delineated camps of those for and those against the poetic status-quo.[[594]](#footnote-594) This is reflected in the way that commentators struggled to define the idiosyncratic *Endymion*. Lockhart asserts that ‘before giving any extracts, we must inform our readers, that this romance is meant to be written in English heroic rhyme’,[[595]](#footnote-595) but this designation seems disingenuous. Keats refuses to use heroic couplets in the conventional sense, and the review’s second attempt to categorise the poem, aligning it with the ‘loose, nerveless versification’ of Hunt’s *Rimini*, is qualified by a concession that ‘the defects of the system are tenfold more conspicuous in [Keats’s] work than in his own’.[[596]](#footnote-596) The ambiguity of the descriptions reflects the way that *Endymion* shows Keats navigating through a minefield of theories on how rhyme should function. Reminiscent of the way that Byron, having subtitled *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* with the phrase ‘A Romance’, deliberately creates a quest that ‘makes no pretension to regularity’,[[597]](#footnote-597) Keats sets out to confound audience expectations by adapting a form that brings to mind more conventional approaches to quest-romance.[[598]](#footnote-598) In embarking on his voyage towards capable poethood, Keats establishes his credentials as a quester by exploring territories previously uncharted by the heroic couplet.

**II.**

Rather than revealing quest to be ‘forlorn’, the self-consciousness with which *Endymion* resists any restrictive or fettering approach to rhyming suggests Keats’s careful creation of the ‘diffuseness’ that Bloom finds contrary to quest-narrative.[[599]](#footnote-599) For the poet intent on resisting the conventions laid out by his precursors, to eschew tradition is to lack any tried and tested route towards a state of capable poethood. In such a landscape, ‘diffuseness’ stands as an inevitable condition of exploration and innovation, as Keats seeks to inhabit the unexplored spaces within the rhyming couplet and discover the full range of possibilities allowed by poetic form. When Andrew Bennett emphasises the poem’s ‘significant homology between physical wandering or disordered space on the one hand, and imaginative or mental wonder(ing) or confusion on the other’,[[600]](#footnote-600) his remarks can be developed by considering the way in which Keats’s rhyming, used throughout *Endymion* as a ‘form of thinking’,[[601]](#footnote-601) enacts the broader patterns and progressions of the poet’s ‘internalized’ questing after his own ‘mature powers’.[[602]](#footnote-602) *Endymion*’s rhymes consistently challenge the simplistic binary that dominates most negative responses to the poem;[[603]](#footnote-603) namely, the association of closed-couplets with control, order, and direction, and the open-couplet with an absence of these qualities. Keats’s couplets vacillate between a forceful wielding of form and a more passive yielding to the sounds and content dictated by rhyme in order to produce the ‘4000 Lines of one bare circumstance’ that,[[604]](#footnote-604) for Keats, would advance his effort to become a capable poet.

This vacillation is typified by a highly self-reflexive passage in Book I:

Hereat Peona, in their silver source,

Shut her pure sorrow-drops with glad exclaim,

And took a lute, from which there pulsing came

A lively prelude, fashioning the way

In which her voice should wander. ’Twas a lay

More subtle cadenced, more forest wild

Than Dryope’s lone lulling of her child;

And nothing since has floated in the air

So mournful strange. Surely some influence rare

Went, spiritual, through the damsel’s hand;

For still, with Delphic emphasis, she spanned

The quick invisible strings, even though she saw

Endymion’s spirit melt away and thaw

Before the deep intoxication.

But soon she came, with sudden burst, upon

Her self-possession—swung the lute aside,

And earnestly said: ‘Brother, ’tis vain to hide

That thou dost know of things mysterious,

Immortal, starry; such alone could thus

Weigh down thy nature. Hast thou sinned in aught

Offensive to the heavenly powers? Caught

A Paphian dove upon a message sent?

(I. 489-510)

The phrase ‘fashioning the way / In which her voice should wander’ introduces a tension between a conscious, deliberate ‘fashioning’ and an aimlessness ‘wandering’ along an unfixed course.[[605]](#footnote-605) The lines imply that the quest of *Endymion* lies in the poet’s willingness to be led as well as lead, as the verse performs a loss of control and a succumbing to the intoxicating influence of its own musicality. As Peona plays a ‘lively prelude’ for Endymion, the writing willingly ‘wander[s]’ towards a suspension in a sensual reverie. The couplets that comprise lines 490-97 use exclusively long vowel sounds, lending the verse a lulling, hypnotic quality. With the same ‘a’ sound persisting across the opening two rhymes, as well as in the fourth, Keats’s repetition creates a sense of excess but also suggests stasis and immobility: ‘exclaim’ and ‘came’, ‘way’ and ‘lay’, and ‘air’ and ‘rare’. For Keats, to rhyme on two verbs is not necessarily to indicate activity, with the couplet of ‘saw’ and ‘thaw’ foregrounding the passivity of the onlooking Peona and the anesthetised Endymion: ‘even though she saw / Endymion’s spirit melt away and thaw / Before the deep intoxication’. The absence of commas across these three heavily enjambed lines mirrors this melting of Endymion’s ‘spirit’, and the lines visibly shorten on the page before crawling to a halt in the pentasyllabic ‘intoxication’. With ‘before’ echoing the previous rhyme of ‘saw’ and ‘thaw’, sounds tumble down upon one another and rhymes fall out of place, heightening this stuttering effect. Despite his willingness to be led by rhyme, Keats also acknowledges the possibility that an excessive yielding to the couplet might result in a kind of poetic inebriation, one that might stunt as much as it stimulates the poetry’s questing momentum. After the rich sibilance that has saturated every line in the passage thus far, seen notably in ‘still, with Delphic emphasis, she spanned’, ‘Before the deep intoxication’ is the first and only line in the entire sequence that does not feature a single ‘s’ consonant, despite its groping towards the sound in the ‘tion’ suffix. The rhyme of ‘intoxication’ and ‘upon’ is a half-rhyme, with the contrasting line lengths accentuating this jarring by placing the terms far apart on the page. That the end-stop occurs after ‘intoxication’ and midway through the couplet contributes to this stunted quality.[[606]](#footnote-606) Peona’s abrupt discarding of the lute is an acutely self-reflexive gesture, mirroring Keats’s own ‘sudden burst, upon / […] self-possession’, as the decelerating verse and abrupt full-stop force the poet to consider where exactly his poem has been led by rhyme.

The remaining rhymes of the passage eschew this passive floating in musicality, and instead demonstrate the poet’s renewed attempt to manipulate the elasticity of the open-couplet form as a means of galvanising energies of quest and exploration. The peculiarly demonstrative rhyme of ‘mysterious’ and ‘thus’ (I. 506-07) juxtaposes polysyllable with monosyllable in a way that recalls the pairing of ‘intoxication’ and ‘upon’ (I. 502-03). While ‘intoxication’ and ‘upon’ fall into pairing with one another as if by accident, an impression supported by the way the end-stop forces the sentence to conclude before the rhyme is completed, ‘mysterious’ and ‘thus’ suggest a more deliberate attempt to fashion rhyme into place: ‘thou dost know of things mysterious, / Immortal, starry; such alone could thus / Weigh down thy nature’ (I. 506-8). The adjective ‘mysterious’ is paired with the comparatively banal conjunctive adverb ‘thus’, a term that invites a relatively soft stress in the iambic pentameter metre and is lacking in semantic weight, but is crucial to the structural integrity of the sentence. The rhyme juxtaposes semantic flourish with syntactic prop, and the responsibility of ‘thus’ to sustain the rhyming pattern shows Keats deliberately sculpting four enjambed lines around the skeletal framework of rhyme. This forceful wielding manifests itself in an altogether more playful manner later in the passage, as Peona asks Endymion

Hast thou sinned in aught

Offensive to the heavenly powers? Caught

A Paphian dove upon a message sent?

(I. 508-10)

The proximity of caesura and line-ending in ‘Offensive to the heavenly powers? Caught’ is such a flagrant manipulation of the couplet that it smacks of contrariness. Jarvis points out that this technique was ‘especially depreciated in the previous century (by Johnson, for example) […] on the grounds that it tended, in a predominantly monosyllabic language such as English, to dissolve the verse character of whatever phrase found itself trapped between pause and line-end’.[[607]](#footnote-607) Here, Keats’s deliberate ‘trapping’ of the term ‘caught’ allows form to reflect content, making rhyme seem mimetic. Peona’s question as to whether Endymion has ‘sinned’ against ‘the heavenly powers’ suggests Keats’s self-consciousness of the risks of the technique, coming as Keats again commits to a couplet that the majority of *Endymion*’s Tory reviewers, certainly those accustomed to the ‘powers’ of strict Augustan versification,[[608]](#footnote-608) would dismiss as ‘sinful’ in its own right. Though the poem does present a ‘homology between physical wandering or disordered space’ and ‘imaginative or mental wonder(ing) or confusion’,[[609]](#footnote-609) the passage’s ability to balance this yielding with an injection of a more firmly controlled wielding shows Keats acknowledging only to keep at bay the fear expressed by Bloom, that this is a realm where ‘nothing narrows to an intensity’ such that ‘all quest must be forlorn’.[[610]](#footnote-610)

Instead, Keats presents this constantly wavering style of rhyming as essential for sustaining his quest to produce a long work of poetry. A scene in Book I considers the phenomenon of a verbal echo as a kind of quasi-rhyme, and questions whether echo alone, seen as indicative of a more regular repetition of sounds, can provide the writing with the necessary sustenance to ‘make 4000 Lines of one bare circumstance’.[[611]](#footnote-611) Lamenting his directionless wandering, Endymion describes being

…cooped up in the den

Of helpless discontent, hurling my lance

From place to place, and following at chance,

At last, by hap, through some young trees it struck,

And, plashing among bedded pebbles, stuck

In the middle of a brook, whose silver ramble

Down twenty little falls, through reeds and bramble,

Tracing along, it brought me to a cave,

Whence it ran brightly forth, and white did lave

The nether sides of mossy stones and rock—

’Mong which it gurgled blythe adieus, to mock

Its own sweet grief at parting. Overhead,

Hung a lush screen of drooping weeds, and spread

Thick, as to curtain up some wood-nymph’s home.

(I. 928-41)

While the rhyming terms themselves are predominantly monosyllabic and generally unremarkable, this highly musical and digressive passage typifies Keats’s willingness to yield to rhyme. In describing Endymion’s ‘following at chance’ of his lance, the poem is swept along on the currents of the couplets. The stream which ‘gurgle[s] blythe adieus, to mock / Its own sweet grief at parting’ points to an almost mocking self-awareness of this tendency to yield to sound.[[612]](#footnote-612) The way the rushing stream can only ever repeat the same noise, a ‘gurgled […] adieu’, suggests that it is the creator of its own kind of rhyme, albeit an ineffective one. Rhyme, in this metaphor, is not capable of instigating any kind of new verbal exchange, or of acting as a springboard for new sounds that might advance a narrative. Instead, as an ‘adieu’, end-rhyme is framed as a device that locks verse into a perpetually unchanging echo, one that initiates a recurring tailing-off of sound. ‘Adieu’ later reappears in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, exemplifying how the strategies developed in early poems like *Sleep and Poetry* and *Endymion* inform Keats’s later work:

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell

To toll me back from thee to my sole self!

Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well

As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.

Adieu! adieu!

(‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 71-5)

This stanza opens by repeating the final word of the one that precedes it, ‘forlorn’ (70). As the ‘plaintive anthem’ (75) of the nightingale fades, Keats becomes confined in the recurring sound of his own voice. In ‘A bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!’, the denseness of the alliteration and internal half-rhyme across ‘bell’, ‘toll’, ‘sole’, and ‘self’, as well as the assonantal ‘me’ and ‘thee’, performs confinement through a stifling repetition of sounds. This notion of sound as a form of imprisonment is developed in *Endymion*’s metaphor of rhyme as echo. There, Endymion proceeds to enter the cave that he speculates could be the ‘grot / Of Proserpine’ (*Endymion*, I. 943-44), a place where

She dabbles, on the cool and sluicy sands;

Or ’tis the cell of Echo, where she sits,

And babbles thorough silence, till her wits

Are gone in tender madness, and anon,

Faints into sleep, with many a dying tone

Of sadness. O that she would take my vows,

And breathe them sighingly among the boughs,

To sue her gentle ears for whose fair head,

Daily, I pluck sweet flowerets from their bed,

And weave them dyingly—send honey-whispers

Round every leaf, that all those gentle lispers

May sigh my love unto her pitying!

O charitable Echo! hear, and sing

This ditty to her!

(I. 946-59)

The nymph ‘Echo’ comes into being solely through sound, but any life she can assume is a fundamentally qualified one. An echo is by its very nature a ‘dying tone’, merely a recurrence of a previous articulation, and one that weakens with each repetition. Endymion claims to be in desperate need for Echo’s aid, praying that she will spread his ‘gentle whispers’ over the earth, allowing them to be heard by his lost lover. Yet by stressing the fallacy of Endymion’s reliance on echo for the transmission of his voice, the passage shows Keats’s awareness of the inefficacy of rhymes that rely solely on repetitive echoing. The lines perform their own echoing effect through the short vowel ‘o’, which jostles for position but gradually diminishes in volume before fading away amongst competing sounds: ‘till her wits / Are gone in tender madness, and anon, / Faints into sleep, with many a dying tone / Of sadness. O that she would take my vows…’. ‘Are gone’ and ‘anon’ introduce this sound through internal rhyme, before ‘anon’ is forced into an uncomfortable half rhyme with the long vowel of ‘tone’. The enjambment means that ‘tone’ moves immediately into a further short vowel sound, ‘of sadness’, which is followed by a caesura only three syllables into the line. This caesura lends additional weight to the long vowel sound that follows in ‘O that she would…’. These two almost slurring long ‘o’ vowels sandwich the short ‘o’ and slow the pace, smothering this sound to mime the gradual silencing of an echo. While the following couplet revives the echo by rhyming ‘vows’ with ‘boughs’, the passage’s abrasive juxtaposition of long and short vowels is not conducive to harmony. Keats’s wielding of sound patterning, particularly the knowingly dissonant rhyme of ‘anon’ and ‘tone’, is central to the performance. That *Endymion* so expertly demonstrates the ineffectuality of formulaic echoing is testament not just to the growing skill of a maturing poet, one confident in the merits of his own approach, but also to a poet self-conscious of the need to maintain onward progression in his writing, and to resist the kind of stasis and inactivity that might prohibit quest-narrative.

While McDonald’s assessment of the ‘Echo’ scene aptly declares that ‘the self-aware ironies of this kind of writing seem to be something other than the blundering and incompetence identified by Keats’s “rhyming critics”’,[[613]](#footnote-613) what is crucial is the way in which Keats manipulates rhyme. An earlier display of ineffective echoing appears in *Sleep and Poetry*, with the poetry approaching an almost melodramatic sense of excess:

O Poesy! for thee I hold my pen

That am not yet a glorious denizen

Of thy wide heaven—Should I rather kneel

Upon some mountain-top until I feel

A glowing splendour round about me hung.

And echo back the voice of thine own tongue?

O Poesy! for thee I grasp my pen

That am not yet a glorious denizen

Of thy wide heaven:

(*Sleep and Poetry*, 47-55)

Peter McDonald describes Keats’s refusal to abandon the couplet of ‘pen’ and ‘denizen’ ‘as though under the impression that it might work better on a second attempt than the first’,[[614]](#footnote-614) identifying the passage’s overly forceful attempt to wield rhyme. Ironically, while Keats intends his work to ‘echo back the voice of [poesy’s] own tongue’, the repeated couplet suggests a poet lacking true inspiration, one who can only resort to restating his previous words. It is as if the poet is desperate to yield to rhyme, begging the quasi-religious force of ‘Poesy’ to subsume him in its power and guide him through his quest towards capable poethood.[[615]](#footnote-615) Here, however, Keats is thrown back on his own resources; this cycle of reiterating the same rhyme implies that rhyme can, if not deployed correctly, resemble a ‘cocoon’ of parallelism.[[616]](#footnote-616) On the contrary, *Endymion*’s portrayal of Echo remains wary of any narrative structured solely around echoing sounds, implying that this might prohibit the exploratory quest to which the poemaspires*.* The reference to how Proserpine ‘dabbles’ (*Endymion*, I. 946) is a significant example, a sound that recurs two lines later in ‘babbles’ (I. 948). Both occupy the second and third syllables of their respective lines, acting like a rhyme that has been misplaced, with Echo’s ‘babbles’ recalling Pope’s account of the birth of ‘dull’ literature and ‘how new-born nonsense first is taught to cry’ (*The Dunciad*, I. 60). In depicting Echo’s ‘babble through silence’ (*Endymion*, I. 948) as nothing more than a ‘dying tone’ (I. 950), the passage from *Endymion* seems to become the Keatsian equivalent of Pope’s pronouncement on rhyme: ‘the sound must seem an echo to the sense’ (*Essay on Criticism*, 365). *Endymion* seeks to avoid repetitive ‘babble’ and embody patterns of quest and exploration through a free movement between the wielding of and a yielding to rhyme. While this technique radically undermines the measured control of Popean poetics, this example shows the two poets reaching a further consensus in their shared desire to detach rhyme from simple parallelism, and to expel any notion of rhyme as ‘automatism’.[[617]](#footnote-617)

Though this design spurs Keats’s quest to resist stasis and explore the capabilities of rhyming verse, a deliberately wavering style of rhyming inevitably creates an uncertain power relationship between poet and poem. Considered alongside the meticulousness of Augustan versification, it is unsurprising that reviews of *Endymion* condemn Keats as a passive, powerless poet. Despite being more overtly positive than many contemporary assessments, Peter George Patmore’s review is essentially an upbeat recasting of Croker’s complaint that Keats ‘seems to us to write a line at random, and then he follows not the thought excited by this line, but that suggested by the rhyme with which it concludes’:[[618]](#footnote-618)

The poet offers himself in a willing sacrifice to the power which he serves: not fretting under, but exulting and glorying in his bondage. He plunges into the ocean of Poetry before he has learned to stem and grapple with the waves; but they ‘bound beneath him as a steed that knows its rider’; and will not let him sink. Still, however, while they bear him along triumphantly, it is, evidently, at their will and pleasure, not at his. He ‘rides on the whirlwind’ safely; but he cannot yet ‘direct the storm’.[[619]](#footnote-619)

Even those who found merit in *Endymion* reproved Keats’s apparent inability to control his creation. The description posits Keats as a would-be quester who remains unable to direct his own voyage, an individual who is instead borne along by external forces. In noting Keats’s failure to ‘stem and grapple with the waves’, the review focuses on the poet’s inability to wield the couplet successfully. Yet the depiction of poetry as a dangerous but ultimately benevolent force, one that ‘will not let him sink’, comes into tension with the earlier suggestion that one can only ‘strive in vain’ (*Endymion*, IV. 414) to wield, or to assert unequivocal mastery over poetry. The fact that waves ‘bear [the poet] along triumphantly’, rather than drown him, implies that Keats’s quest might benefit from the autonomy and self-sufficiency of poetry. This observation astutely highlights the poetic capital that Keatsmakes out of yielding to the glorious ‘bondage’ of rhyme, but Patmore slightly misses the mark in declaring that the poem progresses ‘at [its] will and pleasure, not at his’. The phrase ‘willing sacrifice’ suggests a more complex hierarchy between poet and poem and between quester and quest, highlighting the active passivity of Keats’s writing. The poet may succumb to the ‘whirlwind’, but that he chooses to be goaded by rhyme complicates any conception of Keats as an entirely inactive poet, foregrounding the interplay between activity and passivity that proves vital to the poem’s exploratory quest.

Implicit though unstressed in Patmore’s observation is an acknowledgment of the way in which rhyme, in its ability to generate narrative, can be a boon to the uncertain quester,[[620]](#footnote-620) as is the case in the following passage:

For many days,

Has he been wandering in uncertain ways:

Through wilderness, and woods of mossèd oaks,

Counting his woe-worn minutes, by the strokes

Of the lone woodcutter; and listening still,

Hour after hour, to each lush-leavèd rill.

Now he is sitting by a shady spring,

And elbow-deep with feverous fingering

Stems the up-bursting cold: a wild rose tree

Pavilions him in bloom, and he doth see

A bud which snares his fancy. Lo! but now

He plucks it, dips its stalk in the water: how!

It swells, it buds, it flowers beneath his sight;

And, in the middle, there is softly pight

A golden butterfly, upon whose wings

There must be surely charactered strange things,

For with wide eyes he wonders, and smiles oft.

(II. 47-63)

The inactivity of Endymion, who wanders ‘counting his woe-worn minutes, by the strokes / Of the lone woodcutter’, suggests a procrastination that is mirrored by the poetry itself, with the plot threatening to descend into a complete ‘still[ness]’. This imagery of repetitive, monotonous wielding in the continuously swinging axe, alongside the emphasis on counting, obliquely echoes *Sleep and Poetry*’s criticism of verse that is only concerned with tallying. As Endymion lingers we see a poet himself opting to trust to the contours of poetic form, hoping that doggedly continuing through rhyme might eventually lead to poetic inspiration. The use of the present tense, seen in ‘now he is sitting’ and ‘but now he plucks it’, heightens the impression of Keats being reliant on improvisation in order to sustain his questing after his own ‘mature powers’.[[621]](#footnote-621) With Endymion once again ‘wandering’ by a brook, ‘listening still’ to ‘each lush-leavèd rill’, the lines recall the ‘blythe adieus’ (I. 938) of the stream that led to Echo’s cave, and the poem risks succumbing to its own repetitive echoing. However, when this sequence of monosyllabic rhymes almost accidentally falls into coupling ‘spring’ with the polysllabic verb ‘fingering’, the image ‘snare[s] [Keats’s] fancy’ in its potential to dilate the verse. The poet’s excitement is tangible; the way the ‘ing’ suffix of ‘spring’ rings out twice in ‘fingering’ means the word acts as a kind of double rhyme, reflecting this surge from inertia to intensity.

This gives rise to a passage that Byron might have in mind when he accuses Keats of using poetry as ‘a sort of mental masturbation’:[[622]](#footnote-622) ‘he is always frigging his imagination—I don’t mean that he is indecent but viciously soliciting his own ideas into a state which is neither poetry nor any thing else but a Bedlam of vision produced by raw pork and opium’.[[623]](#footnote-623) Picking up an earlier trope from *Sleep and Poetry*, Keats again presents a convulsing ‘golden’ butterfly as a symbol of pleasure: ‘A butterfly, with golden wings broad parted, / Nestling a rose, convuls’d as though it smarted / With over pleasure’ (*Sleep and Poetry*, 343-5). The orgasmic imagery of the flower exemplifies what Byron would dismiss as Keatsian ‘Bedlam’:

Lo! but now

He plucks it, dips its stalk in the water: how!

It swells, it buds, it flowers beneath his sight.

(II. 57-9)

Eroticising poetic inspiration, Keats juxtaposes flowing sibilance and sharp plosive ‘p’ and ‘k’ sounds to suggest a bursting vitality. The rapid growth of the flower, which comes into bloom in a single couplet, prompts John Jones to dismiss this as one of several ‘perfunctory magical ripening[s]’ that pervade *Endymion*.[[624]](#footnote-624) Yet it is a deliberate, wilful direction of rhyme, rather than any facile sense of ‘magic’, that instigates this acceleration. Quoting Charles Richardson, John Creaser stresses the fallacy of having rhyme fall on ‘insignificant words’.[[625]](#footnote-625) Although the rhyme of ‘now’ and ‘how!’ uses what might be deemed ‘insignificant’ terms in pairing adverb and conjunction, this irregular couplet bursts out with heavy stresses on its closing monosyllables. While Creaser’s analysis of Pope asserts that ‘the very fact that we are not drawn to notice individual rhymes is one way of conveying authorial distinction’,[[626]](#footnote-626) the flamboyance of Keats’s monosyllables is the antithesis of such a style. While lines 49-52 use a caesura at a near halfway point between syllables four and seven, a placement that creates an air of rhythmic regularity, here Keats experiments with compressing caesura and line-ending into a single poetic foot: ‘Lo! But now’ and ‘water: how!’. The technique gives rise to a rhyme that gleefully draws attention to its own floridity. Keats ramps up metrical impropriety to its limit by forcing the caesura closer to the line-ending, first before ‘but now’ with two syllables remaining, and then before ‘how’ with just one syllable to spare. While Creaser condemns such a style as indicative of a powerless poet, Keats’s active manipulation of syntax is what drives this rhyme forwards. Openly orchestrating his experiment in front of his readers, Keats spotlights his technical innovation with impish delight.

Though Marjorie Levinson does not focus on *Endymion* specifically, her emphasis on the ‘overwrought’ aspect of Keats’s style resonates with the poem’s approach to rhyme. Stressing the interrelation of the sexual and class related insults of Tory reviewers, Levinsonconcurs with Byron in defining Keats’s ‘prolix, repetitive, metrically and lexically licentious’ poetics as ‘a species of masturbatory exhibitionism’.[[627]](#footnote-627) Yet in subsuming Keats’s literary ambitions under the terms of class by suggesting his style bears the hallmarks of an aspirational middle-class poet excluded from the aristocracy,[[628]](#footnote-628) Levinson’s approach tends to read the poet as ‘wanting: unequipped, ineffectual, and deeply fraudulent’.[[629]](#footnote-629) Christopher Ricks offers an alternative model for reading the flowering scene, valorising the way in which Keats’s poetry objects ‘to an affected coolness, a manner or code which would think it a betrayal and a weakness to be awkward or to blush’.[[630]](#footnote-630) Aligning the act of blushing with sexual attraction, Ricks suggests that the phenomenon captures ‘the extent to which the deepest feelings are somehow involuntary and yet are our responsibility’, so that ‘some of the essential paradoxes about spontaneity, will, and freedom could come together in the blush’.[[631]](#footnote-631) The intersection of Ricks’s account of blushing and Keats’s approach to questing, which demonstrates a similar interplay between activity and passivity in its vacillation between wielding and yielding approaches to rhyme, cuts to the heart of the critical debate on *Endymion*’s couplets. Considering the source of Byron’s and Wordsworth’s objections to Keats, Levinson argues that the two felt a shared uneasiness about Keats’s ‘exposure of the relation between “working brain” and the “spontaneous overflow” or “rattling on exactly as I talk” of Romantic poetry: that is, Keats’s demystification of a prestigious idea of literary production’.[[632]](#footnote-632) Levinson’s reading implies that by openly ‘frigging’ his imagination in order to produce his writing,[[633]](#footnote-633) Keats presents to readers not poetry but the inner-workings of a poetic mind, making them into unwilling voyeurs. Keats’s Preface suggests his own anxieties about exhibiting his experimentation, implying that he might have kept the poem to himself: ‘knowing within myself the manner in which this Poem has been produced, it is not without a feeling of regret that I make it public’ (‘Preface to *Endymion*’, p. 505). Yet for the poet of *Endymion*, quest lies not in the reaching of a predetermined destination but in the staging of his journey to become a capable poet; in *Endymion*, ‘the manner in which this Poem has been produced’ becomes the Keatsian quest in itself.

To debate whether this exploratory poetics should be a public or private display is to downplay the aesthetic achievements of Keats’s method. In the previously quoted lines, when both bud and poem suddenly ‘flower beneath [Endymion’s] sight’ (II. 59), the blend of actively wielding the couplet through syntax and yielding to the sounds suggested by rhyme makes the effect closer to a Ricksian blush,[[634]](#footnote-634) rather than Byron’s sense of a vacuous ‘Bedlam’ or Levinson’s suggestion of stylistic weakness.[[635]](#footnote-635) Crucially, this is not just unintended blushing or even an inadvertent blushing embraced by the poet. Rather, *Endymion* knowingly drives itself into this state as a means of travelling beyond convention and exploring possibilities. The fact that Keats entrusts to this technique as *Endymion*’s primary compositional method, despite the fact that it occasionally leads the poet into the laboured or bathetic rhymes seen in *Sleep and Poetry*, testifies to what Ricks describes as the Keatsian embrace of ‘awkwardness’.[[636]](#footnote-636) The way the erotic subtext of the flowering scene emphatically lacks any ‘affected coolness’,[[637]](#footnote-637) with the poet delighting in the way the ‘how’ and ‘now’ couplet stretches monosyllabic rhyming to its limit, affirms the value of *Endymion*’s movement between wielding and yielding.[[638]](#footnote-638) This fluid approach to rhyme allows Keats to gleefully resist what he considers to be the bondage of Neoclassical versification, resulting in writing that teems with vigorous, unpredictable life. Rather than showing a poet self-indulgently and myopically ‘frigging’ his imagination, [[639]](#footnote-639) Keats’s rhyming represents his quest to open up new realms of poetic opportunity, allowing him to carve out his own path towards capable poethood through a process of exploration and innovation.

**III.**

Despite the self-deprecatory remarks of the Preface, *Endymion*’s third book reveals Keats’s belief that the poem, through its deliberate formal innovations, is a considered quest towards poetic excellence. The significance of this highly digressive book has proved elusive for critics.[[640]](#footnote-640) Yet Wolfson emphasises ‘the degree to which the figurative aspects of Endymion’s career are invested with both the aspirations and the anxieties of the author’, and this is nowhere more apparent than in Book III.[[641]](#footnote-641) The affinities between Keats’s descriptions of his attempts to compose *Endymion* and the setting of Book III, which shows the poem’s protagonist roaming the ocean floor, hint towards the book being representative of the poetic creation as a whole. In a letter to James Hessey, Keats explains that ‘in *Endymion*, I leaped headlong into the Sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea & comfortable advice’.[[642]](#footnote-642) While the liquid imagery and Keats’s determination to leap ‘headlong’ into it recalls the fluidity of *Endymion*’s open-couplet form, the remarks also reveal the Endymion of Book III as a Keatsian double. Karen Swann also identifies an allegorical impulse in this section of the poem, reading the book ‘as an allegory of “Cockney” aesthetic production that magically “makes” poet, precursor, and poem in the form of the commodity’.[[643]](#footnote-643) Yet by placing images of quasi-texts and quasi-rhymes at the forefront of Endymion’s encounter with Glaucus, Keats seems intent on allegorising his attempt to reinvigorate literary tradition through an adaptation of the rhyming couplet, a technique that allows the book to dramatise Keats’s quest to a position of poetic capability.

When Endymion encounters the ‘old man’ Glaucus ‘in the concave green of the sea’ (III. 191-2), the protagonist is struck by the markings of his mysterious cloak:

And, ample as the largest winding-sheet,

A cloak of blue wrapped up his agèd bones,

O’erwrought with symbols by the deepest groans

Of ambitious magic: every ocean-form

Was woven in with black distinctness; storm,

And calm, and whispering, and hideous roar,

Quicksand, and whirlpool, and deserted shore

Were emblemed in the woof; with every shape

That skims, or dives, or sleeps, ’twixt cape and cape.

The gulfing whale was like a dot in the spell.

Yet look upon it, and ’twould size and swell

To its huge self, and the minutest fish

Would pass the very hardest gazer’s wish,

And show his little eye’s anatomy.

Then there was pictured the regality

Of Neptune, and the sea nymphs round his state,

In beauteous vassalage, look up and wait.

Beside this old man lay a pearly wand,

And in his lap a book, the which he conned

So steadfastly, that the new denizen

Had time to keep him in amazèd ken,

To mark these shadowings, and stand in awe.

(III. 196-217)

These lines are inspired by the universal scope of Achilles’ shield in Homer’s *The Iliad*, hinting towards the epic ambitions that shape Keats’s later *Hyperion* project. While the fabric of Glaucus’s cloak similarly subsumes all within its design, affirmed by the repetition of the ‘and’ conjunction in ‘storm, / And calm, and whispering, and hideous roar, / Quicksand, and whirlpool, and deserted shore’, Keats develops this trope by focusing on the uncertain relationship between cloak and owner.[[644]](#footnote-644) By emphasising how the cloak ‘wrapped up’ Glaucus’s bones, the lines assign agency to the cloak in a way that stresses the powerlessness of its wearer. ‘O’erwrought with symbols’, the cloak recalls Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, an object that is itself ‘with brede / Of marble men and maidens overwrought’ (‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, 41-2). Yet there are clear contrasts between these two representations of art. The speaker of Keats’s Ode celebrates the supposed immortality of the ‘happy, happy boughs!’ (21) and an image of ‘happy love!’ (25), with the hyperbole of the repetition revealing the desperation of this attempt to impart vitality onto inanimate art. While the images on the Grecian urn invite the imaginative speculation of onlookers, seen notably in stanza 4’s questioning of ‘Who are these coming to the sacrifice?’ (31), in *Endymion* the cloak ‘size[s] and swell[s]’ of its own accord, and potentially against the wishes of those who look upon it. To look upon the cloak is to experience enchantment but ultimately to be disempowered, and the passage from *Endymion* shows Keats’s rhymes working hard to create meaning; the couplet of ‘anatomy’ and ‘regality’ rhymes only on the final syllable, implying a disjunction between the powerless physicality of the ‘little eye’ and the ‘regality’ of the cloak’s ethereal imagery. When the cloak’s ‘gulfing whale’ transmutes from a ‘dot’ to its ‘huge self’, overwhelming the gaze of the ‘little eye’s anatomy’, Keats’s emphasis on the cloak’s vertiginously changing perspectives renders it a potent metaphor for *Endymion* itself.[[645]](#footnote-645) An unsigned review published in *London Magazine* in 1820 observes that the poem

is totally unlike […] all other poems. As we said before, it is not *a poem* at all. It is an ecstatic dream of poetry—a flush—a fever—a burning light—an involuntary out-pouring of the spirit of poetry—that will not be controuled.[[646]](#footnote-646)

In terms that resonate with Keats’s depiction of the cloak, the reviewer describes *Endymion* as the site of a thrilling but potentially anarchical disorder. Like the cloak, this vast textual organism is prone to its own kind of burgeoning when Keats yields to the musicality of rhyme. The poem written in open couplets is depicted as a fluid textual mass that can surround, contain, and overwhelm, a form of art that is empowered and autonomous to a potentially dangerous level. Resonating with the earlier notion that one can only ‘strive in vain’ (IV. 414) to wield poetry, the cloak’s status as a representation of *Endymion* foregrounds the poem’s potential to suck the life out of those who attempt to control it.

With the cloak acting as the first of Book III’s images of quasi-texts and quasi-rhymes, Keats’s self-reflexive narrative points up the peril of his poetic quest by stressing the difficulty of mastering this potentially unruly magic. Glaucus, as a victim of Circe’s seduction and the owner of the cloak she fashions, is shown to be deadened under the influence of this ‘winding-sheet’ (III. 196). This man of ‘lifeless’ features (III. 220) possesses ‘snow-white brows’ (III. 221) that ‘went arching up, and like two magic ploughs / Furrow’d deep wrinkles in his forehead large, / Which kept as fixedly as rocky marge’ (III. 222-24). The diction suggests a statuesque, inanimate being, as much a piece of art as a living subject, a trope that anticipates the poet’s encounter with the fallen Titans in *The Fall of Hyperion* who are ‘postured motionless, / Like sculpture builded up upon the grave / Of their own power’ (*The Fall*, I. 382-84). Karen Swann argues that the Glaucus character has its antecedents not only in his mythological namesake but also Wordsworth’s Leech-Gatherer, Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, Milton’s Lycidas, and Spenser’s Archimago, proposing that ‘Glaucus is a patently poetic figure: a figure for the poet and the charm of poetry. As literary predecessor to the belated Endymion, his first act is to anoint the youth as his successor, “the man” who has come to complete and redeem his work’.[[647]](#footnote-647) The lines ‘beside this old man lay a pearly wand, / And in his lap a book, the which he conned / So steadfastly’ (III. 213-15) are a particularly close mirroring of Wordsworth’s description of the leech-gatherer, who ‘fixedly did look / Upon the muddy water, which he conned, / As if he had been reading in a book’ (‘Resolution and Independence’, 86-88).[[648]](#footnote-648) Wordsworth recognises a fortitude in the leech-gatherer, one that belies his physical weakness, and identifies him as an example that all should seek to emulate. Yet Keats inverts this tradition of powerful poetic figures by suggesting Glaucus’s inability to complete his quasi-poetic ‘work’. Describing his labours under the sea, Glaucus informs Endymion of how he has ‘enshrined piously / All lovers, whom fell storms have doomed to die / Throughout my bondage’ (III. 721-23), arranging the corpses alongside his own dead lover, Scylla. The narrator tells readers to

Imagine further, line by line,

These warrior thousands on the field supine—

So in that crystal place, in silent rows,

Poor lovers lay at rest from joys and woes.

The stranger from the mountains, breathless, traced

Such thousands of shut eyes in order placed;

Such ranges of white feet, and patient lips

All ruddy—for here death no blossom nips.

He marked their brows and foreheads; saw their hair

Put sleekly on one side with nicest care;

And each one’s gentle wrists, with reverence,

Put cross-wise to its heart.

(III. 733-44)

In describing the dead lovers as laid out ‘line by line’, Keats’s lines carry metapoetic weight, positing Glaucus as the creator of a kind of quasi-text. Like the cloak, the image is potentially a metaphor for *Endymion* as a whole.[[649]](#footnote-649) But the combination of the phrase ‘line by line’ and the emphasis on the dead warriors as pairs of ‘lovers’ or couples, like Glaucus and Scylla, also implies that the lovers more specifically represent a somewhat macabre metaphor for the rhyming couplet. While Keats refuses to dwell on the more disconcerting implications of this image, the fastidiousness with which Glaucus lays out the bodies with the ‘nicest care’ creates an oddness in tone. The neatness of the ‘thousands of shut eyes in order placed’ morbidly echoes Hunt’s lambasting of Pope and the French school, those poets ‘insensible to music’ who write in a deadening ‘uniform regularity’.[[650]](#footnote-650) Keats’s emphasis on alignment also recalls *Sleep* and *Poetry*’s rebuke of the Neoclassical poets who wield the ‘wretched rule / And compass vile’ (*Sleep and Poetry*, 195-6). Karen Swann argues that ‘the work [of reviving the couples] is all in the preparation and belongs entirely to [Glaucus]’;[[651]](#footnote-651) yet Keats’s depiction of Glaucus’s creation as a graveyard, with Glaucus able to arrange the figures but not to revive them, also thrusts him into the role of an outmoded and ineffective poet. Keats uses Glaucus to critique a formulaic ‘line by line’ style of rhyming, comparing his arrangement to poetry that adheres too keenly to the strict conventions of Augustan versification. The drowned lovers are described as ‘silent rows’, where the term ‘silent’ achieves its greatest resonance as a subtle denouncing of the figure responsible for such an arrangement, the poet who aligns his poetic materials around the flat, un-musical sounds of rigidly closed couplets. The references to the figures as ‘warrior[s]’ subtly hints towards a traditionally epic subject matter, as in the comparison of Glaucus’s cloak to Achilles’ shield in *The* *Iliad*, but the fact that these warriors remain lifeless under Glaucus’s care, as suggested by the term ‘supine’, suggests an approach to composition that suppresses the drama and energy of quest. Subtly critiquing those poets who wield the rhyming couplet with a deadening rigidity, Keats presents the lovers as laid out in pairs by a poet, Glaucus, who operates with neatness and precision but is incapable of making his verses ‘fit to live’ (‘Preface to *Endymion*’, p. 505).

With the sea depicted as a repository of poetic subjects, Glaucus and Endymion are presented as two contrasting types of poet who share equal access to ‘the ceaseless wonders of this ocean-bed’ (III. 392) but achieve significantly contrasting results. As a result, the ritual Endymion must undertake in order to complete his quest is framed as an act of creation, one that is predicated on the adaption of Glaucus’s existing work:

“Let us commence”,

Whisper’d the guide, stuttering with joy, “even now”.

He spake, and, trembling like an aspen-bough,

Began to tear his scroll in pieces small,

Uttering the while some mumblings funeral.

He tore it into pieces small as snow

That drifts unfeathered when bleak northerns blow;

And having done it, took his dark blue cloak

And bound it round Endymion: then stroke

His wand against the empty air times nine.

“What more there is to do, young man, is thine:

But first a little patience. First undo

This tangled thread, and wind it to a clue.

Ah, gentle! ’tis as weak as spider’s skein;

And shouldst thou break it—What, is it done so clean?

A power overshadows thee! O, brave!

(III. 744-59)

Textual destruction and textual recreation intermingle in the passage. With Glaucus ‘uttering the while some mumblings funeral’, Keats stages a funeral not just of Glaucus’s scroll, ostensibly representative of a kind of poetic urtext, but also, by extension, the apparently flagging poetic tradition that he seems to represent. As the scroll is torn into ‘pieces small as snow / That drifts unfeathered when bleak northerns blow’, the verse demonstrates its own ‘drift[ing]’ through rhyming lines, portraying the revivification ritual in vexingly ambiguous images. Endymion is told to ‘first undo / This tangled thread, and wind it to a clue’, and while Glaucus’s question ‘What, is it done so clean?’ suggests that this is achieved with miraculous speed, Keats does not specify where this thread has come from, nor what happens when it is rewound. Despite the fleeting nature of its appearance, this image of entanglement carries a teasing sense of significance, recalling Bloom’s suggestion that ‘the mazes of romance in *Endymion* are so winding that they suggest the contrary to vision’.[[652]](#footnote-652) The enjambment that follows ‘undo’, in its mirroring of the disentangling that the lines describe, performs how Keats’s open couplets unravel the tightly wound metrical patterns of Popean verse. In the rhyme of ‘undo’ with ‘clue’, the image of a ball of yarn suggests a style of rhyming that valorises a loosening of restraints yet remains tied to the couplet form. The passage’s earlier reference to the ‘dark blue cloak’ implies that this mysterious thread comes from the magic garment, where ‘every ocean-form / Was woven in with black distinctness’ (III. 199-200). Although the description of the thread as ‘as weak as spider’s skein’ reaffirms the dangerously enchanting power of the cloak, Glaucus also asserts the need to unravel it with care. The implication is that the garment’s poetic vortex can, in the wrong hands, render a poet powerless, but Keats also reaffirms that mastering it will facilitate a kind of poetic innovation.

Delicately unravelling this ‘winding-sheet’ (III. 196) of death allows Endymion to wield the quasi-textual cloak as a life-giving force. As Endymion begins ‘showering [the scroll’s] powerful fragments on the dead’ couples (I. 784), Keats’s lines implicitly figure himself as resurrecting the couplet tradition and imbuing it with a renewed sense of life:

And, as he passed, each [corpse] lifted up its head,

As doth a flower at Apollo’s touch.

Death felt it to his inwards: ’twas too much:

Death fell a-weeping in his charnel-house.

The Latmian persevered along, and thus

All were re-animated. There arose

A noise of harmony, pulses and throes

Of gladness in the air—while many, who

Had died in mutual arms devout and true,

Sprang to each other madly; and the rest

Felt a high certainty of being blessed.

They gazed upon Endymion. Enchantment

Grew drunken, and would have its head and bent.

Delicious symphonies, like airy flowers,

Budded, and swelled, and, full-blown, shed full showers

Of light, soft, unseen leaves of sounds divine.

(III. 785-800)

Keats’s natural metaphor presents the lovers coming to life ‘as doth a flower at Apollo’s touch’, recalling *Sleep and Poetry*’s criticism of the artificiality of the prevailing couplet style. Implying that Keats relies on a more natural style of rhyming, the lines indulge in the plenitude of nature to posit Endymion’s awakening of the couples, and likewise Keats’s revival of the couplet tradition, as the natural regrowth of a previously stunted form. With the revivification of the drowned lovers reintroducing music to the noiseless vacuum of the seascape, the lines read as an allegorical narrative inspired by Hunt’s rejection of a versification ‘insensible to music’.[[653]](#footnote-653) In a paradox that epitomises Keats’s approach to fashioning a ‘delicious symphony’ of rhyme, the spasmodic ‘pulses and throes’ of the reviving corpses are the source of ‘harmony’, rather than dissonance. As the narrator describes how ‘Enchantment / Grew drunken, and would have its head and bent’, Keats locates ‘enchantment’ in a succumbing to the relaxed, almost stumbling coupling of the polysyllabic ‘enchantment’ with the sharp monosyllables of ‘head and bent’. The couplet not only creates harmonic music but prompts questions as to what constitutes harmony itself, performing the way that *Endymion*’s soundtrack as a whole gleefully eschews ‘smoothness’ in favour of febrile sounds that,[[654]](#footnote-654) like the awakening lovers, ‘spr[i]ng to each other madly’.

By making the image of the couples as quasi-rhymes so central to Endymion’s quest of Book III, Keats reiterates the importance of the couplet to his own quest to achieve capable poethood and write ‘verses fit to live’ (‘Preface to *Endymion*’, p. 505). When Jarvis stresses that rhyme as a form of ‘prosodic thinking’ ‘operates right at the threshold of intentionality’,[[655]](#footnote-655) the observation is borne out by Keats’s concession to B. R. Haydon that when composing poetry, ‘things which I do half at Random are afterwards confirmed by my judgment in a dozen features of Propriety’.[[656]](#footnote-656) This ability to trust to instinct and intuition enables the poem’s fluid vacillation betweena wielding of and a yielding to rhyme, allowing *Endymion* to reject the route towards capable poethood laid out by Keats’s predecessors. Instead, Keats’s exploratory brand of questing utilises the couplet as a tool the poet can actively brandish as a means of directing the longer work of poetry and injecting controlled doses of musicality, as well as an ‘entanglement’ (I. 798) capable of dictating the course of composition in its own right. Echoing Helen Vendler’s description of *Endymion* as a ‘structureless’ poem,[[657]](#footnote-657) Herbert Tucker’s account of Keats’s desire to compose an epic suggests that ‘if to want this was to want the moon—Endymion’s syndrome—it is consoling to think that in reaching after architectonic structure, and grasping stylistic poise instead, Keats through the happy magic of synecdoche got—Endymion’s reward—all the grandeur he had really ever wanted’.[[658]](#footnote-658) To frame Keats as aspiring to a coherent structure but achieving only isolated moments of stylistic flourish is to misrepresent both *Endymion*’s design and its formal achievements. Keats’s shifting between wielding and yielding not only creates the fluctuations of rhyme that are necessary to sustain the poem’s four vast and often disparate books, but the structural framework within which he can explore the limits and capabilities of rhyming verse, carving out his own path towards capable poethood through a commitment to innovation and exploration.

**CHAPTER SIX:**

**‘Too huge for mortal tongue’: Poetic authority and the *Hyperion* project**

*Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* show Keats foregrounding and performing his quest to achieve ‘capable poethood’ before the reader.[[659]](#footnote-659) Building on the quest of *Endymion*, in which the attempt to ‘make 4000 Lines of one bare circumstance’ implies Keats’s desire to master a longer work of poetry,[[660]](#footnote-660) the poems function as a prolonged attempt to assert poetic authority through the epic. *Hyperion*’s ambivalent account of revolution interrogates the concept of authority in the abstract rather than in relation to any specific historical circumstances, allowing Keats to scrutinise his role as creative agent.[[661]](#footnote-661) The poemendeavours to assume epic authority through an omniscient and objective narrative voice that transcends the ‘feeble tongue’ (I. 49) of mortal subjectivity. Yet by lingering on the deposed Saturn, the ‘Father of all verse’ Apollo (III. 13), and the eponymous Hyperion as potential doubles of the poet, this multifaceted text betrays its author’s affinities with both the powerless and the newly empowered. Keats’s attempt to juggle this cast of deities, who each give voice to Keats’s own struggle to compose an epic, highlights a tension between a repressed subjectivity and the requirements of epic poetry. Even as Keats seems overwhelmed by the scale of the epic and in thrall to his own desire for objectivity, his masterful staging of this trial transforms the *Hyperion* project into an apprenticeship in the epic genre. The second part of this chapter will foreground the way in which Keats’s quest to become capable poet is continued and brought to a conclusion in the poem’s rewriting as *The Fall* *of Hyperion* (hereafter *The Fall*), building on Harold Bloom’s observation on the poem’s unfinished state: ‘we wish for more, necessarily, but only now begin to understand how much we have received, even in this broken monument’.[[662]](#footnote-662) In *The Fall*, Keats becomes a quester by successfully re-entering and reanimating the landscape of his former work. By rejecting *Hyperion*’s attempt to repress personality and cement an epic objectivity, the poem instead implies that the most effective way to assert control over a theme ‘too huge for mortal tongue’ (*The Fall*, II. 9) is to render it in terms of poet’s compositional struggle, explicitly foregrounding the poet as a quester seeking after his own ‘mature powers’.[[663]](#footnote-663)

**I.**

Written in the midst of an astonishing resurgence of epic that began around the close of the eighteenth century,[[664]](#footnote-664) evinced most notably by the work of William Blake and Robert Southey,[[665]](#footnote-665) *Hyperion* marks Keats’s attempt at what he considered the most significant form of artistic expression. Described by Herbert Tucker as ‘the last rite of passage to full poetic majority, the summative test of art’,[[666]](#footnote-666) Keats felt the lure of epic composition keenly, and he hoped that to produce one would elevate his poetic capability alongside that of his predecessors. In ‘To Charles Cowden Clarke’ Keats praises his former schoolmaster for instructing him in the art of the sonnet, the ode, and the epigram, but celebrates the grand scale of the epic above all other poetry: ‘epic was of all the king, / Round, vast, and spanning all like Saturn’s ring’ (‘To Charles Cowden Clarke’, 66-7). Writing to George and Georgiana Keats while composing *Hyperion*, Keats posits the epic as a means of acquiring poetic power, outlining a state where ‘no sooner am I alone than shapes of epic greatness are stationed around me, and serve my Spirit the office which is equivalent to a King’s body guard’.[[667]](#footnote-667) This regal simile stresses the primacy of the poet who successfully composes an epic, an individual whose reputation will be enshrined in and protected by the ‘body guard’ that is their output.

While my analysis differs in focus from that of Michael O’Neill, who argues that *Hyperion* ‘uses its story to explore Keats’s view of the role of the poet in relation to history’, I echo his observation that *Hyperion* ‘is a poem about the loss of authority (that of the Titans) which seeks to assert the authority of a poet (Keats)’.[[668]](#footnote-668) The key phrase in O’Neill’s account is ‘seeks to’. Amidst Keats’s quest to become a capable poet, it is *Hyperion*’s thwarted desire to consolidate the epic authority of its narrator that ultimately brings it to a halt, a struggle that stems from the poem’s conflicted narrative voice. Commenting on how the textresists comparisons with Keats’s other works, Jack Stillinger observes that ‘for all [of] its astonishing epic resplendence, [*Hyperion*] just sits there apart from the rest, like Saturn himself, “quiet as stone” (I. 4), almost as if it had been written by someone other than Keats’.[[669]](#footnote-669) This chapter contends that Keats deliberately cultivates this impression, aspiring to a voice of objectivity, detachment, and omniscience as a means of assuming authority over his epic project.[[670]](#footnote-670) Although he did not live to see *The Prelude*, Keats’s apparent determination to write an objective epic might reflect the poet’s desire to avoid the moralising didacticism and explicit self-interest that he perceived in Wordsworth’s quasi-epic *The Excursion*.[[671]](#footnote-671) Unlike *The Fall*’s indebtedness to the mode of Dantescan dream vision, described by Stuart Curran as a form that ‘forestalls distance and accentuates the ways in which truths are perceived and ordered within the mind’,[[672]](#footnote-672) *Hyperion* explicitly strives for distance, aiming to deal in what Curran refers to as ‘the supposedly objective truths of epic tradition’.[[673]](#footnote-673) If Keats saw epic as a form that demanded an objective voice, Curran’s ‘supposedly’ stresses a necessary scepticism towards any epic intended as an unequivocally impersonal work.[[674]](#footnote-674) As *Hyperion* progresses, Keats develops his own scepticism towards the supposed impersonality of epic, something that is explicitly expressed in the poem’s rewriting as *The Fall.* In both poems, Keats explores the extent to which a quest to become a capable poet necessitates foregrounding the figure of the self as quester.

Despite its aspirations towards distance, *Hyperion* is structured around a continuous zooming in and out of interiority.[[675]](#footnote-675) Scenes that initially take the form of an abstracted vision proceed to move fluidly in and out of subjectivity, as Keats’s characters become mediums for voicing his quest to compose an epic. These moments when subjectivity comes to the fore are typically followed by an often abrupt movement outwards into impersonality, showing Keats recognising his heightened self-involvement and attempting to enforce a more straightforwardly ‘objective’ speaking voice. While Edward Bostetter’s insistence that the poem’s abandonment‘was a sign of doubt and imaginative failure’ downplays the poetic heights to which *Hyperion* often soars,[[676]](#footnote-676) it taps into the struggle that dominates Keats’s text. This self-conscious poem repeatedly kicks against the doubt and imaginative failures that threaten its existence, continually attempting to extend its vision beyond the confines of the authorial self. *Hyperion* invites only to resist allegorical readings that align Keats with any one deity, but the poet’s affiliation with his various characters often creates the impression of a text coming apart at the seams. This vacillation between subjectivity and objectivity exposes Keats’s grappling with the demands of epic narration, as is apparent in his attempt to open the poem with an impersonal voice:

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale

Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,

Far from the fiery noon, and eve’s one star,

Sat grey-haired Saturn, quiet as a stone,

Still as the silence round about his lair;

Forest on forest hung above his head

Like cloud on cloud. No stir of air was there,

Not so much life as on a summer’s day

Robs not one light seed from the feathered grass,

But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest.

A stream went voiceless by, still deadened more

By reason of his fallen divinity

Spreading a shade: the Naiad ’mid her reeds

Pressed her cold finger closer to her lips.

(I. 1-14)

The dominant motifs of these lines are silence and stasis, exemplified by negating diction such as ‘no stir of air’ and ‘not so much life’.[[677]](#footnote-677) As Keats attempts to negate the self in order to craft a speaking persona that befits the epic, these negatives become symptomatic of the conflicted voice that narrates the poem. This is manifested in the seemingly obstinate fixation on opening *in medias res*, as *Hyperion* begins on a note of objectively described grandeur, ‘Deep in the shady sadness of a vale’. The repetition of the distal deixis ‘deep’ and ‘far’ reflects the isolation of the despondent Saturn, but also suggests the narrator’s desire to maintain a critical distance from his characters, as if to stress his suitability to the role of objective epic overseer. Keats carefully selects which epic conventions he deploys in order to maintain this impression of impersonality. By eschewing an opening invocation to the muses, the passage consciously avoids a technique that would draw attention to his authorial self, as well as the creative and imaginative workings behind the poem. Yet Keats’s attempt to perform an objective brand of narration immediately invites scepticism. Carefully arranged into fourteen lines, the passage knowingly gestures towards the sonnet form. Keats’s decision to utilise a sonnet, even as the opening of *Hyperion* remains studiedly epic, shows him reflecting on the conflict that underpins his poem.[[678]](#footnote-678) The passage grapples with the tension within the sonnet form itself, an innately conflicted mode that often toes the line between a form of self-indulgence and a form of address.[[679]](#footnote-679) With the allusion to this intensely personal mode subtly suggesting introspection and a potentially self-indulgent subjectivity,[[680]](#footnote-680) the lines hint towards the authorial presence that shadows *Hyperion*, a personality that threatens to seep into the epic at every juncture. Seen in this light, Keats’s attempt to create an epic narrative voice is exposed as a process of forcible self-restraint. In the opening line, the phrase ‘shady sadness’ reveals a pun on ‘vale’, which denotes both a pastoral locale and the ‘veil’ of clothing. These connotations of self-concealment are suggestive of the pressures Keats places upon his speaking voice; to exist in the epic ‘vale’ necessarily involves a ‘veiling’ of subjective concerns. Consequently, this ‘vale’ resembles a kind of prison: ‘forest on forest hung above his head / Like cloud on cloud. No stir of air was there’. The cumulative syntax of such phrasing, alongside the internal-rhyme and repeated ‘r’ sounds of ‘stir’, ‘air’, and ‘there’, create a sense of circularity, mirroring the entrapment endured by both the deposed Saturn and Keats himself. While the Miltonic blank verse reveals the text’s unmistakable dialogue with its epic predecessors, these opening lines foreground the tension between objective distance and subjective involvement that both enlivens and destabilises Keats’s epic venture.

This sense that Keats haunts his purportedly impersonal narrative problematises readings that take the poem’s objectivity at face value. Paul Sherwin argues that the ‘celebrated objectivity of Books I and II’ is ‘on one level a purgation of Miltonic palpable design and self-dramatization’,[[681]](#footnote-681) but *Hyperion*’s refusal to commit unequivocally to any such ‘purgation’ exposes the poem’s objectivity as a kind of generic aspiration. Considering the interpretative difficulties of a text that focuses on both parties of the Titan-Olympian conflict, Susan J. Wolfson poses the pivotal question: ‘what of the narrator’s part in this multiplicity of voices, this “playing of different Natures with Joy or Sorrow”? No authorial persona judges these various utterances or fixes their moral register’.[[682]](#footnote-682) Wolfson’s conclusion that the narrative voice is ‘untempted by the voice of Miltonic judgement’ overstates Keats’s distance from the text.[[683]](#footnote-683) Though Keats’s position in *Hyperion* is not that of a narrator conducting moral judgements of his characters, his involvement in the narrative is much more direct. While Keats seems ‘untempted’ by the voice of judgement, the poet is not untempted by the possibility of articulating his personal voice itself, as the text erodes Wolfson’s cleavage between the ‘authorial persona’ directing the poem and the ‘multiplicity of voices’ that exist within it. The depiction of Saturn in Book I suggests this mingling of modes:

I am smothered up,

And buried from all godlike exercise

Of influence benign on planets pale,

Of admonitions to the winds and seas,

Of peaceful sway above man’s harvesting,

And all those acts which Deity supreme

Doth ease its heart of love in.—I am gone

Away from my own bosom; I have left

My strong identity, my real self,

Somewhere between the throne and where I sit

Here on this spot of earth. Search, Thea, search!

(I. 106-116)

This description invites comparisons with Keats, who posits Saturn as a potential poet in order to voice his own anxieties regarding assuming the role of epic narrator.[[684]](#footnote-684) Depicted as an unmoored character unable to locate and define his own role within the narrative, the fallen Titan provides a harrowing example of the trauma of losing one’s identity. Keats considers the dizzyingly high stakes of his own attempt to perfect ‘a new level of writing’ that would consciously depart from his previous literary style.[[685]](#footnote-685) The shift between Saturn’s current earthbound state and the heavenly height of his previous ‘peaceful sway above man’s harvesting’ has a vertiginous effect, and as the focus again zooms out to show a broader view of ‘planets pale’ and ‘the winds and seas’, the poem stresses the disparity between earthly and transcendent perspectives. This schism shows Keats questioning whether he as poet represents a mortal, earthbound teller of a subjective tale or an immortal and omniscient onlooker of divine events, a participant in a kind of ‘godlike exercise’. The self, subject to the conflicting pulls of ‘the throne’ and ‘here on this spot of earth’, is lost ‘somewhere between’ transcendent and earthly realms, with the uncertainty of this location implying less a mediating position between contraries than an identity torn apart by conflicting impulses. In describing himself as ‘smothered up’ and ‘buried’, Saturn’s diction describes his sudden inability to partake in ‘godlike exercise’ as a state of entombment, implying that to lose one’s identity is to die, even if the physical body remains. This Gothic imagery intensifies the motif of entrapment seen in the opening sonnet.[[686]](#footnote-686) The active verbs of ‘I am gone away from my own bosom’ and ‘I have left / My strong identity’ suggest an agency that is at odds with the passivity of the dethroned Titan, highlighting Keats’s projection of his own subjective concerns into Saturn, specifically that a shift to an epic narrative style entails a wilful destruction of the personal voice that defines him as poet. Having recognised the conflation of Saturn’s ‘I’ with his own, Keats’s abrupt shift from the insistent first person pronoun to the imperative ‘Search, Thea, search!’ forcibly drags the poem outwards into objectivity.

This sense of the narrative zooming in and out of authorial subjectivity continues throughout Book I. As Saturn rallies against his subjugation, the narrative veers back into something resembling self-representation:

‘it must—it must

Be of ripe progress: Saturn must be King.

Yes, there must be a golden victory;

There must be Gods thrown down, and trumpets blown

Of triumph calm, and hymns of festival

Upon the gold clouds metropolitan,

Voices of soft proclaim, and silver stir

Of strings in hollow shells; and there shall be

Beautiful things made new, for the surprise

Of the sky-children. I will give command:

Thea! Thea! Thea! where is Saturn?’

This passion lifted him upon his feet,

And made his hands to struggle in the air

His Druid locks to shake and ooze with sweat,

His eyes to fever out, his voice to cease.

(I. 124-38)

Again, the closing lines of this passage, so deliberately descriptive of Saturn in their listing technique—‘his hands’, ‘his Druid locks’, ‘his eyes’, ‘his voice’—suggest an abrupt disengagement from the previous immersion in subjective thought. Saturn’s assertion that ‘it must / Be of ripe progress’ and ‘there shall be / Beautiful things made new’ could easily represent a manifesto for the *Hyperion* project itself, showing Keats willing himself into the epic endeavour.[[687]](#footnote-687) While *Hyperion* is so often framed in terms of its difference from *Endymion*,[[688]](#footnote-688)this focus on poetic progress is consistent with the earlier poem’s designation as ‘a trial of my Powers of Imagination and chiefly of my invention’,[[689]](#footnote-689) while the desire to have ‘beautiful things made new’ resonates not just with the opening line to Keats’s romance, ‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever’ (*Endymion*, I. 1), but the earlier work’s commitment to a quest built on innovation. Saturn’s statements suggest Keats’s determination to overpower the ‘doubt and imaginative failure’ that Bostetter isolates as the reason for the epic’s unfinished state.[[690]](#footnote-690) Yet the tone of the passage is dictated by the imperatives of line 124; repeating ‘must’ five times over the opening four lines, Saturn gropes vainly after a lost power, with this shrill emphasis failing to convince readers of his authority. Although the envisioning of ‘Gods thrown down, and trumpets blown’ describes a possible trajectory for the epic, the poem does not so much surge forwards as draw to a halt. Keats’s lines float precariously in the midst of imaginary possibilities, and as additional clauses continue to unfurl through the repeated conjunction ‘and’, the poem obliquely recalls the digressive structure that underpins *Endymion*. Keats’s attempt to fashion a new epic style wars against the possibility of a stylistic reversion, and the poet’s inability to bring the epic potentialities to fruition is implied by Saturn’s final inability to ‘give command’, an assertion that dissolves into impotent questioning of his own identity: ‘Thea! where is Saturn?’ Saturn’s speech foreshadows the course of *Hyperion* itself, a poem that is cast aside upon Keats’s recognition of the uncertain identity of his own epic voice.

Hyperion, too, is subject to the narrator’s desire to blend with his characters. As was the case in the depiction of Saturn, what initially resembles an impersonal portrait is increasingly suffused with reflections of Keats’s own subjectivity. Imagery of eyesight and vision cluster around the portrait of Hyperion, concepts that resonate with Keats’s attempt to ‘to see as a god sees’ (*The Fall*, I. 304) and to assume authority over his epic vision:

‘O dreams of day and night!

O monstrous forms! O effigies of pain!

O spectres busy in a cold, cold gloom!

O lank-eared Phantoms of black-weeded pools!

Why do I know ye? Why have I seen ye? Why

Is my eternal essence thus distraught

To see and to behold these horrors new?’

(I. 227-33)

Haunted by spectral visions of his enemies, Hyperion allows Keats to reflect on the nature of ‘seeing’. Rather than symptomatic of an ability to partake in ‘godlike exercise’ (I. 107), ‘seeing’ becomes indicative of passivity and inaction. The image of Hyperion plagued by the sensory onslaught of abstracted, adumbrated figures paints the picture of a poet haunted by imaginative conceptions that are yet to be moulded into a coherent whole. What seems particularly haunting about such visions is the familiarity and even intimacy implied by Hyperion’s ‘Why do I know ye?’ The significance of this recognition is affirmed by the description of the spectres as ‘effigies of pain’. This anticipates *The Fall of Hyperion*, where Keats’s imaginative conceptions explicitly become effigies, ‘sculpture builded up on the grave / Of their own power’ (*The Fall*, I. 383-4). There, Keats views the sculptures of his epic figures from a distance, seeing through the eyes of an authorial persona that is explicitly himself as poet. Yet in *Hyperion* there is an emphatic lack of distance. Hyperion, as poet-surrogate, does not merely ‘see’ but ‘know[s]’ these ethereal imaginative forms. Likewise, upon viewing his epic characters, Keats as narrator does not simply ‘see’ them from the perspective of an objective and omniscient authorial presence, but knows these forms as himself. At this juncture quest and quester are openly intertwined; Keats acknowledges the element of self-portraiture that helps to constitute his poem’s questing after his own ‘mature powers’,[[691]](#footnote-691) with the scene hinting towards the poet’s awareness of the implicit subjectivity of his epic. The curious tension between the other-worldly status of the ‘spectres’ and Hyperion’s familiarity with their forms is a reflection of the tension that underpins the poem as a whole; *Hyperion* presents a series of imaginatively conceived, ethereal deities that are ultimately revealed as housing a figure distinctly familiar to Romantic poetry, the artist whose quest involves a turning inwards to explore the self.

Letters written by Keats while composing the poem accentuate this connection between Hyperion’s lament and his own artistic struggle to produce an epic. Writing to C. W. Dilke, Keats discusses his immersion in the ‘abstract’ epic landscape as a response to his brother’s illness, commenting ‘I wish I could say Tom was any better. His identity presses upon me so all day’ so that ‘I am obliged to write, and plunge into abstract images to ease myself of his countenance his voice and feebleness—so that I live now in a continual fever—it must be poisonous to life although I feel well’.[[692]](#footnote-692) The letter and poem share a similar voice; the liquid imagery of the verb ‘plunge’, implying a kind of vigorous, potentially uncontrollable energy in this decision to embrace ‘abstract images’, mirrors Hyperion’s emphasis on his horrors as existing in a ‘cold, cold gloom’ of ‘black-weeded pools’. To enter into the realm of this purportedly impersonal genre is framed as a means of escaping personal concerns, specifically the suffering of his brother Tom.[[693]](#footnote-693) However, implicit in both images is the possibility of drowning, and Keats’s letter is anxious that one might acquire their own kind of ‘fever’ by embracing imaginative narrative and eschewing personality. A commitment to abstractions is simultaneously a means of ‘eas[ing] myself’ and of acquiring a ‘poisonous’ illness, a paradox that informs the blurring of abstracted distance and personal involvement that dominates not just Hyperion’s speech, but the epic as a whole. If composing *Hyperion* made Keats feel the strain of an apparently jarring movement between the circumstances of his life and those of his art, the poem mirrors this in its similarly disorientating vacillation between imaginative flight and personal thought. Complaining that ‘the shady visions come to domineer’ (I. 244), Hyperion is crushed under the ‘agony’ of vision:

And from the mirrored level where he stood

A mist arose, as from a scummy marsh.

At this, through all his bulk an agony

Crept gradual, from the feet unto the crown,

Like a lithe serpent vast and muscular

Making slow way, with head and neck convulsed

From over-strainèd might.

(I. 257-63)

The reference to the serpent, an allusion to *Paradise Lost*, develops the emphasis on physical debilitation seen in the previous letter. As Nicola Trott states, Keats inverts Milton’s epic so that ‘the Satanic act of invading the serpent becomes the subjective experience of being invaded by it’.[[694]](#footnote-694) This allusion offers the poem’s most explicit indication of Keats’s struggle to assume the voice of an epic poet. The caesurae of lines 258, 259, 260, and 262 agonisingly slow the tempo, as the verse mirrors the crawling of the invading serpent and the gradual asphyxiation of the self. Through Hyperion as poet-surrogate, Keats enacts the poet’s inevitable strangulation at the hands of the epic task and the unavoidable influence of Milton.[[695]](#footnote-695) Crucially, however, despite the initially overwhelming sense of passivity, this remains a strikingly ambiguous moment in the epic. After the poem’s constant vacillation between objective and subjective narration, here Keats adopts a double position, both in and outside of his text and his character. While the text invites us to read autobiographically in terms of Keats’s poetic struggle, it seems that here, Keats as epic poet is not only strangled—as Hyperion, his poet-surrogate—but also strangling. The portrait of Hyperion invites us to question whether the smothered Hyperion might be strangled by Keats’s own personality, as this image of constriction subtly reflects Keats’s insistence on placing images of himself as a quester into his various epic figures. Giving off the impression of being themselves ‘over-strained’, the lines are saturated with sound patterning that almost overwhelms the poetry: ‘crept’ and ‘crown’, ‘from’ and ‘feet’, ‘agony’ and ‘gradual’, ‘like’ and ‘lithe’, and the sibilance of the ‘serpent vast and muscular / Making slow way, with head and neck convuls’d’.[[696]](#footnote-696) The extent of this musicality suggests the firm control of Keats’s artistry, which is at odds with the passivity of his imagery. Through this tension the scene hints towards the poet’s increasing self-consciousness regarding his poetic struggle, as well as his growing awareness of how *Hyperion* can make artistic capital out of its quest to master epic composition.

This self-consciousness achieves its most explicit expression in the depiction of Apollo,[[697]](#footnote-697) who is *Hyperion*’s most explicit representation of the poet questing after his own ‘mature powers’.[[698]](#footnote-698) Described as ‘the Father of all verse’ (III. 13), Apollo is privileged as a kind of idealised creative agent, whose acquisition of his godlike ‘knowledge’ is framed as an act of reading:

‘Mute thou remainest—mute! yet I can read

A wondrous lesson in thy silent face:

Knowledge enormous makes a God of me.

Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions,

Majesties, Sovran voices, agonies,

Creations and destroyings, all at once

Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,

And deify me, as if some blithe wine

Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk,

And so become immortal’.

(III. 111-20)

It is significant that Keats’s annotations to *Paradise Lost* refer to Milton’s orchestration of his own sprawling epic as ‘Apollonian’.[[699]](#footnote-699) Considered in this light, the passage’s connection between empowerment and the ‘wondrous lesson’ of reading once again seems to invite an autobiographical reading. However, if the lines are read in this manner, suggesting that the influence Apollo draws from Mnemosyne is akin to that which Keats must take from Milton to successfully compose an epic, they stress only the impossibility of such a task. The deadening negations of the poem’s opening scene have here been replaced by ceaseless assertion, but the lines deal only in a boundless profusion of abstractions. This listing technique also featured in Book I; while Saturn’s patently unconvincing claim ‘There must be Gods thrown down, and trumpets blown’ (I. 127) implied the inaccessibility of his envisaged ‘epic’ trajectory, this inventory of the themes seemingly available to Apollo also invites scrutiny. The passage’s rapidly accelerating pace is thrilling but rouses suspicion, suggesting an immediacy that is at odds with the scale of what Apollo must ‘read’. As O’Neill suggests, ‘the writing here is distinctly smokeable; that “all at once” is ludicrously opportunist’.[[700]](#footnote-700) The series of Keats’s listed adjectives, ‘names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions’, lodge themselves uncomfortably in a line that is visually bloated on the page, suggesting a load unbearable for any mortal subject. The profundity of ‘creations and destroyings’ is followed by a caesura as Keats pauses to comprehend the scale of this scene. After the elevated tempo of the expanding catalogue of abstractions, this caesura shifts an even greater weight onto the propulsive enjambment that follows in ‘all at once / Pour’; the phrase spills over onto the following line, mirroring the way that ‘knowledge enormous’ floods the ‘wide hollows’ of Apollo’s brain. Keats’s refusal to end-stop his lines hints towards a loss of control in this encounter, implying that such ‘knowledge’ threatens to overwhelm the parameters of poetic form. This quasi-orgasmic outpouring is an ambivalent and profoundly self-conscious moment within the text, showing the poet delighted by but unable to bear the possibilities of epic composition.

In the struggle to acquire such ‘epic’ knowledge, Apollo is shown to ‘die into life’:

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 anguished.

(III. 124-30)

Lurching forwards spasmodically in the shifts between enjambment and end-stopping semicolons, the lines seem unsure whether Apollo’s struggle is ‘most like’ a mortal on the verge of death, or ‘liker still’ to a dead individual stepping back into life. Yet the impression, as Vincent Newey notes, ‘seems less a god being born than a man dying’.[[701]](#footnote-701) The blurring of the dichotomy of life and death suggested by Apollo’s state is illuminated by Keats’s remark on his most significant epic predecessor: ‘I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written but in the vein of art—I wish to devote myself to another sensation’.[[702]](#footnote-702) ‘Life to him would be death to me’ foregrounds Keats’s inability to flourish in the distinctly Miltonic arena of epic, suggesting that to write like Milton would be to efface his own identity. However, read alongside *Hyperion*,the letter also reveals an uncertainty as to what kind of ‘life’ the epic narrator can ever assume within the epic, given Keats’s emphasis on the genre as an objective narrative of abstracted vision, rather than a vehicle for subjective concerns. Foregrounding a binary between the Miltonic ‘vein of art’ and ‘another sensation’, Keats rejects the ‘death’ of committing to Milton’s interpretation of the genre. While his professed allegiance to ‘another sensation’ initially seems a particularly vague statement of intent, suggesting only a desire to ward off any Miltonic influence, ‘sensation’ points to a kind of physical, personal perception that is opposed to an impersonal ‘vein of art’. This distinction informs *Hyperion*’s often disorientating vacillation between attempted objectivity and latent subjectivity, foregrounding this as Keats’s quest to define himself as a poet.[[703]](#footnote-703)

After the narrative’s pervasive attempts to repress personality, the portrait of Apollo affirms the significance of ‘sensation’:

‘For me, dark, dark,

And painful vile oblivion seals my eyes:

I strive to search wherefore I am so sad,

Until a melancholy numbs my limbs;

And then upon the grass I sit, and moan,

Like one who once had wings.—O why should I

Feel cursed and thwarted, when the liegeless air

Yields to my step aspirant? Why should I

Spurn the green turf as hateful to my feet?’

(III. 86-94)

If the previous passages present an idealistic portrait of the poet coming into power, this earlier depiction of Apollo seems more attuned to Keats’s troubled authorial self. Apollo is described as a kind of failed visionary and, crucially, is unable to see, as Keats again integrates his wariness of ‘doubt and imaginative failure’ into the voice of his epic character.[[704]](#footnote-704) In its sharp, almost staccato monosyllables, the sibilant line ‘I strive to search wherefore I am so sad’ exhibits its own agitated and overwrought striving towards musical expression. After the harsh spondee of ‘dark, dark’ and the thudding, burdensome iambs of ‘and painful vile oblivion’, the line ‘Until a melancholy numbs my limbs’ creates a marked shift in tone. Aided by the gentle, almost cushioning internal rhyme of ‘numbs’ and ‘limbs’, this melancholy offers a fleeting moment of relief. While numbness and desensitisation provide some kind of release, the poem refuses to dwell upon this mood, allowing only the briefest of pauses through the line-ending semicolon before moving onto Apollo’s torturous ‘moan’. Yet the cadences of the line strongly evoke ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, as does the setting in a familiar bower of ‘grass’ and ‘green turf’. Asking ‘why should I / Spurn the green turf as hateful to my feet?’, it is as if Keats is no longer able to ‘spurn’ the lyrical mode. Momentarily putting aside the demands of his epic, the poet seems tempted to let the epic slip into the familiar voice of his Ode:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,

Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,

But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet

Wherewith the seasonable month endows

The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild.

(‘Ode to a Nightingale’, 41-5)

This passage from ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ deploys internal-rhyme in ‘see’ and ‘feet’, seen also in *Hyperion*’s ‘numbs’ and ‘limbs’, as well as the sibilance that is ever-present in Apollo’s lament, where ‘s’ sounds occur at least twice in each line. This suggests that a suppressed sensuousness lurks behind Apollo’s speech, one that is at odds with the apparent vacuity of his ‘painful vile oblivion’, offering a further nod towards the luxuriantly expressive voice waiting to break into the apparent objectivity of *Hyperion*.[[705]](#footnote-705) While self-consciousness is a constant feature of the text, here, the latent subjectivity of Keats’s epic voice starts to evoke that of his other lyric poetry; the allusion to his own work reveals the portrait of Apollo as housing *Hyperion*’s most overt transposition of a quintessentially Keatsian lyric self. It is no coincidence that Keats abandons the work within forty lines of this passage. Apollo’s maladies are also strongly reminiscent of the disempowered Saturn at the opening of Book I:

Upon the sodden ground

His old right hand lay nerveless, listless, dead,

Unsceptred; and his realmless eyes were closed;

While his bowed head seemed listening to the Earth,

His ancient mother, for some comfort yet.

(I. 17-21)

Saturn, with his eyes closed and head bowed to the potentially ‘comfort[ing]’ earth, mirrors the suffering experienced not just by the Keatsian lyric self, who ‘cannot see what flowers are at [his] feet’ (41), but also by his Olympian rival Apollo, who complains ‘upon the grass I sit, and moan / Like one who once had wings’ (III. 90-91). The similarities of these descriptions encapsulate the difficulties of *Hyperion*’s flirtation with autobiography. The deities, despite being on opposing sides of the Titan-Olympian conflict, risk being confounded through their shared roots in Keatsian subjectivity. That Saturn and Apollo similarly bemoan their grounded, earthly existence shows Keats articulating his own quest to achieve a grandiose epic omniscience and ‘see as a God sees’ (*The Fall*, I. 303-4). With each of his primary characters voicing the concerns of the epic poet, the text’s ‘multiplicity of voices’ risks collapsing into the singular voice of the subjective authorial self.[[706]](#footnote-706)

The Advertisement to the 1820 volume of Keats’s work describes the inclusion of *Hyperion* as ‘contrary to the wish of the author’, attributing its unfinished state to reviews of *Endymion*: ‘The poem was intended to have been of equal length with *Endymion*, but the reception given to that work discouraged the author from proceeding’ (‘Advertisement to *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems* [1820]’, p. 514). However, in his own copy, an exasperated Keats annotated this paragraph ‘This is a lie’.[[707]](#footnote-707) Given the proliferation of self-portraiture throughout *Hyperion*, Keats’s continuous identification with his characters suggests a more compelling reason for his epic’s unfinished state. Having composed a work brimming with potential poet-surrogates, Keats abandons *Hyperion* upon identifying the tension between subjective involvement and his effort to achieve objectivity, recognising this as a potentially fruitful rather than destabilising force. As a text that is self-consciously an apprenticeship in the epic genre, *Hyperion* allows Keats to crystallise the approach to composing epic that he would undertake in *The Fall*, a poem that endeavours to complete the quest towards capable poethood by reconciling the poet’s apparently conflicting impulses towards lyric and epic.

**II.**

Keats’s quest to assume poetic authority intensifies in the fraught process of rewriting that produces *The Fall of Hyperion*.[[708]](#footnote-708) Depicting his revivification of the stalling epic project as a means of regaining and reasserting authorial authority, Keats’s poem sets out not only to adapt but to usurp its textual predecessor. If the figure of the poet as quester lay implicit in *Hyperion*, *The Fall* argues that the quest to become a capable poet is contingent on more explicitly foregrounding the self. The poem attempts to wed epic and lyric by using the lyric ‘I’ as its central figure, and in creating a narrative persona that is explicitly the subjective poet, Keats presents himself as a quester re-entering the landscape of his former work. Whereas the closing scenes of *Hyperion* tend towards the lyric voice of ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, *The Fall* draws inspiration from another of Keats’s 1819 odes, ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. Enacting the poet’s confrontation with and reanimation of his supposedly failed work, *Hyperion*’s Titanic narrative is presented by Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion* as a static frieze, as if the original poem were an image on a marble urn. While *The Fall*, like the original *Hyperion*, is itself unfinished, the conclusion of *The Fall* represents the culmination of Keats’s effort to stage a heightening of poetic power, rather than a collapse into an incomplete fragment.[[709]](#footnote-709) Although the poem is subtitled ‘A Dream’, suggesting a fragmentary, disparate vision that emanates from the unconscious and cannot be controlled by the dreamer, the poetic labyrinth of *The Fall* is self-consciously a ‘fine spell of words’ (*The Fall*, I. 9), a path towards capable poethood that is devised by an artist knowingly assuming authority over his work.

Placing himself as poet into the text, Keats assumes the lyric mode as a means of performing his effort to rewrite the previous epic, ostensibly working towards a kind of fusion of the genres:

Upon the grass I struggled hard against

The domineering potion; but in vain—

The cloudy swoon came on, and down I sunk

Like a Selenus on an antique vase.

How long I slumbered ’tis a chance to guess.

When sense of life returned, I started up

As if with wings; but the fair trees were gone,

The mossy mound and arbour were no more.

(I. 53-60)

Unlike *Hyperion*’s desire to abstain from subjectivity, the passage explicitly and repeatedly utilises the first person ‘I’. The self-reflexive simile of ‘down I sunk / Like a Selenus on an antique vase’, the first of the poem’s many allusions to ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, meditates on how the self has become the centrepiece of this work of art. The reference to Silenus, companion to the Greek god of wine Dionysus,[[710]](#footnote-710) implicitly posits this use of the lyric ‘I’ as a kind of indulgence, resonating with the conflict between *Hyperion*’s increasingly sensuous lyric voice and Keats’s desire to write in a ‘naked and Grecian Manner’.[[711]](#footnote-711) The phrase ‘I started up / As if with wings’ strongly recalls Apollo’s speech from Book III of *Hyperion*, heightening the impression that *The Fall* allows the lyric voice, repressed throughout its predecessor, to take centre stage:[[712]](#footnote-712) ‘Upon the grass I sit, and moan, / Like one who once had wings’ (*Hyperion*, III. 91-2). The Keatsian ‘potion’ is also central to ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, where the speaker initially considers his ‘drowsy numbness’ (1) as akin to the influence of various intoxicants, but ultimately valorises a flight ‘Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards / But on the viewless wings of Poesy’ (32-33). However, in *The Fall*,Keats’s assertion ‘that full draught is parent of my theme’ (I. 46) effaces the ode’s division between intoxicating substance and poetic flight by punning on a textual draft, presenting the earlier *Hyperion* fragment as the inspiration of the current text. The temptation is to read the effects of this ‘domineering potion’ as indicative of Keats’s shift from *Hyperion* to *The Fall*, and as a substance that removes the poet from epic and places him in the realm of lyric. Yet the poem resists such a clear-cut generic distinction. The lines retain *Hyperion*’s troubling sense of its author’s inability to deploy these ‘wings’, or to ascend freely to a position of unequivocal poetic authority: ‘I started up / As if with wings; but the fair trees were gone, / The mossy mound and arbour were no more’. The combination of monosyllabic diction and the dull thudding of the iambs makes these lines fall flat. While Book III of *Hyperion* teasingly suggests that Apollo resided in something akin to a traditional Keatsian bower, here the poet’s loss of the Edenic ‘fair trees’ and ‘mossy mound’ emphasises that *The Fall*, despite its lyric qualities, is not Keatsian lyric in any straightforward sense. The ambiguity of the poet’s agency in succumbing to this ‘cloudy swoon’ further problematises the possibility that the lyric mode will afford Keats authority: ‘No Asian poppy, nor Elixir fine / […] / Could so have rapt unwilling life away’ (I. 47 & 51). Keats’s syntax makes it unclear whether ‘unwilling’ modifies ‘life’ or ‘rapt’. This means that the lines posit ‘life’ as an ‘unwilling’ existence for the poet, rendering the potion a desired relief, but might also be read as stating that he was ‘rapt’ away from life unwillingly. Through this ambiguity the poet is denied unequivocal agency, and is suggested to be ambivalent towards ‘life’ itself. Keats continues his intense interrogation of what constitutes poetic ‘life’, the question that was pivotal both to *Endymion* and to his interpretation of Miltonic epic, a genre in which ‘life to him would be death to me’.[[713]](#footnote-713) Despite this apparent rejection of Milton, the phrase ‘rapt unwilling life away’, if read with ‘unwilling’ modifying ‘rapt’, shows Keats using a distinctly Miltonic style of inverted syntax.[[714]](#footnote-714) The larger tensions of the *Hyperion* conflict, namely questions regarding what narrative style will allow the poet to assume authority over the grand scale of epic, are built into Keats’s ambiguous syntactic choice, which seems to simultaneously pull towards and away from the Miltonic idiom. Likewise, to reduce the distinction between *The Fall* and *Hyperion* to a simple dichotomy between epic and lyric, or to consider *The Fall* as casting aside all traces of epic tradition, is to underplay the thematic and generic intertwinement of these deeply conflicted texts.

Instead, *The Fall*’s dramatisation of Keats’s quest to regain authority and become a ‘capable poet’ pivots on an alternative dichotomy,[[715]](#footnote-715) the ‘dreamer’ and the ‘poet’, as established in the poem’s opening passage:

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

Traced 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—mayst 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 purposed to rehearse

Be Poet’s or Fanatic’s will be known

When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave.

(I. 1-18)

These knotty lines refer to the ‘fanatic,’ the ‘savage’, and the ‘Poet’ to emphasise the universality of dreams, affirming that ‘every man whose soul is not a clod / Hath visions’. However, this democratic view of poetic capability is tempered by the fact ‘Poesy alone can tell her dreams’, proposing that the poet’s skill lies in articulating vision, and that the experience of vision comes second to technique. Dreams seem to come before poetry, but a poem, rather than an alternative type of vision, is posited as a dream relayed to an audience with particular skill. While it is a ‘pity’ that fanatics ‘have not / Trac’d upon vellum or wild Indian leaf / The shadows of melodious utterance’, that the poet can only ‘trace’ out ‘shadows’ is a curious depiction of linguistic representation. Stressing the inevitable diminution of imaginative forms that occurs through writing, Keats posits poetry as essential to avoiding ‘dumb enchantment’, but also as a process that can only adumbrate poetic vision. Despite this, his phrase ‘the fine spell of words’ celebrates the power of language and its ability to ‘tell’, punning on ‘spell’ to posit writing as a means of inscribing vision on the page, but also to imply a form of magic in the linguistic recreation of dreams. ‘Spell’ throws open to question whether the artifice of language instigates an alternative kind of ‘dumb enchantment’, despite such enchantment being precisely the state it intends to dispel. The culminating Gothic imagery heightens this ambivalence. While ‘this warm scribe my hand’ is the source of vision’s material existence, the passive construction ‘will be known’ and the delaying of the personal pronoun ‘my’ are strangely impersonal. This sense of otherness is heightened by the disconcerting proximity of death, as the vitality of ‘warm scribe’ is juxtaposed with the ‘grave’. With Keats distancing the writing hand from himself, positing it as a ‘scribe’ that teeters between the vital warmth of life and the coldness of death, his uncertainty regarding how one assumes poetic life continues to ghost the poem. When Keats, describing the existence of the savage, writes that ‘bare of laurel they live, dream, and die’, life in its entirety passes in less than a single line, implying a sense of futility and waste. While any attempt to ‘tell’ dreams and produce poetry is to surrender oneself to the kind of criticism that these final lines explicitly invite, Keats also stresses that a refusal to ‘tell’ is to barely live at all. Ultimately, what marks the passage is the fact that its retrospective quality, written after the dream itself has taken place, does not dispel the spectre of doubt that looms over the entire poem. Keats affects a lack of certainty regarding the value of his verse, stressing that posterity will be the ultimate judge of him as either ‘poet’ or ‘Fanatic’. The decision lies in the hands of readers. Yet as the poem continues it becomes increasingly unclear not just whether readers are witnessing a dream or a poem, but whether this bifurcation of vision is even a valid means of emphasising poetry as a privilege available to only a select few. While *The Fall* invites readers to use this division as a means of gauging poetic authority, Keats also ensures that the distinction is difficult to maintain.

The role of Moneta is pivotal to this tension, and central to the performative qualities of *The Fall*. That Moneta is a recasting of Mnemosyne from *Hyperion* has various implications. ‘Moneta’ is the Latin form of ‘Mnemosyne’, Greek Goddess of Memory, a link that is affirmed by the speaker’s address of her as ‘Shade of Memory’ (I. 282). Consequently, Jonathon Shears considers Moneta’s presence in the text as undermining Keats’s desire to transcend the problematic *Hyperion* fragment, declaring that ‘there is a curious masochism in the fact that Keats chooses Moneta or memory when he desires to escape the influence of Milton’.[[716]](#footnote-716) Yet the issue is more complex than Shears suggests, and *The Fall* is not simply an exercise in eradicating Miltonic influence. The poem’s deliberate recalling of *Hyperion*, despite any sense of masochism, is central to the way it performs its quest to usurp the original text. Interrogating the tension between dream and poem, Keats uses Moneta to draw *Hyperion* and *The Fall* into debate with one another. Moneta is a figure who represents not just the narrator’s Dantescan guide through the dream landscape in the questing tradition of Virgil and Beatrice,[[717]](#footnote-717) but also a kind of muse, one who presents the speaker with a vision of his previous poem: ‘Then Moneta’s voice / Came brief upon mine ear,—“So Saturn sat / When he had lost his realms”’ (I. 300-02). However, in Moneta, Keats creates a muse figure that not only alludes to the memory of a previously unfinished poem, but also provides the speaker with his subject only after renouncing his status as poet.[[718]](#footnote-718) *The Fall*’s ambiguous introductory lines vexingly posit the poet as both like and unlike the ‘fanatic’ dreamer (I. 17), establishing a tentative binary based on the poet’s heightened linguistic capabilities. Yet Moneta sees this division as more clear cut, taunting the speaker by asking ‘Art thou not of the dreamer tribe? / The poet and dreamer are distinct, / Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes’ (I. 198-200). The distinction, despite Moneta’s insistence, is not as obvious as she suggests. Moneta posits the poet and dreamer as different in type rather than degree, contrary to Keats’s emphasis in the opening passage that a poem is a dream ‘told’ with particular narrative skill. With Keats, as quester, and Moneta, as both muse figure and guide, each struggling for authority, *The Fall* becomes a performance ground where self-assertion is continually entangled with doubt. That Moneta’s oppositional voice speaks from within the dream framework itself adds a layer of irony to her critique, showing the text deliberately undercutting itself. Keats is challenged to prove himself superior to the common ‘dreamer’ but subtitles his poem ‘A Dream’, a gesture that typifies the poem’s determination to collapse this bifurcation of vision, as the criteria on which the poem attempts to define authorial authority are innately and deliberately unstable.

This instils the poet’s later encounter with the Titans with a productive tension. The speaker, having been told within his dream that he is not a poet, comes face to face with a representation of his previous poem. Keats’s epic appears as an interpolated poem within the dream:

‘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-unravelled web. I set myself

Upon an eagle’s watch, that I might see,

And seeing ne’er forget.

(I. 301-10)

In these lines Keats offers a manifesto, outlining what it is to be a poet and to assume poetic authority. An awakening of visionary power is enacted in line 304’s heavy stresses on ‘see’ and ‘sees’, but that the poet’s theme is a vast ‘web’ suggests a troubling intangibility. The truly capable poet is able to ‘see’ the translucent ‘web’ and ‘take the depth’ of it, to transcend a surface impression and experience a more penetrative type of perception. From the threads of Moneta’s words the poet must craft a fuller poetic narrative, but the image also stresses the risk that the poet, in this necessary unravelling, becomes irrevocably entangled. While the eagle is renowned for the strength of its eyesight, the speaker must do more than merely see, else become subject to a paralysing ‘dumb enchantment’ (I. 11). Regardless, Keats hints that the speaker, a figure who was previously not a poet and felt ‘as Vultures feel / They are no birds when Eagles are abroad’ (I. 91-2), is experiencing a kind of metamorphosis. The eagle imagery recalls ‘On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer’, which strains after an appropriate simile to describe an encounter with art:

Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes

He stared at the Pacific—and all his men

Looked at each other with a wild surmise—

Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

(‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’, 11-14)

The lines capture both the awe of discovery and the risk that such a sensation remains ineffable, mirrored by the rhythmic disruptions of the dashes and comma. Despite Keats’s admiration for Chapman’s translation, the traces of passivity in this ‘wild surmise’ and that his relationship with Homer is mediated through the third party of the translator create friction with the identification with Cortez himself. This association with active conquest reveals the thinly veiled ambition of the poet, suggesting an urge not just to admire but to actively shape his own poetic legacy. Likewise, when the poet of *The Fall* sets himself ‘upon an Eagle’s watch’, the image of the watching predator is pregnant with an inherent but delayed aggression, suggesting that this scouting of *Hyperion* will soon be followed by forceful action. Keats, while determined to ‘ne’er forget’ his epic, stresses a determination to go further than mere ‘seeing’, the act of passively meditating on previous work, as he instead emphasises his desire to gain mastery over *Hyperion*.

However, upon viewing the vale of the Titans, the setting of the epic, the speaker encounters an entirely lifeless realm. As he gazes on ‘what first I thought an image huge. / Like to the image pedestalled so high / In Saturn’s temple’ (I. 298-300), the imagery contrasts starkly with the rendering of Thea in the previous work: ‘Her face was large as that of Memphian sphinx, / […] / But oh! how unlike marble was that face’ (*Hyperion*, I. 31-4). The metaphor of the Titans as sculptures in *Hyperion* becomes literal in *The Fall*, which presents ‘marble’ effigies of Keats’s epic figures:

Long, long those two were postured motionless,

Like sculpture builded-up upon the grave.

Of their own power. A long awful time

I looked upon them: still they were the same.

(I. 382-85)

The lines self-reflexively allude to the construction of a new poem ‘upon the grave’ of the unfinished *Hyperion*. In a description reminiscent of ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, particularly the repetition of ‘long, long’, the world of the epic is rendered as a static, painfully inanimate image. By framing his previous poem in this scene of complete inertia, Keats implies that the work experienced a kind of death upon its abandonment, with the scene suggesting that the poet, distanced from his original creation, is situated outside but looking in on the epic genre. The absence of life in the Titans also prompts questions as to whether these inanimate figures ever had a life of their own, given their status in the original *Hyperion* as reflections and extensions of Keats’s own self. The generic differences between the two poems further illuminate this image; *Hyperion*, despite its frequent shifts into self-portraiture, endeavours to present the narrative of the Titans through an impersonal omniscient narrator, prioritising directness. In *The Fall*, Keats’s use of narrative framing self-consciously renders this plot indirectly, instead foregrounding the trials of the poet-as-quester.[[719]](#footnote-719) The above scene explicitly draws attention to this technique, dramatising *The Fall*’s indirectness and exploring the distance this creates between Keats and his original epic; the disempowered poet-narrator can only access a figuration of his previous work through the medium of a dream. Even Moneta, a figure previously responsible for unveiling the Titanic narrative to the poet and guiding him through his quest, dissolves into an existence as merely one of ‘the three fixèd shapes’ (I. 391). Her earlier taunt ‘what benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe / To the great World? Thou art a dreaming thing’ (I. 167-68) looms large, with the stasis of the scene hinting towards the poet’s inability to ‘see as a God sees and take the depth / Of things’ (I. 304-05). Distanced from his epic figures, the speaker struggles to imaginatively reanimate this frieze and gain mastery over his subject, as the task of rewriting is revealed as the quest that dominates the poem:

Hour after hour I cursed myself—

Until old Saturn raised his faded eyes,

And looked around and saw his Kingdom gone,

And all the gloom and sorrow of the place,

And that fair kneeling Goddess at his feet.

As the moist scent of flowers, and grass, and leaves,

Fills forest dells with a pervading air

Known to the woodland nostril, so the words

Of Saturn filled the mossy glooms around,

Even to the hollows of time-eaten oaks,

And to the windings in the foxes’ hole,

With sad low tones.

(I. 399-410)

The abrupt conjunction ‘until’ creates a marked shift in tone, as a burden seems to be lifted from the narrative. The luscious natural imagery that describes Saturn’s words starkly contrasts with the previous emphasis on ‘sculpture’, as well as the description of art as ‘Cold Pastoral’ in ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ (45). In the lines ‘as the moist scent of flowers, and grass, and leaves / Fills forest dells with a pervading air’, Keats uses an abundance of alliterative effects on ‘s’ and ‘l’ sounds, a technique that was particularly prominent in *Hyperion*. This musicality creates a feeling of heightened sensory activation, positing language as a life-giving stimulant that allows the poet to will Saturn’s image into being. As the sterility of the inanimate domain begins to recede, Keats’s simile shows him performing his own quelling of ‘dumb enchantment’ through the ‘fine spell of words’ (*The Fall*, 9). The lines show Keats’s quest after his own ‘mature powers’ beginning to flower into success; [[720]](#footnote-720) it is as if a film has been removed from the poet’s eyes, allowing him to offer a revelatory impression of clarity and vitality to the portrait of Saturn’s suffering. If the Saturn of *Hyperion* seems less an autonomous character than a half-formed projection of Keats himself, here the poet is able to transcend what was previously mere sculpture and begin to ‘take the depth’ (I. 304) of *Hyperion* itself. While Canto I ends by moving out of this vision and back into Moneta’s mediating frame, this scene hints towards the increasing poetic capability of the speaker, transforming *Hyperion* from a frieze that one might passively gaze upon into a landscape in which the poet might quest.

In spite of its unfinished state, Canto II represents the climax of this heightening of poetic power and enacts Keats’s coming to terms with the quest of rewriting his epic. Although Moneta reminds the speaker of his apparent reliance on her mediating role, declaring ‘Mortal, that thou mayst understand aright, / I humanise my sayings to thine ear’ (II. 1-2), only fifty lines later Keats refers to her as ‘Mnemosyne’, describing her ‘sitting on a square-edged polished stone’ (II. 51), a name used once previously in line 331. This shift serves a greater purpose than merely maintaining metre, and is more than an erroneous ‘slip’.[[721]](#footnote-721) If ‘Moneta’ was previously the speaker’s guide through the dream, ‘Mnemosyne’ seems to be the product of a different type of vision, as if the Dantescan tradition is being blended with or even subsumed by Keats’s ongoing desire to compose an epic. Having previously performed the struggle for authority between the poet and Moneta, Keats’s decision to replace ‘Moneta’ with *Hyperion*’s previous incarnation of her character hints that he has entered an unmediated form of his original Titanic vision, positing the poet as a quester no longer reliant on his guide. The epiphanic declaration ‘Now in clear light I stood, / Relieved from the dusk vale’ (II. 49-50) suggests that Keats has transcended the doubts and uncertainties that dominate *The Fall*, a poem Newey calls ‘a psychomachia, or mind-debate, about the function and value of poetry’.[[722]](#footnote-722) Again the poem shifts to a further new locale in line with its provisional and often unpredictable structure, in keeping with the sense of narrative fragmentation implied by its characterisation as ‘A Dream’. This structure can be briefly summarised as follows; after the retrospective introduction, the poem moves into the garden of the dream, followed by the shift into Moneta’s temple after imbibing the ‘full draught’. Finally, after plunging into Moneta’s mediated narrative of the Titans, the poet enters an ostensibly unmediated vision where ‘Moneta’ has become ‘Mnemosyne’. There, it is as if Keats, entering the locale of his previous text, becomes reattuned to epic and begins to regain control over the genre itself. Commenting on these textual layers, Andrew Bennett notes that ‘such a rigorously complex embedding provides an unstable, liminal quality to the poetry, which continually threatens to slide, through a ‘faulture’, on to a different plane of narration. […] The reader must struggle through various thresholds before [being] able to approach the story of *Hyperion*’.[[723]](#footnote-723) Bennett reads *The Fall* in terms of Keats’s developing aesthetics of reception, positing the poet-narrator as the reader’s surrogate, and considers the ending of the poem as exemplifying the work’s textual instabilities. Yet this structural technique, by initially deferring but eventually facilitating the poet’s access to his Titanic theme, ultimately becomes a harmonising rather than destabilising force, gradually reconciling Keats with his abandoned epic and depicting the incremental progression of his quest to re-enter the earlier poem.

In the poem’s final narrative plane, the vale’s ‘clear light’ emanates, in part, from Hyperion himself:

My quick eyes ran on

From stately nave to nave, from vault to vault,

Through bowers of fragrant and enwreathèd light

And diamond-pavèd lustrous long arcades.

Anon rushed by the bright Hyperion;

His flaming robes streamed out beyond his heels,

And gave a roar, as if of earthly fire,

That scar’d away the meek ethereal Hours,

And made their dove-wings tremble. On he flared…

(II. 53-61)

This passage modifies the chronology and verb subject of lines from *Hyperion*, heightening the intensity of the original scene:

On he [Hyperion] flared,

From stately nave to nave, from vault to vault,

Through bowers of fragrant and enwreathèd light,

And diamond-pavèd lustrous long arcades.

(*Hyperion*, I. 217-20)

Previously a detached description of the deity’s entrance, the revised lines become an account of the poet-speaker’s arrival, typifying *The Fall*’s conversion of objective poetic vision into subjective experience. If the ‘lofty theme’ (I. 306) of the epic was previously an intangible ‘half-unravelled web’ (I. 308), the elongated description of ‘nave to nave, from vault to vault, / Through bowers of fragrant and enwreathèd light, / And diamond-pavèd lustrous long arcades’ posits the epic as a physical, inhabitable space, as the speaker exemplifies his ability to ‘take the depth / Of things as nimbly as the outward eye / Can size and shape pervade’ (I. 304-6). The sense of proximity inherent in ‘rush’d by’ depicts a near-literal coming together of the current text’s lyric ‘I’ and the previous fragment’s epic hero, implying a synthesis of the lyric and epic genres.

Hence the ending of *The Fall*, although curtailed, suggests the attainment of a kind of poetic success. That this conclusion is deeply embedded in the poem’s numerous narrative layers strikes a chord with Keats’s aforementioned definition of poetic capability. It is in the ‘depths’ of *The Fall*’s textual levels, where the distinction between dream and poem is at its most fragile, that the poet seems to achieve his greatest victory. Yet the problem posed at the beginning of the text as to ‘whether the dream now purposed to rehearse / Be Poet’s or Fanatic’s’ (I. 16-17) remains unresolved. While the ending of *The Fall* shows the poet to directly experience a kind of vision without Moneta’s mediating and often admonishing presence, it also shows this kind of immersion in vision to be inseparable from ambiguity.[[724]](#footnote-724) The poem offers no definitive statement as to whether the speaker is in a dream or a poem. If the speaker was previously a dreamer on the outside looking in to epic, this entrance into the landscape of *Hyperion* emphatically collapses this dream-poem distinction. Thus the poem’s ending exemplifies not a slide between distinct narrative layers, as Bennett argues,[[725]](#footnote-725) but a more subtle and less abrasive kind of blending. To read these closing scenes in terms of the distinction between dream and poem as two rigidly distinct types of vision would be to cede authority to Moneta and her definition of poetic capability. Instead, this blurring of dream and poem undermines her insistence that to be a poet is to experience an alternative type of vision to the dreamer, supporting Keats’s emphasis that poetic capability instead lies in the ability to ‘tell’ (I. 8) a dream. In that sense, the struggle for authority that dominates *The Fall* ends in a victory for Keats, and these closing lines offer the poem’s most definitive statement on what it is to assume poetic authority; to quest after capable poethood is to confront insoluble problems about what exactly constitutes a poem. Performing his reconciliation with *Hyperion*, Keats emphasises the co-existence of the lyric ‘I’ with the characters of his previous epic, as well as the poet’s ability to directly narrate this scene, despite the uncertain status of their shared visionary landscape.

While *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion* work towards differing notions of authority, the two texts intertwine to enact Keats’s quest towards the poetic authority required to compose an epic. *Hyperion* situates authority in the assumption of an impersonal narrative voice, aspiring towards the role of omniscient but self-effacing overseer capable of controlling the universal scale of the epic. However, in its vacillation between objectivity and an immersion in a distinctly Keatsian lyrical subjectivity, the poem becomes a kind of trial in the epic genre, allowing Keats to lay the foundations for the synthesis of epic and lyric in *The Fall*. Drawing out the implicit subjectivity of *Hyperion*, Keats performs the entrance of the lyric ‘I’ as quester within *The Fall*’s epic landscape, dramatising his reconciliation with the abandoned epic and in turn the resumption and reanimation of a stalling poetic project. In the final blurring of the textual levels of dream and poem, Keats usurps Moneta by undermining her insistence that the distinction between poet and dreamer is an issue of degree, rather than type, proving himself a capable poet. Although the poem’s unfinished state inevitably invites speculation as to the work’s intended conclusion, of primary importance is the way that *The Fall*, while adapting scenes from the earlier epic, consistently presents itself as more than an elongated prologue. To read the poem as precursor to a recapitulation of *Hyperion* is to underplay the fractious relationship between these distinct but tightly interrelated poems. In rejecting his publisher’s suggestion that the reception of *Endymion* was responsible for *Hyperion*’s unfinished state, emphatically stating that ‘this is a lie,[[726]](#footnote-726) Keats suggests his opposition to the framing of his original epic as a failed work. Yet *The Fall* gains its power from Keats’s willingness to incorporate this perception into his own performance; the poem’s virtuoso manipulation of the epic genre allows the poet to quest beyond ‘doubt and imaginative failure’, [[727]](#footnote-727) revealing his attainment of poetic authority.

**Conclusion: ‘The agitation inseparable from accomplishment’**

The poetry of Byron, Shelley, and Keats is galvanised by its self-conscious use of the questing mode. In a September 1813 letter to Annabella Milbanke Byron declares that ‘the great object of life is Sensation—to feel that we exist—even though in pain—it is this “craving void” which drives us to Gaming—to Battle—to Travel—to intemperate though keenly felt pursuits of every description whose principal attraction is the agitation inseparable from their accomplishment’.[[728]](#footnote-728) ‘To feel that we exist […] even though in pain’: Byron’s remarks reflect the concerns of this thesis, which argues that Byron, Shelley, and Keats unite in emphasising the high-wire experience of quest. By valorising a spirit of adventure that is productively complicated by their work’s insistence upon self-questioning, all three poets explore the limits and potential of quest. For each, quest becomes pivotal to a brand of self-conscious poetry that locates artistic achievement in difficulty and struggle, wresting poetic capital from the ‘*tumult*’ that Byron identifies as central to the human experience. As the poet puts it in a journal entry of November 1813, ‘and yet a little *tumult*, now and then, is an agreeable quickener of sensation; such as a revolution, a battle, or an *aventure* of any lively description’.[[729]](#footnote-729)

In its cataloguing of those ‘intemperate though keenly felt pursuits of every description’, Byron’s comments might serve as a gloss for the variety of the quests explored in this study. The approaches to quest adopted by Byron, Shelley, and Keats differ strikingly, but within these varying approaches lies a mutual refusal to accept any narrow definition of what quest is and can be. Byron’s reference to ‘an *aventure* of any lively description’ pointedly leaves open the question of what form such an adventure might take. His emphasis on ‘*aventure*’ also brings to mind the word’s etymological roots in the French *a venir*, meaning that which is yet to come, a formulation that captures the qualities of potentiality and possibility that are prized by the Romance genre. For the poets featured in this thesis, however, fundamental to the concept of quest is a privileging of expansiveness, a commitment to opening up and exploring new spaces, which precludes quest’s association with any single generic framework.[[730]](#footnote-730) Each poet conceives of quest as a mode that, in its harnessing of the power of human desire, contains ‘a burning atom of inextinguishable thought’ (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 693), one that cannot be contained within a single genre, form, or idea. The result of such expansiveness is that the questing mode draws out the characteristics that are unique to each poet. Yet for all the contrasts between Byron’s disruption of quest, Shelley’s purposely precarious questing, and Keats’s questing after capable poethood, the way these poets extend quest beyond the generic traditions of Romance, embedding it into the fabric of their poetic productions, also offers evidence of a shared artistic achievement.[[731]](#footnote-731)

Besides this common emphasis on quest as a mode of formal, generic, and intellectual expansiveness, the quests of Byron, Shelley, and Keats share several key areas of focus. Closely related to the above discussion is each poet’s willingness to experiment with genre. Building on Stuart Curran’s analysis of how ‘generic conceptions penetrate the particular culture of British Romanticism’,[[732]](#footnote-732) this thesis argues that each poet’s desire to quest might be satisfied, in part, through an innovation of generic and formal frameworks. Curran attributes this increased generic interest, particularly in the Romance genre, to the unique cultural moment of the early nineteenth-century: ‘with Napoleon’s invasion of Spain in 1807 and the introduction of British armies onto the Peninsula, the storied land of romance was enveloped in modern reality’.[[733]](#footnote-733) Yet this thesis sees each poet’s interest in scrutinising, revising, and individuating genre not as a response to history, but as more broadly emblematic of the quester’s desire to open up new textual and intellectual territories. While *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III is pointedly subtitled ‘A Romaunt’, Byron also accentuates the discontinuities inherent in the Spenserian stanza form in order to disrupt the kind of exploration that is typically associated with the Romance genre, allowing for a unique creation in the process. In *Adonais* Shelley presents the elegist as a solitary quester seeking the assent of a distant reader, and the poem wins tension from its questioning of the elegy’s conventional privileging of community. In *The Fall of Hyperion* the epic becomes a textual space in which Keats must quest, as the poet strives to achieve poetic authority by moving beyond the attempted Miltonic epic of *Hyperion* towards a hybridising of lyric and epic modes. In each chapter of this thesis, the quests of Byron, Shelley, and Keats are shown to be enriched by an acute generic interest that is common to each poet.

A further trait that binds the poet’s respective writings is a preoccupation with issues of movement, process, and teleology.[[734]](#footnote-734) Mobility plays a vital role in each poet’s quests, both in physical and intellectual forms.[[735]](#footnote-735) Throughout their work, all three poets foreground states of ambivalence and uncertainty as a means of revealing their commitment to process. This thesis sees states of non-committedness as typical of the quester, who conceives of human experience as something that can be known only through discovery and exploration.[[736]](#footnote-736) Crucially, ambivalence and movement are tightly interrelated concepts in each poet’s productions. Recurring throughout the thesis is a sense that Byron, Shelley, and Keats remain ambivalent towards any teleological understanding of quest, so that goals, ends, and targets are at once sought after and scrutinised in each poet’s self-conscious quest poetry. Byron’s artistic technique of disruption exhibits this approach. Implicit in the poet’s dual movements towards and away from the doubles of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III are the tensions between travelling and arriving that are explicitly foregrounded in Shelley’s *The Triumph of Life*. Shelley’s own commitment to process is suggested by his belief that ‘All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn which contained all oaks potentially’ (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 693), and central to Shelley’s aesthetic mastery is the way that quest allows him to make a performance out of his poetry’s teetering between potentialities. Perhaps the thesis’s most explicitly teleologically-minded reading is the notion that Keats’s poetry stages the poet’s questing after a state of capable poethood. Yet Keats’s quests are also built on exploration, as well as the uncertainty inseparable from such a process, exhibiting an approach to quest that focuses on means as much as ends. *Endymion* grows out of Keats’s desire to produce ‘4000 Lines of one bare circumstance’;[[737]](#footnote-737) in his shifting between a wielding of and a yielding to rhyme, Keats adopts a path towards poetic excellence that openly risks allowing these multiplying couplets to become an interminable profusion in which ‘all quest must be forlorn’.[[738]](#footnote-738) Likewise, though this thesis argues that *The Fall of Hyperion* climaxes with Keats successfully becoming a capable poet, the poem’s status as an incomplete fragment productively complicates such a reading. Having documented Keats’s entrance into the epic landscape of his unfinished *Hyperion*, the poem concludes with an image of the onrushing Hyperion—‘On he flared… (II. 61)’—that allows this flaring to continue into futurity. For all the sense that Keats, in mastering epic, has completed what Herbert Tucker describes as ‘the last rite of passage to full poetic majority, the summative test of art’,[[739]](#footnote-739) the poet’s vision is never end-stopped, and its significance is never explicitly revealed. In offering a sense of fulfilment and culmination that belies its own fragmented, incomplete state,[[740]](#footnote-740) *The Fall of Hyperion* embodies the valorising of movement, process, and open-endedness that unites the quest poetry of this thesis.

Amending Harold Bloom’s argument in ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’, the diversity of this thesis’s approaches to quest stems from a belief that ‘the arena of self-consciousness’ is just one possible arena in which the Romantic quest might take place.[[741]](#footnote-741) Yet the self nevertheless plays a significant role in Byron’s, Shelley’s, and Keats’s pursuit of quest. In conceiving of his own poetic development as a quest towards a state of capable poethood, Keats’s poetry most overtly embodies this interest. Yet the approaches to quest seen in the works of Byron and Shelley, too, reveal a complex, multifaceted approach to the self, one that, like Keats’s, transcends Bloom’s insistence that ‘the [Romantic] is to widen consciousness as well as to intensify it, but the quest is shadowed by a spirit that tends to narrow consciousness to an acute preoccupation with self’.[[742]](#footnote-742) If Wordsworth, in *The Prelude*, is able to declare ‘A Traveller I am, / And all my Tale is of myself’ (*The Prelude* [1805], III. 196-97), the quests of Byron, Shelley, and Keats seek to revise and interrogate this notion. *Pace* Bloom’s understanding of self-consciousness as a strictly negative, restricting presence in quest, this thesis argues that all three poets ambivalently depict the self as something the quester must work with as well as against. Each defines the self as the agent of quest even as their quests often strive to achieve ‘a going out of our own nature, an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person not our own’ (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 682). The doubling of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III, where Byron’s quest to transcend the self and assume the identity of his apparent doubles is continually disrupted by the independence of the unassimilable Byronic self, anticipates Shelley’s *Epipsychidion*, where the quest is catalysed by a desire to unite self and other even as it strives to preserve the separation of these two distinct entities. In Keats’s *Hyperion* poems, the self becomes still more central to quest not out of a belief in the self’s steadfastness and stability, but because of the poet’s relentless quest for self-improvement, his desire to become the self, and the poet, that he strives to be.[[743]](#footnote-743) In amending *Hyperion*’s attempts to compose objective epic and foregrounding a focus on Keats as poet, *The Fall of Hyperion* appears to concede the inevitability of the self impinging upon quest. Yet this attention to the self also permits the poet’s triumph, staging Keats’s re-entrance to and reanimation of the landscape of his earlier, unfinished epic. Though all three poets share Shelley’s belief in the need for an individual ‘to lift them[selves] out of the dull vapours of that little world of self’ (*A Defence of Poetry*, p. 690), they might also echo the concession expressed memorably in Shelley’s letter to Leigh Hunt: ‘*self*, that burr that will stick to one. I can’t pull it off yet’.[[744]](#footnote-744) By ending on the part teasing, part ominous note of ‘yet’, Shelley closes this lament, partly a mock-lament, by glimpsing a moment of anticipated self-transcendence. The remarks capture the sense of the self as a productively oppositional presence that is also prominent in the quests of Byron and Keats. In all three poets’ work the self is capable of occupying a double position, being both the vehicle that enables the quester’s voyage beyond the here and now, and the very thing that the quester seeks to voyage beyond.

The final trait that unites the quests of Byron, Shelley, and Keats, implicit throughout the discussions, is a preoccupation with the possibility that their quests might fail. All three poets suggest that the victories of quest are contingent on struggle, even as such difficulties threaten to debar any possibility of questing achievement. The question posed by Harold Bloom resounds through the poetry of this thesis: ‘though all men are questers, even the least, what is the relevance of quest in a gray world of continuities and homogenized enterprises?’[[745]](#footnote-745) Though Byron, Shelley, and Keats stress the enduring significance of quest, the counter-possibility that quest represents a vain endeavour remains integral to their poetry, enriching and enlivening their work. Shelley’s lines from the close of *Prometheus Unbound* epitomise this dual focus:

These are the spells by which to re-assume

An empire o‘er the disentangled Doom.

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;

To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;

To defy Power, which seems omnipotent;

To love, and bear; to hope, till Hope creates

From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;

Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent:

This, like thy glory, Titan, is to be

Good, great, and joyous, beautiful and free;

This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory.

(*Prometheus Unbound*, IV. 568-78)

Demogorgon’s future tense pronouncement situates the lines in the mood of conditionality that is pivotal to the questing mode, suggesting achievement even as it affirms the precariousness of that which is only conditional. Shelley’s opening rhyme foregrounds these uncertainties. On one hand ‘re-assume’ implies an empowerment that serves to temper the apocalyptic vision of ‘doom’. On the other, the placement of ‘doom’ as the second iteration of the rhyme threatens to allow the term precedence over ‘re-assume’, with the sound of ‘doom’ seeming to reveal itself lurking within the more optimistic cadence of ‘re-assume’. Implicit in the lines is the possibility that any dispelling of ‘doom’ represents nothing more than a temporary relief. Yet the passage also stands out for the way it places verbs centre-stage, evident not just in the anaphoric repetition of ‘to suffer’, ‘to forgive’, to defy’, and ‘to love’, but also in the way Shelley thrusts ‘re-assume’, ‘create’, ‘contemplate’, ‘repent’, and ‘to be’ into rhyme positions. The technique affirms Shelley’s belief in the human capacity to act, to endure, and to quest even amidst uncertainty, which seems the only means of achieving the ‘Victory’ envisaged in the surge of the final triplet. In offering a celebration of potential glory that is charged by the poet’s manifest self-doubt, the lines reflect the conflicting energies inherent in the questing mode. For Byron, Shelley, and Keats, quest is at once a mode capable of ‘kindling’ poetic opportunities, sparking the voyages that afford their poetry its drama, intensity, and power, and a mode that is galvanised by the prospect of its own ‘dwindling’, forcing the poets to confront the possible thwarting of the hopes that inspire them to quest.[[746]](#footnote-746) Paradoxically, this alertness to the potential boundaries and limitations of their power allows the poetry of Byron, Shelley, and Keats to ascend to its greatest heights, heights that are achieved through their work’s self-conscious deployment of the questing mode.

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1. Byron laments ‘the inadequacy of [man’s] state to his Conceptions’, typifying the drive towards betterment that defines each of these poets. Byron, Letter to John Murray, 3 November 1821, in *BLJ*, IX, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Harold Bloom, ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’, in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Norton, 1970), pp. 3-23 (p. 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Northrop Frye cites the Holy Grail as a typical motive or reward for quest. Distinguishing between secular and non-secular approaches to quest, Frye writes that ‘we have spoken of the Messianic hero as a redeemer of society, but in the secular quest-romances more obvious motives and rewards for the quest are more common. Often the dragon guards a hoard: the quest for buried treasure has been a central theme of romance from the Siegfried cycle to *Nostromo*, and is unlikely to be exhausted yet. Treasure means wealth, which in mythopoeic romance often means wealth in its ideal forms, power and wisdom’. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*: *Four Essays* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 193-94 & pp. 186-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Frye, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Corinne Saunders defines quest as one of ‘the great motifs of medieval romance’ alongside the knight errant and the chivalric test. Corinne Saunders, ‘Introduction’, in *A Companion to Romance, From Classical to Contemporary*, ed. by Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 1-9 (p. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Frye, pp. 186-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Frye, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Frye, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Saunders, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For the way ‘generic conceptions penetrate the particular culture of British Romanticism’, see Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York, NY & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ‘Unlike Bloom, then, for whom all readings are misreadings, I would reassert the value of poetry as a mode of knowing when the object of knowledge is literature itself’. Michael O’Neill, ‘Poetry as Literary Criticism’, in *The Arts and Sciences of Criticism*, ed. by David Fuller & Patricia Waugh (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), pp. 117-36 (p. 123). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Michael O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For Romantic poetry as constructed out of a process of self-questioning, see Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence*: *Wordsworth, Keats and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca, NY:Cornell UP, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Leigh Hunt describes the passage as ‘the consummation of a state of things for which all the preceding part of the poem has been yearning’. Quoted in R. Brimley Johnson, *Shelley-Leigh Hunt: How Friendship Made History*, 2nd edn (London: Ingpen and Grant, 1929), p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Timothy Webb, ‘The Unascended Heaven: Negatives in *Prometheus* Unbound’, in *Shelley Revalued: Essays from the Gregynog Conference*, ed. by Kelvin Everest (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1983), pp. 37-62 (p. 60). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Webb, ‘The Unascended Heaven’, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Webb argues that ‘this sobering note may have been intended as a riposte to Godwin, Condorcet and others whose view of man’s perfectibility was too simple-minded for Shelley’. Timothy Webb, *Shelley*: *A Voice Not Understood* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1977), p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For the poem’s debts to Spenserian Romance, see Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1991), pp. 140-45 and Chiara Moriconi, ‘“I Must Tell a Tale of Chivalry”: Keats’s Early Reading of Spenser in “Specimen of an Induction to a Poem”’, *Keats-Shelley Review*, 29.2 (2015), 82-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Erica Levy McAlpine argues that Keats’s ‘attraction to subjunctive verbs and conditionals’ confirms him as a poet ‘content with his own uncertainty about the source of poetry’s power’. Erica Levy McAlpine, ‘Keats’s Might: Subjunctive Verbs in the Late Poems’, in *Grasmere 2010*: *Selected Papers from the 40th Anniversary Wordsworth Summer Conference*, comp. by Richard Gravil (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, LLP, 2010), pp. 126-38 (p. 138). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. ‘Like love itself, romance, resisting the immediate claims of the present, exists forever in potential and gestures towards what it yet might become’. Mark Sandy, ‘Quest Poetry: *Alastor* and *Epipsychidion*’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe* Shelley, ed. by Michael O’Neill, Anthony Howe & Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), pp. 272-88 (p. 273). See also Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude 1799, 1805, 1850*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. by Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York, NY & London: Norton, 1979), p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. William Keach, *Shelley’s Style* (New York, NY & London: Methuen, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Most significant to this thesis are Michael O’Neill, *The Human Mind’s Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley’s Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) and *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard UP, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence*: *Wordsworth, Keats and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1986) and *Formal Charges*: *The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Vendler, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. O’Neill, ‘Poetry as Literary Criticism’, p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, p. xiii. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 3. Though this thesis adopts an alternative methodological approach to that expressed in *The Romantic Ideology*, it remains reliant on the insight of works including Jerome J. McGann, *Fiery Dust*: *Byron’s Poetic Development* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968); *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; London: John Murray, 1976); *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. by James Soderholm(Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. ‘From [Hazlitt’s] essays emerges plainly his view that the crucial occurrence for his generation had been the French Revolution. In that event and its repercussions, political, intellectual and imaginative, and in the resulting waves of hope and gloom, revolutionary loyalty and recreancy, he saw both the promise and the failures of his violent and contradictory era’. M. H. Abrams, ‘English Romanticism: The Spirit Of The Age’, in *Romanticism: Points of* View, ed. by Robert F. Gleckner and Gerald E. Enscoe, 2nd edn (Detroit, MI: Wayne State UP, 1974), pp. 314-30 (p. 314). See also David Duff, *Romance and Revolution*: *Shelley and the Politics of a Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence*, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Harold Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. vii & p. viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Keach, p. xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Paul de Man, ‘Shelley Disfigured’, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1984), pp. 93-123 (p. 116). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Paul de Man, ‘The Resistance to Theory’, in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. by K. M. Newton (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), pp. 158-64 (pp. 159-60). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. de Man, ‘Shelley Disfigured’, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Frye, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. O’Neill, *The Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Terence Hoagwood, *Byron’s Dialectic: Skepticism and the Critique of Culture* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1993), p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. David Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence*: *The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1959), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Perkins, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Perkins, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Kucich, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Jeffrey N. Cox, ‘*Lamia, Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*: Eros and “romance”’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), pp. 53-68 (p. 53). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Sandy, p. 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Herbert Tucker, *Epic*: *Britain’s Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Frye, p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Frye, p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Frye, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Frye, p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, pp. 5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, pp. 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, pp. 15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 8 & p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. W. H. Auden, ‘*Don Juan*’, in *The Dyer’s Hand and other essays* (London: Faber, 1963), pp. 386-406 (p. 399). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. See Byron’s criticism of *Endymion* as ‘a sort of mental masturbation’. Byron, Letter to John Murray, 9 November 1820, in *BLJ*, VII, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Significant studies of this relationship include Charles E. Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) and William D. Brewer, *The Shelley-Byron Conversation* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Frye, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London and New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1973), p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, pp. 5-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Saunders, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. O’Neill, ‘Poetry as Literary Criticism’, p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Qtd. in Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Qtd. in Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. See Hartman’s declaration that deconstruction emphasises ‘a certain absence or indeterminacy of meaning’. Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism*, p. viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Vincent Newey uses this phrase to describe *Alastor*. Vincent Newey, ‘Shelley and the Poets: *Alastor*, ‘Julian and Maddalo’, *Adonais*’, *Durham University* *Journal*, 85.2: *Shelley Special Issue*, ed. by Michael O’Neill (1993), 257-72 (p. 260). [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (London: Oxford UP, 1971), p. 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Abrams, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age: or, Contemporary Portraits* (London: Henry Colburn, 1825), p. 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Hazlitt, p. 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. The 1805 *Prelude* is quoted in this case for the way its syntax captures the air of suspense and revelation in the experience; in 1850 the line reads ‘But to my conscious soul I now can say—“I recognise thy glory”’ ([1850], VI: 598-99). [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, ed. by H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 155-482 (p. 319). [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Wolfson shows Wordsworth utilising a less overt style of questioning than Keats, an observation that is also applicable to Coleridge. Wolfson, *The* *Questioning Presence*, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Perry, p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Stephen C. Behrendt, *Reading William Blake* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. John B. Beer, *Blake’s Visionary Universe* (Manchester: Manchester UP; New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, 1969), p. 53 & p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Beer, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, p. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 17 & p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Auden, p. 399. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. For essays on Byron’s dramas, see Robert Gleckner and Bernard Beatty (eds.), *The Plays of Lord Byron: Critical Essays* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Curran, p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1971), p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. My thesis builds upon the insight of Daniel J. Hughes, who argues that Shelley’s poems are constituted by ‘elaborate, sometimes dazzlingly successful, sometimes merely desperate, strategies by which the fading coal of his inspiration can be kept ablaze’. Daniel J. Hughes, ‘Coherence and Collapse in Shelley, with Particular Reference to *Epipsychidion*’, *ELH*, 28 (1961), 260-83 (p. 261). See also Peter Sacks’s sense that Shelley ‘has driven [*Adonais*] to the brink of its own ruin’. Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy*: *Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, MA & London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood*, p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. For a reading of Shelley that has influenced these ideas, one that foregrounds a ‘mobile process’ of ‘transference’ or a ‘ceaseless transition between elements of thought’, see Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley’s Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York, NY & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), p. vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Keats, Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 387. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. The phrase ‘capable poethood’ is taken from Daniel Hughes, ‘Prometheus Made Capable Poet in Act One of *Prometheus Unbound*’, *Studies in Romanticism*,17.1 (1978), 3-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 8 October 1817, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 169-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Byron, Letter to Annabella Milbanke, 29 November 1813, in *BLJ*, III, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Keats, Letter to J. A. Hessey, 8 October 1818, in *Letters of Keats,* I, 373-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. O’Neill, ‘Poetry as Literary Criticism’, p. 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Byron, Letter to John Murray, 3 November 1821, in *BLJ*, IX, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Lord George Gordon Byron, ‘Preface [to Cantos I-II] to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, A Romaunt*’, in Lord George Gordon Byron, *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 8 vols(Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980-93), II, 3-6 (p. 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Byron, ‘Addition to the Preface [to Cantos I-II]’, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. McGann, II, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. ‘When we first heard of the poem of *Childe Harold*—a Romaunt—what could we expect, but a new assortment of chivalrous tales, of amours and battles, of giants and deliverers, of Knights and Saracens, of dwarfs and demons? In this we were mistaken. And our puzzle is now to account for these portentous titles of a poem, the subject of which is certainly neither chastity, nor valour, nor truth; nor fairies, nor damsels, nor deliverers; nor heroes baptized, or infidel; but the narrative of a modern tourist’. William Roberts, review of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* I-II, *British Review*, III (June 1812), 275-302, in *The Romantics Reviewed*: *Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, *Part B: Byron and Regency Society Poets*, ed. with introd. by Donald H. Reiman, 5 vols (New York, NY & London: Garland, 1972), I, 396. See also the remarks of the *Anti-Jacobin Review*, XLII (August 1812), 343-65, in *The Romantics Reviewed*, *Part B*, I, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Corinne Saunders discusses ‘the knight errant, the quest, [and] the chivalric test’ as ‘the great motifs of medieval romance’. Corinne Saunders, ‘Introduction’, in *A Companion to Romance, From Classical to Contemporary*, ed. by Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 1-9 (p. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Jerome Christensen, *Lord Byron’s Strength: Romantic Writing and Commercial Society* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Michael O’Neill, ‘Poetry of the Romantic Period: Coleridge and Keats’, in *A Companion to Romance*, pp. 305-20 (p. 305). [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, & Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP: 1991), p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Harold Bloom, ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’, in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Norton, 1970), pp. 3-23 (p. 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Alan Rawes, ‘1816-17: *Childe Harold* III and *Manfred*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. by Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 118-32 (p. 119); Mark Sandy, *Romanticism*, *Memory and Mourning* (Oxon & New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), pp. 79-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age: or, Contemporary Portraits* (London: Henry Colburn, 1825), p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. My decision not to consider Harold as one such double stems from the fact that this is already well explored in extant criticism. Jerome McGann devotes a chapter to tackling what he describes as a ‘neglected but basic rhetorical problem’, examining the poem’s intricate shifts between narrator and Harold as well as Byron’s blurring of the two. Jerome McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron’s Poetic Development* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 67-93 (especially pp. 68-69). Philip W. Martin offers a more contentious account, suggesting that ‘this caricature is so imperfectly and inconsistently sketched that neither the distinctions from Byron nor the similarities to him are made sufficiently clear’, concluding that ‘we are left with the impression that the Childe has been used as a device by which Byron can watch himself perform’. Philip W. Martin, *Byron: A Poet Before His Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), p. 21. Andrew Rutherford views Harold and Byron as ‘clearly differentiated’ to the extent that the poem features ‘two central characters instead of one’. Andrew Rutherford, *Byron: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1961), p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. McGann sees Canto III as Byron’s ‘first self-conscious analysis of the aesthetics of self-projection’. Jerome McGann, *Don Juan in Context* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press; London: John Murray, 1976), p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Vincent Newey, ‘Authoring the Self: *Childe Harold* III and IV’, in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, ed. by Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1988), pp. 148-90 (p. 157). [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Newey, p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Newey, p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Newey, p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Frederick Garber, *Self, Text, and Romantic Irony: The Example of Byron* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1988), p. 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Martin, p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Kucich, p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Byron, ‘Preface [to Cantos I-II]’, pp. 4-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Byron, ‘To Thomas Moore, Esq. [‘Preface to *The Corsair; A Tale*]’, in *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by McGann, III, 148-50 (p. 149). [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Saintsbury privileges the alexandrine for the way it balances a stanza that tends towards ‘vignetting’, promoting continuity by ‘launch[ing] [the stanza] on towards its successor *ripae ulterioris amore*’. However, this analysis also exposes the Spenserian stanza as a site of conflicting impulses, suggesting that the alexandrine can only battle for continuity in an inherently discontinuous form. George Saintsbury, qtd. in David Scott Wilson-Okamura, ‘The Formalist Tradition’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, ed. by Richard A. McCabe (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), pp. 718-32 (p. 725). Hughes, qtd. in Wilson-Okamura, p. 725. [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Hughes, qtd. in Wilson-Okamura, p. 725. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*’, in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works,* ed. by Stephen Gill(Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), pp. 595-615 (p. 598). [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. ‘Byron adopts the conventions of Romanticism he inherited—spontaneous overflow, internal colloquy—in order to break them apart’. Jerome J. McGann, ‘Byron and the Anonymous Lyric’, in *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. by James Soderholm(Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 93-112 (p. 95). [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. Wilson-Okamura, p. 725. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Francis Berry describes Byron’s ‘virtuosity in the management of stops’. Francis Berry, ‘The Poet of *Childe Harold*’, in *Byron: A Symposium*, ed. by John D. Jump (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 35-51 (p. 42). [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Gavin Hopps, ‘Byron and Grammatical Freedom’, in *Liberty and Poetic Licence: New Essays on Byron*, ed. by Bernard Beatty, Tony Howe and Charles E. Robinson (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2008), pp. 165-80 (p. 176). [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Hopps, p. 174. See also Geoffrey Ward, ‘Byron’s Artistry in Deep and Layered Space’, in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, pp. 191-225 (p. 200). [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Jeff Dolven, ‘Spenser’s Metrics’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Edmund Spenser*, pp. 385-402 (p. 391). [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. McGann, *Fiery Dust*, pp. 67-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Alan Rawes, *Byron’s Poetic Experimentation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Rawes, ‘1816-17’, p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Rawes, ‘1816-17’, p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Newey, pp. 151-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. ‘Byron seems positioned somewhere between a forlorn yearning […] for permanent transcendence and a resignation to its impossibility. Nevertheless, where *Childe Harold* I and II insisted on the impossibility of a permanent transcendence of “earth-born jars”, *Childe Harold* III is a quest poem and written in hope, regardless of how faint that hope may be’. Rawes, *Byron’s Poetic Experimentation*, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. See Wolfson’s previously quoted analysis, which argues that Byron’s poetry sets ‘energies of freedom and eruption’ against ‘the demands of constraint and conservatism’. Wolfson, *Formal Charges*, p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Deborah Forbes, *Sincerity’s Shadow: Self-Consciousness in British Romantic and Mid-Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard UP, 2004), p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. ‘Byron resists, too, the temptation to depict the lives of men like Rousseau and Napoleon as mere types or analogues of his own case. He is aware of similarities between his lot and theirs, and this awareness helps to give the poem its unity and strength of feeling; but he avoids crudely identifying them with himself’. Rutherford, p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. McGann, ‘Hero with a thousand faces’, in *Byron and Romanticism*, pp. 141-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. McGann, ‘Byron and the Anonymous Lyric’, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. John Clubbe, ‘Byron, Napoleon, and Imaginative Freedom’, in *Liberty and Poetic Licence*,pp. 181-92 (p. 181). [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Byron, ‘Journal: November 24, 1813’, in *BLJ*, III, 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Byron, ‘Journal: November 23, 1813’, in *BLJ*, III, 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Byron, ‘Journal: November 23, 1813’, in *BLJ*, III, 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. McGann, *Don Juan in Context*, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Forbes, p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Citing Byron’s statement in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* IV that ‘I twine / My hopes of being remembered in my line / With my land’s language’ (IV. 9: 76-78), Jerome Christensen emphasises the way that Byron utilises his aristocratic heritage to enhance the quality of his poetry: ‘Committing his memory to his “line”, Lord Byron now acknowledges that he has a line, rather than just a given name — a poetic profession with a line of work and a line of products’. Christensen, p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. ‘To read Byron biographically is to oversimplify; what does need to be recognised is that the poem depends for its effect on our knowing that Byron knows that we know that he is writing his canto in the aftermath of the separation scandal; creativity may result in the escape from self into text, but the text frequently persuades us we are in touch with the self that wishes to die itself and end up as text’. Michael O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Bainbridge, p. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. This stanza is cited from *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. McGann II, 76-119 (p. 49) rather than McGann’s *Lord Byron: The Major Works* owing to its use of ‘image’ over ‘imagine’ in line 49. Neither edition contains an explanation for the different choices. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Christensen, pp. 170-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Michael O’Neill, ‘The Fixed and the Fluid: Identity in Byron and Shelley’, *The Byron Journal*, 36.2 (2008), 105-116 (p. 113). [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. O’Neill, ‘The Fixed and the Fluid’, p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. McGann, *Don Juan in Context*, p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. McGann, ‘Hero with a thousand faces’, p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Forbes, p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. See John Wilson, review of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* IV, *Edinburgh Review*, XXX (September 1818), 87-120, in *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Andrew Rutherford (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 147-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. McGann, *Fiery Dust*, p. 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Byron, ’Detached Thoughts: 15 October 1821’, in *BLJ*, IX, 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Byron, ’Detached Thoughts: 15 October 1821’, in *BLJ*, IX, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Byron, Letter to Lady Melbourne, 22 November 1813, in *BLJ*, III, 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Lord Byron, ‘The Bowles/Pope Controversy 1821: Letter to John Murray Esq’, in *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. by Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 120-60 (p. 128). [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Anthony Howe, *Byron and the Forms of Thought* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2013), p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. As Edward Duffy writes, ‘in just seven stanzas [Byron] manages to include: vanity, sophistry, self-pity, emotional masochism, eloquence, verbal wizardry, sensibility, idealism, sensuality, paranoia, insanity, social and political revolution, and selfishness’. Edward Duffy, Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley’s Critique of the Enlightenment (Berkeley, LA & London: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 72-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. McGann, ‘Byron and Wordsworth’, in *Byron and Romanticism*, pp. 173-202 (p. 176). [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. McGann, ‘Byron and the Anonymous Lyric’, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. ‘We must say, that it would afford us still greater pleasure to find these tuneful gentlemen [Wordsworth and Southey] returning the compliment which Lord Byron has paid to their talents, and forming themselves on the model rather of his imitations, than of their own originals’. Francis Jeffrey, review of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III, *Edinburgh Review*, XXVII (February 1817), 277-310, in *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 98-109 (p. 99). [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. John Wilson, review of *Manfred*, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, I (June 1817), 289-95, in *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 111-14 (pp. 112-13). [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. William Wordsworth, Letter to Sir George Beaumont, 25 December 1804, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth,* ed. by Ernest De Selincourt, revised by Alan G. Hill, 2nd edn, 8 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967-93), I: *The Early Years, 1787-1805* (1967), 518. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, p. 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron: Revised with a New Preface*, ed. by Ernest J. Lovell, Jr. [1824] (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1966), p. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Jane Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*’, p. 597. Coleridge articulates a similar belief that the Spenserian stanza facilitates a ‘frequent descent to the phrases of ordinary life’. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, ed. by H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 155-482 (p. 202). [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. William Wordsworth, Letter to Catherine Grace Godwin, 1829, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth,* V: *Part II, 1829-1834* (1979), 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Martin, p. 69 & p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Kucich, p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Geoffrey Hartman foregrounds Wordsworth’s emphasis on unity, writing that ‘Wordsworth‘s recovery is therefore a rediscovery of inner continuities’. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, foreword Donald G. Marshall, Theory and History 34 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 1987), p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. Hughes, qtd. in Wilson-Okamura, p. 725. O. B. Hardison, *Prosody and Purpose in the English Renaissance* (Chicago, IL: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989), p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. Christensen, p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. Michael O’Neill, ‘“A Very Life in Our Despair”: Freedom and Fatality in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Cantos III and IV’, in *Liberty and Poetic Licence*, pp. 37-49 (p. 41). [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. The phrase is taken from J. Michael Robertson, ‘Aristocratic Individualism in Byron’s *Don Juan*’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 17.4 (1977), 639-655. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Newey, p. 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. W. B. Yeats, ‘Anima Hominis’,in W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1959), pp. 325-342 (p. 331). [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. W. B. Yeats, ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’, in W. B. Yeats, *W. B. Yeats: The Major Works*, ed. by Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), pp. 180-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. T.S. Eliot, ‘East Coker, 1940’ in *The Four Quartets*,in T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber, 1969), pp. 177-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. O’Neill, ‘The Fixed and the Fluid’, p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. See the Scrope Davies manuscript of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III in *The Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics: Lord Byron*, gen. ed. Donald H. Reiman, 13 vols (New York, NY: Garland, 1985-98), vol VII: *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage Canto III. A Facsimile of the Autograph Fair Copy Found in the “Scrope Davies” Notebook*, ed. by T. A. J. Burnett (1988), 202-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago, IL & London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. McGann, ‘Byron and the Anonymous Lyric’, p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. McGann, ‘Byron and the Anonymous Lyric’, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. McGann, ‘Byron and the Anonymous Lyric’, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology*, p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. McGann, ‘Byron and the Anonymous Lyric’, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1984), p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. ‘The overall effect […] is not simply to qualify Spenser’s idealism but to magnify and complicate his drama of self-debate’. Kucich, p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Bloom, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. Harold Bloom, ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’, in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Norton, 1970), pp. 3-23 (p. 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. ‘rhetoric, *n.*’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015) <http://www.oed.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/view/Entry/165178> [accessed 12 December 2015]. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. See L. E. Marshall, ‘“Words Are Things”: Byron and the Prophetic Efficacy of Language’, *Studies in English Literature*, *1500-1900*, 25.4 (1985), 801-22 (p. 804). [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Nietzsche declares that Byron’s play ‘spellbinds the reader with its magic power and can plunge him into the deepest melancholy’. Qtd. in Curtis Cate, *Friedrich Nietzsche*: *A Biography* (London: Pimlico, 2003), p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. Anne Barton, ‘Don Juan Transformed’, in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, ed. by Andrew Rutherford (London: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 199-220 (p. 202). [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. Andrew Elfenbein, ‘Byron: gender and sexuality’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. by Drummond Bone (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 56-74 (p. 69). [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Michael G. Cooke, *The Blind Man Traces the Circle: On the Patterns and Philosophy of Byron’s Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1969), p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Francis Jeffrey’s review considers *Manfred* as a static monodrama: ‘it is not at all a drama or play in the modern acceptation of the term. It has no action; no plot—and no characters; Manfred merely muses and suffers from beginning to end’. Francis Jeffrey, review of *Manfred*, *Edinburgh Review*, XXVIII (September 1817), 418-31, in *Byron: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Andrew Rutherford (London and New York, NY: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 115-18 (p. 115). [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 214. See A. Dwight Culler for a history of ‘monodrama’ as term and a genre, including its status as a precursor to Victorian dramatic monologues. A. Dwight Culler, ‘Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue’, *PMLA*, 90.3 (1975), 366-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. ‘The early spectacle of Manfred’s emphatically self-conscious and self-confessing determination too easily seduces attention from the fact that he is met in a pattern of self-discovery and self-acceptance’. Cooke, *The Blind Man Traces the Circle*, p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. Frederick Garber, ‘Self, Society, Value, and the Romantic Hero’, *Comparative Literature*,19.4 (1967), 321-33 (p. 332). [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. Jerome J. McGann ‘My brain is feminine: Byron and the poetry of deception’, in *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. by James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 53-76 (p. 69). [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Caroline Franklin, *Byron* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. Alan Richardson, ‘Byron and the Theatre’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. by Drummond Bone(Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 133-50 (p. 133). [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. Philip Martin affirms that *Manfred* ‘draws on Byron’s experience of the theatre more extensively than any play he ever wrote’. Philip W. Martin, *Byron: A Poet Before His Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Jeffrey N. Cox, ‘Melodrama, Monodrama, and the Forms of Romantic Tragic Drama’, in *Within the Dramatic Spectrum: The University of Florida Comparative Drama Conference Papers, vol. VI*, ed. by Karelisa Hartigan (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), pp. 20-34 (p. 20). [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. Martin argues that Byron undermines the possibility of a serious metaphysical drama through a reliance on Gothic extravagance. See Martin, pp. 107-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. Alan Richardson, *A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (University Park, PA & London: Pennsylvania State UP, 1988), p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Richardson, *A Mental Theatre*, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. Both A. Dwight Culler and Cox suggest that the monodrama differs from the dramatic monologue ‘in lacking an ironic tension between sympathy and judgement’, with the genre resisting the assumption ‘that every speaker is an “unreliable narrator”’. See Cox, p. 21; Culler, p. 368. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Frederick Garber, *Self, Text and Romantic Irony: The Example of Byron* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1988), p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. Garber, ‘Self, Society, Value, and the Romantic Hero’, p. 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Garber, *Self, Text and Romantic Irony*, p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. Simon Bainbridge, ‘The Poetic Conversations of Byron and Shelley’, in *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, ed. by Charles Mahoney (Malden, MA & Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 197-216 (p. 206). [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Byron, Letter to John Murray, 15 February 1817, in *BLJ*, V, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. Bainbridge, p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Richardson, *A Mental Theatre*, p. 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Andrew Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. ‘Even in a lively oral narration, it is not unusual to introduce persons in conversation with each other, and to give a corresponding variety to the tone and the expression. But the gaps, which these conversations leave in the story, the narrator fills up in his own name with a description of the accompanying circumstances, and other particulars. The dramatic poet must renounce all such expedients’. A.W. Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. by John Black (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1846), p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. *BLJ*, V, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. Atara Stein, ‘“I Loved Her and Destroyed Her”: Love and Narcissism in Byron’s *Manfred*’, *Philological Quarterly*, 69.2 (1990), 189-215 (p. 203). [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. ‘It is significant that the shape Manfred perceives is only the “Phantom” or *apparition* of Astarte; and in an important sense it can be said that she is part of the contrivance of the pay, the tool of those forces that would use her to hold Manfred in their power’. Stuart Sperry, ‘Byron and the Meaning of *Manfred*’, *Criticism*, 16.3 (1974), 189-202 (p. 196). [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Garber, ‘Self, Society, Value, and the Romantic Hero’, p. 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. Garber, *Self, Text and Romantic Irony*, p. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. McGann, ‘Byron and Wordsworth’, in *Byron and Romanticism*, pp. 173-201 (pp. 194-95). [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. Emily A. Bernhard Jackson, ‘Manfred's Mental Theater and the Construction of Knowledge’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 47.4 (2007), 799-824 (p. 801). [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. Terence Hoagwood, *Byron’s Dialectic: Skepticism and the Critique of Culture* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1993), p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. Bernhard Jackson, p. 806. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. Hoagwood, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. Hoagwood, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. Garber, ‘Self, Society, Value, and the Romantic Hero’, p. 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt, and others, 2nd edn (New York, NY & London: Norton, 2008), pp. 1783-1784. All subsequent references to Shakespeare’s works will be taken from this edition, unless indicated otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. For a transcript of the relevant drafts, see Lord George Gordon Byron, *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 8 vols(Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980-93), IV, 467-71. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. The implication is also that of Mark Sandy, who, in emphasising Manfred as engaged in a ‘Nietzschean act of wilful forgetfulness’ following the trauma of Astarte’s death, sees the protagonist as ‘capable of deliberately forgetting the past’. Mark Sandy, ‘“The Colossal Fabric’s Form”: Remodelling Memory, History and Forgetting in Byron’s Poetic Recollections of Ruins’, *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*,51 (August 2008) <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ravon/2008/v/n51/019258ar.html> [accessed 05 October 2015], para. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. Elfenbein, *Byron and the Victorians*, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Bernhard Jackson, p. 816. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. Michael O’Neill, ‘“And all things seem only one”: the Shelleyan Lyric’, in *Essays and Studies 1992: Percy Bysshe Shelley: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. by Kelvin Everest (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 115-32 (p. 119). [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Baldick, p. 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. Samuel Claggett Chew, *The Dramas of Lord Byron: A Critical Study* (Miami, FL: HardPress Publishing, 2013 [1915]), p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. Bloom, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. G. Wilson Knight, *Byron and Shakespeare* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. In considering *The Deformed Transformed* as an exploration of the gap between rhetoric and achievement I follow F.M. Doherty’s sense that ‘beyond all the other plays, [*The Deformed Transformed*] belongs to the Byronic world of division’. F. M. Doherty, ‘Byron and the Sense of the Dramatic’, in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, ed. Bernard Beatty and Vincent Newey (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1988), pp. 226-41 (p. 238). [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Byron, Letter to John Murray, 3 November 1821, in *BLJ*, IX, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. Bloom, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. Marjean D. Purinton, ‘Byron’s disability and the techno-gothic grotesque in *The Deformed Transformed*’, *European Romantic Review,* 12.3 (2008), 301-20; Christine Kenyon Jones, ‘Deformity transformed: Byron and his biographers on the subject of his lameness’, *European Romantic Review,* 12.3 (2008), 249-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, ‘Byron and the new disability studies: A response’, *European Romantic Review,* 12.3 (2008), 321-27 (p. 327). [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Peter Manning pursues this kind of reading: ‘for an author to transcribe himself thus undisguisedly is startling and the arduous progress towards self-understanding it attests must never be underestimated’. Peter J. Manning, *Byron and His Fictions* (Detroit, MA: Wayne State UP, 1978), p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Since *The Deformed Transformed* is not included in McGann’s *Major Works*, all quotations from the play are taken from *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. McGann, VI, 517-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Michael G. Cooke, *The Romantic Will* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale UP, 1976), p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Cooke writes that Byron’s heroes typically display a confrontation between ‘the autonomous mind-as-will and “strong reality”. Michael G. Cooke, *The Blind Man Traces the Circle: On the Patterns and Philosophy of Byron’s Poetry* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1969), pp. 88-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Beaton, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. Barton, p. 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. ‘This entire scene is farcical, a devil-man encounter only because Arnold insists on making it one’. Daniel P. Watkins, ‘The Ideological Dimensions of *The Deformed Transformed*’, in *The Plays of Lord Byron: Critical Essays*, ed. by Robert Gleckner and Bernard Beatty (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1997), pp. 347-62 (p. 353). [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. This is the case throughout the play, as Chew points out: ‘all Caesar incites him to do would occur to any high-minded man to undertake’. Chew, p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. ‘The truth is that in these days the grand “primum mobile” of England is *Cant—*[…] I say Cant, because it is a thing of words, without the smallest influence upon human actions’. Lord Byron, ‘The Bowles/Pope Controversy 1821: Letter to John Murray Esq’, in *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. by Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 120-60 (p. 128). [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Manning, p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Cooke, *The Blind Man Traces the Circle,* p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. The setting recalls the first appearance of the ghost of Hamlet’s father on the ramparts. Hamletian echoes recur through Byron’s oeuvre; for a compelling account of the ‘correspondences between Byron’s life and Shakespeare’s play’, see Wilson Knight, pp. 73-116. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. On Byron’s use of *ottava rima*, Northrop Frye writes that ‘he could be serious if he liked, for sudden changes of mood belong to the form, and he could swing back to burlesque again as soon as he was bored with seriousness, or thought the reader might be. It is particularly the final couplet that he uses to undercut his own romantic Byronism’. Northrop Frye, ‘Lord Byron’, in *The* *Collected Works of Northrop Frye*, gen. ed. Alvin A. Lee, 30 vols (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996-2012), XIV: *Northrop Frye’s Writings on the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, ed. by Imre Salusinzky (2005), 50-71 (p. 65). [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. The Percy Anecdotes report Bayard’s final reproach to Bourbon: “Pity not me”, exclaimed the high spirited chevalier, “I die as a man of honour ought, in the discharge of my duty; they, indeed, are objects of pity, who fight against their king, their country, and their oath’. Sholto and Reuben Percy, *The Percy Anecdotes: Original and Select*, 20 vols (London: J. Cumberland, 1826), XII, 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Manning, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Caroline Franklin, *Byron’s Heroines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. Franklin, *Byron’s Heroines*, p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Franklin’s study uses ‘heroine’ not to ‘denote a favourable portrayal, but merely in the sense of a female protagonist’, but, in *The Deformed Transformed*, Olimpia seems a heroine in the former sense, coming far closer to achievement than her male counterparts. Franklin, *Byron’s Heroines*, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Diane Long Hoeveler, *Romantic Androgyny: The Women Within* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 1990), p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Cooke, *The Romantic Will*, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. Imke Heuer, ‘“Shadows of Beauty, Shadows of Power”: Heroism, Deformity, and Classical Allusion in Joshua Pickersgill’s *The Three Brothers* and Byron’s *The Deformed Transformed*’, *Cardiff Corvey*: *Reading the Romantic Text*,4 (Summer 2004), <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/encap/journals/corvey/articles/cc12\_n01.pdf [accessed 5 October 2015] (pp. 20-21). [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Andrew Elfenbein, ‘Byron and the Fantasy of Compensation’, *European Romantic* Review, 12.3 (2008), 267-83 (p. 279). [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. See Empson’s sense of ‘the sheer splendour of the first utterance of Satan’. William Empson, *Milton’s God* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), p. 44.Empson follows the line of interpretation established by Shelley and Blake; see *A Defence of Poetry*, p. 691 & William Blake, ‘The Marriage of Heaven and Hell’, in *Blake’s Poetry and Designs*: *Authoritative Texts, Illuminations in Colour and Monochrome, Related Prose, Criticism*, ed. by Mary Lynn Johnson & John E. Grant (New York, NY & London: Norton, 1979), p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Watkins, p. 354. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Bloom, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. ‘Byron’s poetry shimmers with a complex interplay of formal commitments in which the energies of freedom and eruption are set against the demands of constraint and conservatism’. Susan J. Wolfson, *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Barton, p. 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. Mary Shelley, Letter to Lord Byron, 16 November 1822, in *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980), I, 289. For Byron’s use of the Doppelgänger, see Charles E. Robinson, ‘The Devil as Doppelgänger in *The Deformed Transformed*: the Sources and Meaning of Byron’s Unfinished Drama’, in *The Plays of Lord Byron*, pp. 321-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Vincent Newey sees this tension as central to Byron’s writings: ‘Byron may say, with regret, “I live and die unheard”, but in doing so he points the eternal paradox of living and being heard: incompleteness, the wanting that is both aspiration and not-having, is the inescapable condition of being’. Vincent Newey, ‘Authoring the Self: *Childe Harold* III and IV’, in *Byron and the Limits of Fiction*, pp. 148-90 (p. 163). [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Jane Stabler, *Byron, Poetics and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Carlos Baker, *Shelley’s Major Poetry: The Fabric of a Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1948), p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Simon Haines, *Shelley’s Poetry: The Divided Self* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 194. Following Haines, Teddi Chichester Bonca complains that ‘*Epipsychidion* was monstrous, Shelley realized, not because Teresa Viviani fell short of his ideal, but because its six hundred lines of gorgeous verse created a radiant Paradise that encompassed little more than the poet’s own narrow world of Self’. Teddi Chichester Bonca, *Shelley’s Mirrors of Love: Narcissism, Sacrifice, and Sorority* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Harold Bloom, ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’, in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Norton, 1970), pp. 3-23 (p. 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Mark Sandy suggests the dangers faced by the Shelleyan quester when he presents ‘the alignment of self-destruction with self-introspection’ as a ‘central motif in Shelley’s visionary and existential quest poetry’. Mark Sandy, *Romanticism*, *Memory, and Mourning* (Oxon & New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1953), p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. Daniel J. Hughes, ‘Coherence and Collapse in Shelley, with Particular Reference to *Epipsychidion*’, *ELH*, 28 (1961), 260-83 (p. 279). [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. Bloom reads *Epipsychidion* as concerned with ‘the confrontation of a Thou in one human being by the I in another and the relational event which ensures from such a confrontation’, while O’Neill emphasises the way in which ‘the poet’s feelings about a relationship are twinned in complicating ways with his feelings about relationship itself’. Harold Bloom, *Shelley’s Mythmaking*, Yale Studies in English: Volume 141 (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1959), p. 207. Michael O’Neill, *The Human Mind’s Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley’s Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. Bloom, *Shelley’s Mythmaking*, p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*: *Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. Barthes, p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. For Derrida’s emphasis on the ‘play of signification’, see Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 120. For De Man’s emphasis on deconstruction as a means of maintaining the ‘autonomous potential of language’, see Paul de Man, ‘The Resistance to Theory’, in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*: *A Reader*, ed. by K. M. Newton (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), pp. 158-64 (pp. 159-60). [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. Angela Leighton, ‘Love, Writing and Scepticism in *Epipsychidion*’, in *The New Shelley: Later Twentieth Century Views*, ed. by G. Kim Blank (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 220-41 (p. 225). [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. Leighton, ‘Love, Writing and Scepticism in *Epipsychidion*’, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Leighton, ‘Love, Writing and Scepticism in *Epipsychidion*’, p. 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Bloom, *Shelley’s Mythmaking*, p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. Michael O’Neill, ‘“Conscript Fathers and Shuffling Recruits”: Formal Self-awareness in Romantic Poetry’, in *Romanticism and Form*, ed. by Alan Rawes (Hampshire and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 23-39 (p. 29). [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. G. Wilson Knight, *The Starlit Dome*: *Studies in the Poetry of Vision* (London: Oxford UP, 1941), p. 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Bloom, *Shelley’s Mythmaking*, p. 208. For Shelley’s relationship with Dante, see Richard E. Brown, ‘The Role of Dante in *Epipsychidion*’, *Comparative Literature*, 30.3 (1978), 223-235; Stuart Curran, ‘*Epipsychidion*, Dante, and the Renewable Life’, *Dante and Italy in British Romanticism*, ed. by Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 93-104 (p. 94); Timothy Webb, *The Violet in the Crucible: Shelley and Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 291. [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. See Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 2nd edn, ed. by Donald H. Reiman & Neil Fraistat (New York, NY: Norton, 2002), II, 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. Nancy Moore Goslee, *Shelley’s Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), pp. 140-1. Goslee traces the way in which Shelley’s effort to convert Teresa Viviani to Emily manifests itself in ‘a series of faltering and collapses in the [poem’s] drafting process’. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Edward E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1963), p. 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. by T.S. Eliot (New York, NY & London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. Leighton, ‘Love, Writing and Scepticism in *Epipsychidion*’, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, ‘Keeping Faith with Desire: A Reading of *Epipsychidion*’, in *Evaluating Shelley*, ed. by Timothy Clarke and Jerrold E. Hogle (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1996), pp. 180-96 (p. 189). [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. W. B. Yeats, ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’, in W. B. Yeats, *W. B Yeats: The Major Works*, ed. by Edward Larrissy (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. Sandy, *Romanticism*, *Memory, and Mourning*, p. 107. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Michael Rossington, Jack Donovan and Kelvin Everest, 5 vols (London & New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), IV, 188-89. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. William Hazlitt, review of *Posthumous Poems*, *Edinburgh Review*, XI (July 1824), 494-514, in *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by James E. Barcus (London and Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 335-45 (p. 335). [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. Paul Vatalaro writes that ‘elusiveness of this kind breeds frustration, but in the process sustains desire, which, in turn, brings about pleasure’. Paul A. Vatalaro, *Shelley’s Music: Fantasy, Authority, and the Object Voice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Vatalaro, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. The charge was repeatedly levelled at the open-couplets of Keats’s *Endymion*, as in Croker’s complaint that Keats ‘write[s] a line at random, and then he follows not the thought excited by this line, but that suggested by the rhyme with which it concludes’. Unsigned review of Endymion, *Quarterly Review*, XIX (September 1818), 204-8, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by G. M. Matthews (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 110-114 (p. 112). [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Stuart Sperry, *Shelley’s Major Verse*: *The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1988), p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Sperry, p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. Sperry, p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. Sperry, p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. The technique anticipates Shelley’s emphasis on ‘other eloquence than words’ (567) in his later envisioning of sexual unity with Emily. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. Leighton, ‘Love, Writing and Scepticism in *Epipsychidion*’, p. 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. William A. Ulmer, *Shelleyan Eros*: *The Rhetoric of Romantic Love* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990), p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley’s Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York, NY & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), p. 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Angela Leighton writes that *Epipsychidion* at times resembles ‘a practice ground for *Adonais*’. Leighton, ‘Love, Writing and Scepticism in *Epipsychidion*’, p. 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy*: *Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987), p. 147 & p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. For *Adonais*’s contribution to the development of pastoral elegy, see Stuart Curran, ‘*Adonais* in context’, in *Shelley Revalued*: *Essays from the Gregynog Conference*, ed. by Kelvin Everest(Leicester: Leicester UP, 1983), pp. 165-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. Susan J. Wolfson, ‘Keats enters history: autopsy, *Adonais*, and the fame of Keats’, in *Keats and History*, ed. by Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), pp. 17-45 (p. 33). [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. Shelley, Letter to Charles Ollier, 11 June 1821, in *Letters of PBS*, II, 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. Shelley, Letter to John and Maria Gisborne, 5 June 1821, in *Letters of PBS*, II, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Kelvin Everest, ‘Shelley’s *Adonais* and John Keats’, *Essays in Criticism*, 57 (2007), 237-64 (p. 249); see also Madeleine Callaghan, ‘“His Mute Voice”: The Two Heroes of *Adonais*’, *Keats-Shelley Review*, 24 (2010), 38-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. For the way that allusions to Keats’s oeuvre reveal Shelley’s ‘fierce ambivalence towards his “brother” Keats and the dimensions of his struggle with the conflict of poetic influence and originality’, see Andrew Epstein, ‘“Flowers That Mock the Corse beneath”: Shelley’s “Adonais”, Keats, and Poetic Influence’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 48 (1991), 90-128 (p. 91 & p. 94) [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. Abrams, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. Stephen Behrendt writes that ‘the [critics’s] failure to “love” the authors whose works they assess […] is hence a failure less of reason than of love. It is a frustration of community, an *unfeeling* rejection of the author’s invitation to the mutually creative interpersonal activity implied by the acts of writing and reading’. While Behrendt examines the relationship between poet and reviewer, I argue that *Adonais* is also concerned with the complicated ‘community’ an elegy attempts to establish with its audience. Stephen C. Behrendt, *Shelley and His Audiences* (Lincoln, NE & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. Michael O’Neill, ‘Shelley’s Pronouns: Lyrics, *Hellas*, *Adonais*, and *The Triumph of Life*’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe* Shelley, ed. by Michael O’Neill, Anthony Howe & Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), pp. 391-407 (p. 399). [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. Earl Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, MD & London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971), p. 473. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. Earl J. Schulze, *Shelley’s Theory of Poetry: A Reappraisal* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. Using Shelley’s definition of drama in *A Defence of Poetry*, Daniel Wilson argues that *Adonais* comes closer to being a drama than an elegy and declares that ‘the reader is consequently involved as both spectator and actor in the play of identity’ (10) in the poem. Rather than being a dramatic lyric that ‘allows for a subjective agency’ (11) amongst its audience, as Wilson suggests, I argue that *Adonais* is a self-conscious elegy that deliberately calls into question the relationship between the elegist and the reader. See Daniel Wilson, ‘“Applaud the Deed”: The Theatre of Lyricism in Shelley’s *Adonais*’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 25.1 (1994), 10-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. O’Neill, ‘Shelley’s Pronouns’, p. 397. See also Michael O’Neill, ‘*Adonais* and Poetic Power’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 35.2 (2004), 50-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Richard Cronin, *Shelley’s Poetic Thoughts* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. Cronin, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. Sacks, p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Cronin, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Behrendt, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. ‘Deriving “poor Keats’s life” and “poor fellow” from the already existing tales, Shelley conceives a “scene” to serve the polemical agenda of the elegy’. Wolfson, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. James A. W. Heffernan, ‘*Adonais*: Shelley’s Consumption of Keats’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 23.3 (1984), 295-315 (p. 304). [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. Heffernan, p. 301. [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. For a list of allusions in the stanza, though one that does not mention the Spenserian allusion, see *The Poems of Shelley*, *Volume Four: 1820-1821*, ed. by Rossington, Donovan and Everest, p. 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, in Edmund Spenser, *Spenser: Poetical Works*, ed. by J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (London: Oxford UP, 1970), pp. 1-414. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. Everest, ‘Shelley’s *Adonais* and John Keats’, p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. Greg Kucich discusses the way in which ‘*Adonais*, [as] a poem in Spenserian stanzas about mutability and eternity, elaborates Keats’s Spenserianism in that other great lyrical drama of reality and idealism, *The Eve of St. Agnes*’. Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania UP, 1991), pp. 326-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. Keats, Letter to Percy Bysshe Shelley, 16 August 1820, in *Letters of Keats*, II, 322-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. Kucich, p. 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Byron’s letter to Leigh Hunt of 22 October 1815 concedes ‘I was angry—& determined to be witty—& fighting in a crowd dealt about my blows against all alike without discrimination or discernment’. *BLJ*, IV, 320. See also Byron’s annotations to *English Bards* in the copy belonging to Robert Charles Dallas: ‘The greater part of this satire I most sincerely wish had never been written—not only on account of the injustice of much of the critical, and some of the personal part of it—but the tone and temper are such as I cannot approve’. Lord Byron, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers: A facsimile of the fourth edition containing MS. Notes by Lord Byron*, ed. by Sir John Murray (London: Roxburghe Club, 1936), p. 82. For discussion of the way Byron later frames *English Bards* as ‘the work of a former self, seeking to make a clear distinction between the youth who initially wrote the poem and the older self speaking from the margins’, see Alex Watson, ‘Byron’s Marginalia to *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*’, *The Byron Journal*, 37.2 (2009),131-39 (p. 135). [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. Lord Byron, ‘The Bowles/Pope Controversy 1821: Letter to John Murray Esq’, in *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. by Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 120-60 (p. 148). [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. For the poem’s ambiguous conception of power, see O’Neill, ‘*Adonais* and Poetic Power’, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), p. 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. Sacks, p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. See Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* III (st. XCVII). [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. See Shelley’s declaration that poetry ‘arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life, and veiling them, or in language or in form, sends them forth among mankind, bearing sweet news of kindred joy to those with whom their sisters abide’. *A Defence*, p. 681. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. For a discussion of Byronic mobility, see Jerome J. McGann, ‘Mobility and the poetics of historical ventriloquism’, in Jerome J. McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. by James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 36-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. by George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), I. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. Angela Leighton uses Johnson’s remark as springboard to discuss ‘the recurrent paradox of elegiac poetry: how can the contrived and leisured work of art recapture the natural impulse of “grief”?’ Angela Leighton, ‘Deconstruction Criticism and Shelley’s “Adonais”’, in *Shelley Revalued*, pp. 147-64 (p. 156). [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. Sacks, p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Cronin, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. ‘No matter how stylised or conscious in conception, this passage actually is a thoroughly self-pitying and self-centred portrait of one who saw another’s fate as an opportunity to weep his own’. Haines, p. 215. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. O’Neill, ‘Shelley’s Pronouns’, p. 400. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. Judith Chernaik, ‘The Figure of the Poet in Shelley’, *ELH*, 35.4 (1968), 566-90 (p. 582, n. 18). [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. ‘The rigorously formal construction of the sentence fits oddly with the reader’s sense of it as an uncontrolled emotional outburst’. Cronin, p. 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. Epstein, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. Epstein, p. 117 & p. 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, pp. 3-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. The lines bear out Wasserman’s sense that *Adonais* represents a ‘poetics of assertion’. Wasserman, p. 473. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. ‘Shelley is able to redeem Adonais from the emphatic status of being merely dead which governed the first section […] by virtue of a transvaluation of the elegy’s key opposition, death and life, or its related terms, awakening and sleep’. O’Neill, ‘Shelley’s Pronouns’, p. 398. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. Cronin, p. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. O’Neill, ‘*Adonais* and Poetic Power’, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. O’Neill, ‘Shelley’s Pronouns’, p. 400. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. Shelley, Letter to John and Maria Gisborne, 5 June 1821, in *Letters of PBS*, II, 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. My use of the phrase ‘elegising power’ concurs with the definition offered by O’Neill: ‘my use of the word “power” includes in its meanings “the power of communicating and receiving intense and impassioned conceptions respecting man and nature” of which Shelley writes in *A Defence of Poetry* [(*A Defence*, p. 701)]’. O’Neill, ‘*Adonais* and Poetic Power’, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. Epstein, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Timothy Webb, *Shelley: A Voice Not Understood* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1977), p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. Mark Sandy, *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. Behrendt, p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (eds.), *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*: *Authoritative Texts and Criticism*, A Norton Critical Edition(New York, NY & London: Norton, 1977), p. 405 (n.4 & n. 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. Ross Greig Woodman, *The Apocalyptic Vision in the Poetry of Shelley* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,

     1964), pp. 158–79. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. Callaghan, p. 50. Epstein concurs that the poem’s final stanzas refuse ‘either pure affirmation or pure negation’. Epstein, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. O’Neill, ‘Shelley’s Pronouns’, p. 402. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. Woodman, pp. 158-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. Sacks, p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. Edward Trelawny, *Records of Shelley, Byron and the Author*, introd. Anne Barton (New York, NY: New York Review of Books, 2000 [1878]), p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. Anthony Howe writes that *On Life* ‘has no desire to be a thoroughgoing or systematic work of philosophy’ and instead represents an attempt to ‘pursue’ meaning. Anthony Howe, ‘Shelley and Philosophy: *On a Future State, Speculations on Metaphysics and Morals, On Life*’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Michael O’Neill, Anthony Howe & Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), pp. 101-16 (p. 111). [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. It is not the purpose of this comparison to attribute Trelawny’s remark with the same textual status as *On Life*. Though the accuracy of Trelawny’s reportage is inevitably in question, the comment nevertheless represents an insightful way of reading Shelley. As Newman Ivey White puts it, ‘[Trelawny’s] reputation for truthfulness was not impeccable. […] But it has been often observed that he is at his best in writing of Shelley. His remarks on Shelley have in general the indefinable ring of truth’. Newman Ivey White, *Shelley*, 2 vols (New York, NY: Knopf, 1940), II, 624. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. For details of the Scrope Davies Notebook’s genesis and discovery, see Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Donald Reiman, Neil Fraistat, and Nora Crook, 3 vols (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000–12), III, ed. by Neil Fraistat and Nora Crook (2012), 69-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Shelley, Letter to Thomas Love Peacock, 22 July 1816, in *Letters of PBS*, II, 495-502. Subsequent references to this specific letter will be given parenthetically in the main body. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. Judith Chernaik and Timothy Burnett, ‘The Byron and Shelley Notebooks in the Scrope Davies Find’, *The Review of English Studies, New Series*, 29.113 (1978), 36-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. Michael O’Neill, ‘The Scrope Davies Notebook [Commentary]’, in *Complete Poetry of PBS*, III, 466-523 (pp. 466-69 & 473-74). [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: An Interpretation of the Major Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. The emphasis on perpetuity resonates with a Burkean notion of sublimity: ‘But let it be considered that hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness, which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds’. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. by J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge, 1958 [1757]), p. 63. See Angela Leighton for the way in which the letter, in keeping with Shelley’s other 1816 correspondence, ‘outlines an aesthetic of creativity which draws most closely on a vocabulary of the sublime’. Leighton, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. Deconstruction’s emphasis on movement is evident in Paul de Man’s reading of *The Triumph of Life*, which presents the poem as an allegory of figuration governed by ‘chain[s] of metaphorical transformations’, as well as J. Hillis Miller’s account of the poetry’s emphasis on the ‘inexhaustible power of continuation’. Paul de Man, ‘Shelley Disfigured’, in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1984), pp. 93-123 (p. 112); J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985), p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. de Man, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. See also when Shelley affirms his unwillingness to ‘pursue Buffon[’]s sublime but gloomy theory, that this earth which we inhabit will at some future period be changed into a mass of frost’. *Letters of PBS*,I, 499. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. See O’Neill, ‘Commentary’, in *Complete Poetry of PBS*, III, 466-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. Critical accounts of the poem are sparse and often brief. Chernaik and Burnett provide the first publication of the poem but analyse the writing only briefly, suggesting its responsiveness to Shelley’s reading of *Childe Harold*’*s Pilgrimage*. Timothy Webb also uses the sonnet to illuminate other works, stressing that ‘similar images and ideas are developed at greater length and with greater subtlety in “Mont Blanc”’. Erland Anderson develops the insight of Chernaik and Burnett, proposing that the poem was written with Claire Clairmont in mind. Michael O’Neill offers the most substantial treatment of the poem on its own terms, emphasising the complexity of the sonnet’s ‘negotiations between self- and other-awareness’. Chernaik and Burnett, pp. 39-40; Timothy Webb, ‘Shelley and the Ambivalence of Laughter’, in *Essays and Studies 1992: Percy Bysshe Shelley: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. by Kelvin Everest (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 43-62 (p. 49); Erland Anderson, ‘“Upon the Wandering Winds…”: A Note on the First Sonnet Discovered in the Byron and Shelley Notebooks in the Scrope Davies Find’, *ELN*, 17.2 (1979), 120-22; Michael O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. O’Neill, ‘Commentary’, in *Complete Poetry of PBS*, III, 468. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Upon the wandering winds’, in *Complete Poetry of PBS*, III, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. Trelawny, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest elide this distinction in affirming that ‘the objects of Nature are all evoked in terms of sound and motion’. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Geoffrey Matthews and Kelvin Everest, 3 vols (London: Longman, 1989), I, 521, n.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. Shakespeare’s ‘Sonnet 1’ is an example of a sonnet that uses the *ababcdcdefefgg* rhyme and firmly marks the ends of its quatrains, in this case through a colon and two full stops. William Shakespeare, ‘Sonnet 1’, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt, and others, 2nd edn (New York, NY & London: Norton, 2008), p. 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. John Blades emphasises the role of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey in adapting the sonnet ‘to produce the distinctive pattern of three quatrains and a couplet, imposing the *volta* between lines twelve and thirteen, a pattern frequent to both Spenserian and Shakespearean sonnets’. John Blades, *Shakespeare: The Sonnets* (Basingstoke & New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. ‘The English couplet, with its tightly closed rhyme, moralising or summarising, offers a strong sense of closure within the sonnet architecture’. Blades, p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. Both versions of the poem are quoted from *Complete Poetry of PBS*, III, 72-79, which publishes the two poems side by side. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. The Notebook also includes an alternative version of ‘Mont Blanc’, but my decision to focus this chapter on the ‘Hymn’ stems from the poem’s unique approach to motion. As Judith Chernaik writes, the poems ‘suggest two alternative ways of conceptualising reality and the relation of the mind to that which it experiences and to that which it intuits or desires beyond experience’. Tilottama Rajan convincingly summarises the distinction, framing it in terms of the ‘Hymn’’s eschewal of conclusion: ‘Like “Mont Blanc” and the “Ode to the West Wind”, which are openly about the ambiguously creative and destructive potential in life, the “Hymn” is about Power and mutability. What distinguishes it from the other two poems is a certain resistance to its own conclusions, which is reflected in the neotheological and therefore sentimental tendency of hymn: the tendency to believe in salvation by a pure and unambiguous Meaning that is outside life and therefore immune to it’. Judith Chernaik, *The Lyrics of Shelley* (Cleveland, OH: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1972), p. 33; Tilottama Rajan, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell UP, 1980), p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. Following the Scrope Davies find in 1976, the 1817 version was published for the first time by Chernaik and Burnett, pp. 43-5. Timothy Webb attributes the poem with a ‘special authority’ since, like the version of ‘Mont Blanc’ contained within the same source, ‘they are not discarded drafts but alternative versions’. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley: Poems and Prose*, ed. by Timothy Webb (London: Everyman, 1995), p. 347. For consideration of varying editorial approaches to publishing the different versions, see Mark Anderson, ‘“Straining After Impossibilities”: Textual Presentation and the Scrope Davies Find’, *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 27.2 (2013), 91–104. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. O’Neill argues that comparison reveals ‘fascinating variations on a theme’ such that the two versions ‘point up one another’s distinctly individual outlook’. Michael O’Neill, ‘Splendour among Shadows: Shelley’s Artistry’, in *Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics: Percy Bysshe Shelley*, gen. ed. Donald H. Reiman, 9 vols (New York, NY: Garland, 1985-97), vol. VIII: *Fair-Copy Manuscripts of Shelley’s Poems in European and American Libraries*, ed. by Donald Reiman and Michael O’Neill (1997), xi-xxvi (p. xiii). [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. O’Neill, ‘Commentary’, in *Complete Poetry of PBS*, III, 478. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. See the following lines from *Endymion*: ‘…and he doth see / A bud which snares his fancy. Lo! but now / He plucks it, dips its stalk in the water: how! / It swells, it buds, it flowers beneath his sight’ (II. 56-59). [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. William Keach, *Shelley’s Style* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. Cian Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), p. 101. See also Leighton, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. For all instances of ‘light’ in Shelley’s works, see *A Lexical Concordance to the Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, comp. and ed. by F. S. Ellis (London: Bernard Quadrich, 1892), pp. 397-400. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. Definitions proposed in the concordance include ‘other light than ordinary daylight’, ‘mental light, knowledge, genius’ and ‘expression, animation’, but the most relevant here is Ellis’s sense of light as a force that ‘direct[s] as a guiding star’. *A Lexical Concordance to the Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, p, 397-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. de Man, p. 105. See also de Man’s remark that ‘light covers light […] and creates conditions of optical confusion that resemble nothing as much as trying to read *The Triumph of Life*, as its meaning glimmers, hovers, and wavers, but refuses to yield the clarity it keeps announcing’. de Man, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. Karen A. Weisman, *Imageless Truths: Shelley’s Poetic Fictions* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Philadelphia Press, 1994), p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. Rajan, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. ‘The similes have the effect […] of calling attention to themselves, to the act of simile-making itself, and thus to imaginative acts of perception and creation in general’. Spencer Hall, ‘Power and the Poet: Religious Mythmaking in Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty”’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 32 (1983), 123-49 (p. 139). [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. ‘Theological systems impose a certainty, a stability on the world that has no basis in the reality of human experience, which is an experience of uncertainty, of flux. […] “Intellectual Beauty”, it seems, is presented as a hypothesis better founded than, say, God, but still a hypothesis’. Richard Cronin, *Shelley’s Poetic Thoughts* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley’s Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York, NY & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), p. 353, n. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. Hogle, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. Leader and O’Neill point up the echoes between Shelley’s ‘before me fled / The night; behind me rose the day’ (*The Triumph of Life*, 26-7) and Goethe’s ‘The day ahead, behind my back the night / The sky above me and the waves below’ (*Faust*,I. ii. 1087-8). See *Shelley: The Major Works*, p. 816; J. W. Goethe, *Faust Part One*, trans. by David Luke (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. Shelley, Letter to John Gisborne, 10 April 1822, in *Letters of PBS*, II, 406. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. Donald Reiman, *Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life”: A Critical Study* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1965), p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Michael O’Neill, *The Human Mind’s Imaginings: Conflict and Achievement in Shelley’s Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. Hogle, p. 319. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. Keach, p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. O’Neill, *Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. Keach, p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. For Dante’s influence on *The Triumph of Life*, see Ralph Pite, ‘Shelley, Dante and *The Triumph of Life*’, in *Evaluating Shelley*, ed. by Timothy Clarke and Jerrold E. Hogle (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1996), pp. 197-211. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. Ann Wroe contextualises *The Triumph of Life* in terms of Shelley’s sea voyages of 1821-22: ‘the yacht also went out merely to challenge squalls, storms, and winds. The end was unknown; the point was speed, motion, and the heeling of the undecked boat, with its multiple sails sometimes almost grazing the surface of the sea. […] A journey without a destination was also the theme of much of the writing [Shelley] was doing on shore’. Ann Wroe, ‘Resolutions, Destinations: Shelley’s Last Year’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, pp. 48-64 (p. 59). [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. Shelley, *Letters of PBS*, II, 406. [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. Shelley, *Letters of PBS*, II, 406. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. de Man, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. de Man, pp. 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. de Man, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. de Man, pp. 116. [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. Rajan, p. 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. Rajan, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. While Stuart Sperry suggests that ‘it is not surprising that many critics have viewed the poem as a palinode to the poet’s earlier work and its Promethean power of affirmation’, Carlos Baker argues that ‘*The Triumph of Life* is rather a reaffirmation than a palinode’ against Shelley’s previous affirmations. See Stuart M. Sperry, *Shelley’s Major Verse: The Narrative and Dramatic Poetry* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard UP, 1988), p. 199 & Carlos Baker, *Shelley’s Major Poetry*: *The Fabric of a Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1948), p. 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. Hillis Miller, p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. See the climactic lines of the essay, which capture the thrill of the critic’s involvement in ‘a chain of repetitions’. See Hillis Miller, p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. Hillis Miller, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. de Man, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. O’Neill, *Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. Reiman, *Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life”: A Critical Study*, p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. Reiman notes the scarcity of feminine rhymes in *The Triumph of Life*, while Keach notes the accumulation of feminine rhymes in the depiction of the ‘Shape all Light’, designed to ‘initiate and evoke the [shape’s] gliding, sweeping movement’. See Reiman, p. 93 & Keach, p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. O’Neill, *Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
494. de Man, pp. 97-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
495. For Sperry, Shelley’s use of Rousseau ‘seems most clearly, however, to advance the claim that whereas others channelled their best energies into particular goals or objects that ultimately failed them, Rousseau alone remained loyal to the heart itself, to its irrepressible springs of longing—that is, to the principle of the insatiability of human desire’. Sperry, pp. 197-98. [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
496. Cronin, p. 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
497. de Man, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
498. de Man, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
499. See Ralph Pite’s discussion of the way that Shelley’s meeting with Rousseau ‘is not an immediately coherent or explicable event but neither does it feel random’, and how this relates to a Dantescan tension ‘between authority and surprise’. Pite, p. 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
500. de Man, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
501. ‘Dante’s muscular clarity, his concern with definition and order, is, in a sense imposed against the will of the verse form. Dante, Shelley would have argued, imposed on experience an order, in itself beautiful, but which had no adequate basis in that experience’. Cronin, p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
502. Vidyan Ravinthiran discusses the way that Shelleyan *terza rima* ‘tries to feed off its own previous inspirations’. See Vidyan Ravinthiran, ‘Dante and Shelley’s *Terza Rima*’, *Essays in Criticism*,61 (2011), 155-72 (p. 159). [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
503. Cronin, p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
504. As Keach writes, ‘if the *terza rima* of *The Triumph of Life* threatens to impose a despotic or tyrannical arbitrariness of its own with its sequential chain of terminal commitments and obligations […] these are calculated stylistic risks, aspects of Shelley’s attempt to appropriate and shape the arbitrariness of language into a medium both reflective of and resistant to a power that defies the mind’s desire for meaning’. Keach, pp. 186-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
505. Cronin, p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
506. de Man, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
507. Rajan, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
508. O’Neill, *Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
509. Relevant here is Keach’s suggestion that ‘Forgetting, obliteration are powerful forces in *The Triumph of Life*. But the articulation of these forces depends upon the counterforces if remembering, literation and repetition’. Keach, p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
510. For the way that the scene is ‘filled with the latent energy of possible significance’, see Earl Schulze, ‘Allegory against Allegory: *The Triumph of Life*’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 27.1 (1988), 31-62 (p. 49). [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
511. O’Neill’s reading of the poem cites Chekhov’s conception of the artist’s primary duty; for Chekhov, ‘answering the questions’ and ‘formulating them correctly’ are two distinct concepts, and ‘only the latter is required of an author’. See O’Neill, *Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
512. Cronin, p. 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
513. Hugh Roberts, ‘Spectators Turned Actors: *The Triumph of Life*’, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, selected and ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, A Norton Critical Edition, 2nd edn (New York, NY: Norton, 2002), pp. 760-68 (p. 765). [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
514. See Keach, p. 165 & Ross Wilson, *Shelley and the Apprehension of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), pp. 148-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
515. Roberts, p. 765. [↑](#footnote-ref-515)
516. Roberts, p. 766. [↑](#footnote-ref-516)
517. Hogle, p. 335. [↑](#footnote-ref-517)
518. Sperry, p. 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
519. See Cronin, p. 213, for discussion of the lines as a ‘rhetorical boast’. [↑](#footnote-ref-519)
520. O’Neill, *Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-520)
521. Geoffrey Hartman, ‘Gods, Ghosts, and Shelley’s “Atheos”’, *Literature and Theology*, 24.1 (2010), 4-18 (p. 13). [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
522. Leighton, p. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
523. ‘For the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness’. *A Defence of Poetry*, pp. 696-97. For an analysis of the metaphor’s centrality to Shelley’s writing, see Daniel Hughes, ‘Kindling and Dwindling: The Poetic Process in Shelley’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 13 (1964), 13-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
524. Sperry, p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
525. Sperry, p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-525)
526. de Man, p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-526)
527. Earl Schulze suggests that the shape ‘embodies the infinite suggestiveness of a symbol’, but the fact that this mobility of meaning is explicitly the result of the shape’s own movements is an issue that requires greater emphasis. See Schulze, p. 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-527)
528. de Man, p. 116. For the way in which *The Triumph of Life* ‘refuse[s] the safety of allegory’, see Madeleine Callaghan, ‘Shelley and the Ambivalence of Idealism’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 64 (2015), 92-104 (p. 94). [↑](#footnote-ref-528)
529. de Man, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
530. de Man, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-530)
531. Callaghan, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-531)
532. Hogle glosses this suspension as ‘Faustlike’, the product of ‘the desire to penetrate what seem to be veils hiding a deeper origin and shame at the prospect of thereby violating—and forgetting—an outward-tending process of love’. Hogle, p. 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-532)
533. O’Neill, *Human Mind’s Imaginings*, p. 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-533)
534. The method differs to that of the ‘Hymn’, but both have something in common with Daniel Hughes’s sense that ‘Shelley's poems are fading coals that seek to stay alive through the elaborate and daring verbal strategies that constitute his poetic structures’. Hughes, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
535. This exemplifies Anthony Howe’s suggestion that in *The Triumph of Life* ‘the conventional quest for knowledge is referred over to a mode of knowing that seems to offer at once the apparent contraries of oblivion and definition’. Howe, ‘Shelley and Philosophy’, p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
536. ‘amazed, *adj.*’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015) <http://www.oed.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/view/Entry/6067> [accessed 12 December 2015]. [↑](#footnote-ref-536)
537. de Man, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-537)
538. Trelawny, p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-538)
539. F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), p. 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-539)
540. Harold Bloom, ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’, in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Norton, 1970), pp. 3-23 (p. 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-540)
541. Bloom, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-541)
542. Bloom, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-542)
543. Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 8 October 1817, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 169-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-543)
544. ‘His *Endymion*, in resolving to be free from all critical trammels, had no versification’. Leigh Hunt, ‘Selections from Keats, with Critical Notice’, in *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*, gen. eds. Robert Morrison & Michael Eberle-Sinatra, 6 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2003), IV: *Later Literary Essays*, ed. by Charles Mahoney (2003), 108-11 (p. 109). [↑](#footnote-ref-544)
545. As John Barnard writes, ‘Keats’s stylistic success exists in an eerie proximity to vulgarity or technical failure. The early poetry’s idiosyncrasy is worth insisting upon because it is integral to the mature work’. John Barnard, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-545)
546. Nicola Trott argues for Keats’s ‘fear of fixity’ and his ‘fascinated horror of stasis’ in his poetics: ‘In his own recognition, the chameleon is a formative principle, at once imparting itself to, and taking on the identity of, its creations. The poetry craves existences that it may enter, in satisfaction of its own avid hunger for form. Its characteristic movement is from one entity to another (rather than “hovering between images”, as in a Coleridgean poetry of indeterminacy)’. Nicola Trott, ‘Keats and the prison house of history’, in *Keats and History*, ed. by Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), pp. 262-79 (pp. 273-74). [↑](#footnote-ref-546)
547. For John Barnard, ‘in both his speculations and his poetry Keats’s mode is essentially exploratory and tentative’. Barnard, p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-547)
548. The phrase ‘capable poethood’ is taken from Daniel Hughes, ‘Prometheus Made Capable Poet in Act One of *Prometheus Unbound*’, *Studies in Romanticism*,17.1 (1978), 3-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-548)
549. Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-549)
550. See Bloom’s argument that the Romantic poet ‘takes the patterns of quest-romance and transposes them into his own imaginative life, so that the entire rhythm of the quest is heard again in the movement of the poet himself from poem to poem’. Bloom, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-550)
551. Review signed ‘Z’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, III(August 1818), 519-24, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by G. M. Matthews (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), pp. 97-110 (p. 110). [↑](#footnote-ref-551)
552. Simon Jarvis, ‘Why rhyme pleases’, *Thinking Verse*,1 (2011), 17-43 (p. 24). [↑](#footnote-ref-552)
553. Jarvis, ‘Why rhyme pleases’, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-553)
554. Jarvis, ‘Why rhyme pleases’, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-554)
555. Stuart Sperry suggests that ‘sensation’, despite its centrality to Keats’s work, is a strikingly ambiguous state, one that divides critics in their attempts to pinpoint a definition of the term. Stuart Sperry, ‘A Poetry of Sensation’, in *Keats the Poet* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1973), pp. 3-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-555)
556. Unsigned review, *Quarterly Review*,XIX(September 1818), 204-8, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-556)
557. A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1905), pp. 212-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-557)
558. Byron, Letter to John Murray, 9 November 1820, in *BLJ*, VII, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-558)
559. ‘If *Endymion* seems a poem lacking control and clarity (as the complaint goes, from Keats to Arnold to some present readers), it is only because this is a poem of discovery rather than of “consequitive reasoning”’. Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence, Wordsworth, Keats and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell UP, 1986)*,* p. 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-559)
560. Jarvis, ‘Why rhyme pleases’, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-560)
561. Dane Lewis Baldwin and others (eds.), *A Concordance to the Poems of John Keats* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1963), p. 436. [↑](#footnote-ref-561)
562. Baldwin, *Concordance*, p. 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-562)
563. Jeffrey N. Cox suggests that reviews ‘correctly identify the Cockney style as both smart and abrasive. […] There is something “bold” and assured about this poetry, something challenging and thus potentially “insolent”, even something arrogantly annoying in its contempt for commonly held notions’. Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-563)
564. For discussion of how critical responses to Keats were rooted in a class-conscious perspective, see Jerome J. McGann, ‘Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism’, *MLN*, 94 (1979), 988-1032 (pp. 997-8) [↑](#footnote-ref-564)
565. Review signed ‘Z’, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, p. 101 & p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-565)
566. William Keach, ‘Cockney Couplets: Keats and the Politics of Style’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 25.2 (1986), 182-196 (p. 184). [↑](#footnote-ref-566)
567. Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*, in Alexander Pope, *Alexander Pope: The Major Works*, ed. by Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), pp. 411-571. All subsequent references to Pope’s poetry will be from this edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-567)
568. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-568)
569. Unsigned review, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 110-14 (p. 111). [↑](#footnote-ref-569)
570. Qtd. in Cox, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-570)
571. ‘In 1818, not Keats, but Hunt was the prominent, daring writer who awakened the cultural and political anxieties of the conservative press’. Michael Tomko, ‘Leigh Hunt’s Cockney Canon: Sociability and Subversion from Homer to *Hyperion*’, in *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, ed. by Charles Mahoney (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 285-301 (pp. 285-86). For further information on Keats’s role in the ‘Cockney’ school, see Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) and Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School*. [↑](#footnote-ref-571)
572. Leigh Hunt, ‘Preface’ to *Foliage; or, Poems Original and Translated* (London: C. and J. Ollier, 1818), pp. 9-39 (p. 12). [↑](#footnote-ref-572)
573. For a perceptive reading of Keats’s ‘Sonnet*.* On Leigh Hunt’s Poem *The Story of* Rimini’, see Andrew Franta, *Romanticism and the Rise of the Mass Public* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), pp. 96-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-573)
574. Leigh Hunt, ‘Preface to *The Story of Rimini*’, in *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*, V: *Poetical Works*, *1802-21*, ed. by John Strachan (2003), 165-68 (p. 167). [↑](#footnote-ref-574)
575. ‘Pope’s style was habitually and routinely by everyone described as “polished”—this itself testifies to a felt link between the intensively worked-over surface of his verse and the gleaming cabinets, tables, canes and snuff-boxes evoked in *The Rape of the Lock*’. Jarvis, ‘Why rhyme pleases’, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-575)
576. See Bloom’s sense that the Romantic poet ‘the entire rhythm of the quest is heard again in the movement of the poet himself from poem to poem’. Bloom, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-576)
577. For the way in which Keats belongs to the Cockney school of politics as well as the Cockney school of poetry, see Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* and Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School*. [↑](#footnote-ref-577)
578. Hunt, ‘Preface to *Rimini*’, p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-578)
579. Hunt, ‘Preface to *Rimini*’,p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-579)
580. Bloom, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-580)
581. Ezek. 1.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-581)
582. Susan J. Wolfson, *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2006), p. 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-582)
583. This concept of yielding develops Sperry’s suggestion that Keats’s early works show the poet ‘developing a flow of associations sufficient to determine its own point and direction’: ‘There is an evident struggle throughout the early verse for some means to start the creative process flowing. Often Keats’s method is simply to amass a series of impressions in the hope they will of themselves create the impetus to carry him forward’. Sperry, pp. 72-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-583)
584. Bloom, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-584)
585. Hunt, ‘Preface to *Rimini*’,p. 167 [↑](#footnote-ref-585)
586. I echo Wolfson in viewing the ‘young poet’ of this workas a ‘prospect’. Wolfson, *Borderlines*, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-586)
587. ‘Bowles’s own preference for the open, enjambed couplet is an aspect of the “Pope controversy” that doubtless exacerbated Byron's antipathy to Bowles as it did his antipathy to Keats’. Keach, ‘Cockney Couplets’, p. 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-587)
588. Byron, ‘The Bowles/ Pope Controversy 1821: Letter to John Murray Esq’, in *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. by Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 120-60 (p. 157). [↑](#footnote-ref-588)
589. Byron, Letter to Percy Bysshe Shelley, 26 April 1821’, in *BLJ*, VIII, 103-04. [↑](#footnote-ref-589)
590. Byron, ‘Some Observations Upon An Article in *Blackwood’s Magazine*’, in *BLJ*, IV, 493. [↑](#footnote-ref-590)
591. William Keach, ‘Cockney Couplets’, pp. 186-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-591)
592. Hunt, ‘Selections from Keats, with Critical Notice’, p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-592)
593. Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1963), p. 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-593)
594. This reading challenges the argument of Jeffrey N. Cox, who reads *Sleep and Poetry* as ‘Keats’s announcement that he has found himself as a poet in joining the Hunt circle’. Cox, p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-594)
595. Review signed ‘Z’, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-595)
596. Review signed ‘Z’, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-596)
597. Lord George Gordon Byron, ‘Preface [to Cantos I-II] to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, A Romaunt*’, in Lord George Gordon Byron, *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 8 vols(Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980-93), II, 3-6 (p. 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-597)
598. The sentiments expressed in the Anti-Jacobin Review of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* might also be applied to *Endymion*’s use of the heroic couplet: ‘From the form and nature of this “Romaunt”, as it is whimsically, and improperly, denominated, we were led to look for all the characteristics of a regular poem’. Anti-Jacobin Review, XLII (August 1812), 343-65, in *The Romantics Reviewed*: *Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, *Part B: Byron and Regency Society Poets*, ed. with introd. by Donald H. Reiman, 5 vols (New York, NY & London: Garland, 1972), I, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-598)
599. Bloom, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-599)
600. Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-600)
601. Jarvis, ‘Why rhyme pleases’, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-601)
602. Bloom, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-602)
603. See the review of John Wilson Croker; Unsigned review, *Quarterly Review* XIX(September 1818), 204-8, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-603)
604. Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 8 October 1817, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-604)
605. Bennett, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-605)
606. ‘This technique is common in the “open” couplets of *Endymion*, where Keats’s contemporaries saw it as providing a sense of “variety”: often, verse paragraphs will end on the first line of a couplet, and new paragraphs begin with the answering rhyme’. Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions*: *The Working of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), p. 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-606)
607. Simon Jarvis, ‘Archaist-Innovators: The Couplet from Churchill to Browning’, in *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, pp. 25-43 (p. 38). [↑](#footnote-ref-607)
608. Lockhart describes the poem as a failed attempt at writing in ‘English heroic rhyme’. Review signed ‘Z’, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-608)
609. Bennett, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-609)
610. Bloom, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-610)
611. Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 8 October 1817, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-611)
612. For reference to these ‘adieus’ as ‘acutely self-aware phenomena’, see McDonald, p 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-612)
613. McDonald, p. 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-613)
614. McDonald, p. 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-614)
615. Susan J. Wolfson writes ‘where Z reads ridiculous boyish infatuation I see a parade, frequently verging on parody, of Keats’s poetic measuring against mighty and less mighty masters. Vocation, the calling to the career, is the self-conscious subject, a casting call relayed into audience and audition. Aware of the stakes, Keats hedges enthusiasm with stagey affectation. […] Keats heightens a theatricality that verges on disassociation, putting ironies in the fire of desire’. Wolfson, *Borderlines*, p. 219. My reading relies on a similar belief that self-consciousness is ever present throughout *Sleep and Poetry*, but I attribute this to Keats preparing himself for the exploratory poetics of *Endymion*. [↑](#footnote-ref-615)
616. Jarvis, ‘Why rhyme pleases’, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-616)
617. Jarvis, ‘Why rhyme pleases’, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-617)
618. Unsigned review, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-618)
619. Unsigned review, *London Magazine* (Baldwin’s) (April 1820), ii, 380-9, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 133-48 (p. 147). [↑](#footnote-ref-619)
620. Keach writes that Keats ‘allows himself to be led (and also misled) by the rhyme as it generates a need for connection and development, as it provokes and then gives unexpected shape to figurative elaborations’. Keach, ‘Cockney Couplets’, 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-620)
621. Bloom, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-621)
622. G. M. Matthews suggests that Byron’s ‘socio-sexual revulsion’ towards Keats’s poetry was motivated by issues of class: ‘it was more or less accepted— since Crabbe and Wordsworth had insisted on it— that the domestic emotions of the lower classes were a fit subject for poetry; but that a poet of the lower classes should play with *erotic* emotions was insufferable, unless these were expressed in a straightforward peasant dialect, as with Burns or Clare’. G. M. Matthews, ‘Introduction’, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 1-37 (p. 35). [↑](#footnote-ref-622)
623. Byron, Letter to John Murray, 9 November 1820, in *BLJ*, VII, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-623)
624. John Jones, *John Keats’s Dream of Truth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), p. 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-624)
625. John Creaser, ‘Rhymes, Rhyme and Rhyming’, *Essays in Criticism*, 62.4 (2012), 438-60 (p. 445). [↑](#footnote-ref-625)
626. Creaser, p. 453. [↑](#footnote-ref-626)
627. Marjorie Levinson, *Keats’s Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988),pp. 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-627)
628. Levinson, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-628)
629. Levinson, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-629)
630. Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1974),p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-630)
631. Ricks, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-631)
632. Levinson, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-632)
633. *BLJ*, VII, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-633)
634. Ricks, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-634)
635. *BLJ*, VII, 225; Levinson, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-635)
636. Ricks, p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-636)
637. Ricks, p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-637)
638. I echo Ricks’s suggestion that ‘embarrassment, erotic feeling, and poetic creativity fertilise each other’ in Keats’s poetry. Ricks, p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-638)
639. *BLJ*, VII, 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-639)
640. ‘Especially troublesome to critics seeking clues to some pervasive unifying principle [for the poem] is the whole of Book III, which deals exclusively with the Glaucus myth (as transfigured by Keats) and Endymion’s part in it. This episode is generally interpreted as an exemplification of the “friendship theme” introduced in Book I. But if so, it has left most critics dissastisfied: the “example” comprising some one thousand lines is obviously out of proportion to its importance; its induction is irrelevant; but mainly, the incidents themselves cannot be justified in any reasonable explanation’. William Garrett, ‘The Glaucus Episode: An Interpretation of Book III of *Endymion*’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 27 (1978), 23-34 (p. 24). John Barnard suggests that Book III shows Endymion ‘progressively learning to sympathise with the sufferings of others’. Barnard, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-640)
641. Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-641)
642. Keats, Letter to J. A. Hessey, 8 October 1818, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 374. [↑](#footnote-ref-642)
643. Karen Swann, ‘Endymion’s beautiful dreamers’, in *Cambridge Companion to Keats*, pp. 20-36 (p. 27). [↑](#footnote-ref-643)
644. My reading concurs with Theresa M. Kelley’s, who sees the cloak as ‘graphically display[ing] evidence of Circe’s mesmerising power over her victims, and the way ekphrasis can become potent and risky magic’. Theresa M. Kelley, ‘Keats and “Ekphrasis”’, in *Cambridge Companion to Keats*, pp. 170-185 (p. 176). [↑](#footnote-ref-644)
645. Nicola Trott suggests that the cloak is ‘surely a metaphor for [Keats’s] own art—a catalogue-epic of extreme fluidity and inclusiveness’. Trott, p. 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-645)
646. Unsigned review, in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-646)
647. Swann, p. 26. See also Vincent Newey, ‘Keats, history and the poets’, in *Keats and History*, pp. 165-93 (p. 174). [↑](#footnote-ref-647)
648. William Wordsworth, ‘Resolution and Independence’, in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), pp. 260-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-648)
649. ‘The passage casts [*Endymion*] as a repository of poetic “beauties” (to draw on the language of nineteenth-century reviewing), and our reading experience as a string of breathless encounters with rows on rows of the alluring, docile dead, each with the face of an Adonis, a Hyacinth, a Ganymede, an Endymion, each poised in anticipation of our animating backward glance’. Swann, p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-649)
650. Hunt, ‘Preface to *Rimini*’, p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-650)
651. Swann, pp. 26-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-651)
652. Bloom, p. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-652)
653. Hunt, ‘Preface to *Rimini*’, p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-653)
654. Hunt, ‘Preface’ to *Rimini*’, p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-654)
655. Jarvis, ‘Why rhyme pleases’, pp. 37-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-655)
656. Keats, Letter to B. R. Haydon, 10, 11 May 1817, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-656)
657. Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA & London: The Belknap Press, Harvard UP, 1983), p. 292). [↑](#footnote-ref-657)
658. Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse, 1790-1810* (Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-658)
659. The phrase ‘capable poethood’ is taken from Daniel Hughes, ‘Prometheus Made Capable Poet in Act One of *Prometheus Unbound*’, *Studies in Romanticism*,17.1 (1978), 3-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-659)
660. Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 8 October 1817, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-660)
661. In this sense the poem functions similarly to Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*, which likewise treats the concept of revolution out of time. [↑](#footnote-ref-661)
662. Harold Bloom, ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’, in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Norton, 1970), pp. 3-23 (p. 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-662)
663. Bloom, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-663)
664. ‘The Romance revival, by its intensity and by the popularity of the new poetry that accompanied it, has marked the period from 1790 to 1825 indelibly with its name. Yet, the truly amazing phenomenon during this time is the proliferation of epics in England, which is unique in the history of Western literature. If we are inclined to smile at the pretensions of a culture that anticipated several epics every year, we perhaps testify less to our taste than to our own shift in values and lowered expectations. Every major poet planned an epic (though not all were executed) and minor bards issued them in profusion’. Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford UP, 1986), p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-664)
665. Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse, 1790-1810* (Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-665)
666. Tucker, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-666)
667. Keats, Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14, 16, 21, 24, 31 October 1818, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-667)
668. Michael O’Neill, ‘Writing and history in the *Hyperions*’, in *Keats and History*, ed. by Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), pp. 143-164 (p. 153). [↑](#footnote-ref-668)
669. Jack Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline, and Other Essays on Keats’s Poems* (Chicago, IL & London: University of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 47-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-669)
670. In a lecture given in 1818, G. W. F. Hegel argues that the goal of the epic is to provide an objective realisation of a universal world view: ‘The rounding-off and the finished shape of the epic lies not only in the particular content of the specific action but just as much in the entirety of the world-view, the objective realization of which the epic undertakes to describe; and the unity of the epic is in fact only perfect when there is brought before us in all their entirety not only the particular action as a closed whole in itself but also, in the course of the action, the total world within the entire circumference of which it moves.’ G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*: *Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. by T.M. Knox, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II, 1090. [↑](#footnote-ref-670)
671. Keats discusses Wordsworth’s poetry in a letter to Reynolds, stating that ‘we hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us’. Keats, Letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3 February 1818, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-671)
672. Curran, p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-672)
673. Curran, p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-673)
674. ‘It is a commonplace that Romantic epic poems take the poetic self as their focus. [Blake’s] *Milton* and [Wordsworth’s] *The Prelude* certainly do so, but we misunderstand them if we take this self-centredness as indicating a radically subjective orientation that somehow swept into hegemonic power with the new century’. Tucker, p. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-674)
675. Vincent Newey briefly discusses Keats’s use of ‘long distance shots’ and telescopic shifts in focus as a means of heightening suspense, but I view such a technique as evincing the text’s movement in and out of subjectivity: ‘The vast scene telescopes to the detail of how “the Naiad ‘mid her reeds/ Press’d her cold finger closer to her lips” (13-14); elsewhere such fateful suspense is conveyed by long-distance shots, such as the dying splendour of Hyperion portrayed as “a vast shade/ In midst of his own brightness” (2. 372-73)’.Vincent Newey, ‘*Hyperion*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and Keats’s epic ambitions’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), pp. 69-85 (p. 75). [↑](#footnote-ref-675)
676. Edward E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1963), p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-676)
677. Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-677)
678. Stuart Curran describes the Keatsian sonnet as a vehicle for conflict: ‘Virtually all of Keats’s mature sonnets centre on psychological confrontation in which he is simultaneously drawn forth in attraction or admiration and repelled by his sense of the limitations and constraints of his existence. Wordsworth plays over such materials so as to comprehend a dialectical rhythm within his unifying sensibility, not so much absorbing them into the egotistical sublime as realizing the objective intensities of what Keats called negative capability; but Keats’s major sonnets assert a raw tension between their contraries’. Curran, pp. 52-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-678)
679. Heather Dubrow notes the sonnet’s shifts from ‘apparently internalized meditation to what is indubitably interchange between two voices or even among several. […] Sonnets often exemplify discursive possibilities that bridge the internal and address a single person, the beloved; for example, some critics have suggested the letter as a model for how many sonnets work. […] On the other end of the spectrum from that internalized reflection, some sonnets, especially political ones, are clearly public address rather than private reflection’. Heather Dubrow, ‘The sonnet and the lyrical mode’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, ed. by A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge & New York, NY: Cambridge UP, 2011), pp. 25-45 (p. 39). [↑](#footnote-ref-679)
680. Discussing the affinities between the sonnet and the lyric, Dubrow highlights their shared commitment to subjective thought: ‘if one adopts the common definition of a mode as an overarching and transhistorical category encompassing many genres, surely the sonnet is not merely an instance but also a textbook example, even a prototype, of the lyric mode. Lyric is, for example, […] frequently represented as the genre of internal and individualized emotions, and the principal subject traditionally associated with the sonnet is love’. Dubrow, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-680)
681. Paul Sherwin, ‘Dying into Life: Keats’s Struggle with Milton in *Hyperion*’, *PMLA*, 93.3 (1978), 383-94 (p. 384). [↑](#footnote-ref-681)
682. Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca, NY & London: Cornell UP, 1986), p. 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-682)
683. Wolfson, p. 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-683)
684. Geoffrey Hartman sees an impulse towards lyric in Keats’s willingness to explore the psychological states of his characters: ‘If Wordsworth wrote “lyrical ballads”, that is, ballads that interest us not because of thrilling adventure or spooky episodes but because of the character or psyche of the persons they depict, Keats can write “lyrical epic”’. Geoffrey H. Hartman, ‘Spectral Symbolism and the Authorial Self: An Approach to Keats’s *Hyperion*’, *Essays in Criticism*, 24.1 (1974), 1-19 (p. 4). However, this chapter contends that the poem, when shifting between objectivity and the psyche of its characters, is actually moving in and out of Keats’s own subjectivity. [↑](#footnote-ref-684)
685. This phrase is taken from the title of W. Jackson Bate’s chapter on *Hyperion* in his biography of Keats; see W. Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1963), pp. 388-417. [↑](#footnote-ref-685)
686. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick lists scenes of ‘sleeplike and deathlike states’ and ‘subterranean spaces and live burial’ amongst her summary of typical Gothic conventions, and also argues that in Gothic works, the self is often ‘massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access’. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York, NY: Methuen, 1986), p. 9n & 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-686)
687. Vincent Newey calls Saturn ‘a personification of Wordsworth in the aspect in which Keats did not warm to him: ‘the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime’. Newey, p. 77. Yet the latent self-portraiture of the speech also reflects Keats’s desperation to craft a successful epic. [↑](#footnote-ref-687)
688. Andrew Bennett argues that the trope of negation that opens *Hyperion* represents ‘a negation of *Endymion*’ and ‘a response to the critical reception of that poem’. Bennett, p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-688)
689. Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 8 October 1817, in *Letters of* Keats, I, 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-689)
690. Bostetter, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-690)
691. Bloom, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-691)
692. Keats, Letter to C. W. Dilke, 20, 21 September 1818, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 369. [↑](#footnote-ref-692)
693. Walter Jackson Bate outlines the relevant contextual background, stressing the contemporaneity of Tom’s illness and the composition of *Hyperion*. Bate, pp. 363-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-693)
694. Nicola Trott, ‘Keats and the prison house of history’, in *Keats and History*, pp. 262-79 (p. 268). [↑](#footnote-ref-694)
695. ‘Ever since the later seventeenth century the task of writing any long poem in English, not to mention epic, had been rendered formidable if not insuperable by the overriding example of *Paradise Lost*, a poem that in its mastery of structure, symbol, and the whole mythos of the classical world as well as that of Christianity had developed a form and a coherence beyond which, for sheer effectiveness, it seemed impossible to proceed’. Stuart Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1973), p. 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-695)
696. Bate describes such sound patterning as typical of this stage of Keats’s career: ‘Beginning with *Hyperion*, and continuing through the odes of the following May, we also find Keats putting into practice a theory of assonance and of other forms of vowel interplay about which he had been thinking for a year or more’. Bate, p. 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-696)
697. Geoffrey H. Hartman, emphasising the divergence of Book III from those that precede it, suggests that in *Hyperion*, ‘not only are we in an atmosphere where mankind plays no formal role, but the poet, almost without exception, excludes himself till the third book. The style of that book constitutes a clear break and anticipates *The Fall of Hyperion*, where the poet enters immediately in his own person as a Dantesque dreamvoyager’. Hartman, p. 5. While a kind of stylistic break is indeed overt, as I will demonstrate, I contend that self-portraiture pervades the text and is not consigned to Book III alone. [↑](#footnote-ref-697)
698. Bloom, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-698)
699. John Keats, ‘Notes on Milton’s *Paradise Lost*’, in *The Complete Works of John Keats*, ed. by Harry Buxton Forman, 5 vols (Glasgow: Gowans and Gray, 1900), III, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-699)
700. O’Neill, ‘Writing and history in the Hyperions’, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-700)
701. Newey, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-701)
702. Keats, Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 17, 18, 20, 21, 24, 25, 27 September 1819, in *Letters of Keats*, II, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-702)
703. Helen Vendler proposes that ‘the language of Sensation did not seem adequate to Keats as a vehicle either for tragedy or for heroism. His powerful association of the language of Sensation with the language of lyric led him to think that maturity of mind would have to entail a forsaking of lyric for the epic or dramatic (following the ardors rather than the pleasures of verse, after the manner of Milton)’. Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard UP, 1983), p. 151. *Hyperion* shows Keats questioning this belief, considering the merits of ‘the language of sensation’ and its suitability to epic poetry. [↑](#footnote-ref-703)
704. Bostetter, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-704)
705. In a letter to Haydon Keats comments that ‘In *Endymion* I think you may have many bits of the deep and sentimental cast—the nature of *Hyperion* will lead me to treat it in a more naked and grecian Manner’. Yet Book III increasingly moves away from treating its subject in a ‘naked’ manner. Keats, Letter to B. R. Haydon, 23 January 1818, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-705)
706. Wolfson, p. 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-706)
707. For a reprinting of the relevant manuscript, see Susan J. Wolfson, *Reading John Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-707)
708. Keats is, as O’Neill suggests, ‘a poet of recoil upon the self, of dissatisfaction with previous (and indeed current) achievements’. Michael O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford, Clarendon Press: 1997)*,* p. 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-708)
709. Mark Sandy observes that both Hyperion poems are generally understood ‘as curtailed by inherent structural weaknesses in their poetic design and sensibility’. Mark Sandy, *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-709)
710. ‘In Greek myth, Silenus represented the spirit of wild life in a creature half-man, half-animal in form. […] He is sometimes represented as Dionysus’ tutor, or depicted in the train of Dionysus, making music or getting drunk’. M. C. Howatson, *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), p. 524. [↑](#footnote-ref-710)
711. Keats, Letter to B. R. Haydon, 23 January 1818, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-711)
712. ‘For all [of *The Fall*’s] pretensions to epic narrative, and for all its debt to Spenser, Milton, and Dante, its import is lyric’. Vendler, p. 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-712)
713. Keats, Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 17, 18, 20, 21, 24, 25, 27 September 1819, in *Letters of Keats*, II, 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-713)
714. ‘There were too many Miltonic inversions in it’, Keats explained to J. H. Reynolds, outlining his reasons for abandoning *The Fall*. Keats, Letter to J. H. Reynolds, 21 September 1819, in *Letters of Keats*, II, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-714)
715. Hughes, pp. 3-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-715)
716. Jonathon Shears, *The Romantic Legacy of Paradise Lost* (Surrey & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), p. 176.

     The poem’s belatedness is often considered specifically in terms of Keats’s indebtedness to Milton; for example, see Stuart Sperry, ‘Keats, Milton and *The Fall of Hyperion*’, *PMLA*,77.1 (1962), 77-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-716)
717. ‘Throughout the induction the dreamer, like Dante in the *Purgatorio*, is required to make repeated ascents by means of steps, while in her role Moneta resembles Virgil and later Beatrice. At the climax of the fragment Moneta parts her veil just as, in canto thirty-one of the *Purgatorio*, Beatrice reveals herself to Dante. These and other changes have been sufficient to persuade many critics that in *The Fall* Keats was rejecting Milton in order to embrace Dante as his new master.’ Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, p. 313. However, Sperry also asserts that this supposition, despite the poem’s ‘important debt to Dante’s quest for higher vision’, is ‘at best a half-truth’, an observation that I echo. To consider *The Fall* and *Hyperion* in terms of a binary between epic and lyric, or in this case between Miltonic epic and Dantescan dream vision, is to simplify the fractious intertwinement of the two texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-717)
718. Sperry aptly refers to ‘the balance Keats had to strike between [Moneta’s] role of interrogator and judge on the one hand and intercessor and redeemer on the other’. Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, p. 326. [↑](#footnote-ref-718)
719. ‘For the supposedly objective truths of epic tradition Keats substitutes the mode insinuated upon the genre by Dante, the dream vision, which forestalls distance and accentuates the ways in which truths are perceived and ordered within the mind.’ Curran, p. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-719)
720. Bloom, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-720)
721. Douglas Bush uses this term in John Keats, *Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. by Douglas Bush (Boston, MA; Riverside Editions, 1959), p. 358 (line 331 n.). [↑](#footnote-ref-721)
722. Newey, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-722)
723. Bennett, p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-723)
724. Patricia Meyer Spacks emphasises the ambiguity of ‘vision’ as both a term and a concept, with the word denoting the perception of visible reality through the faculty of sight but also describing the kind of ‘perceptual expansion’ enabled by visionary experiences such as dreams, informs the uncertain status of the poet’s act of ‘seeing’. Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Poetry of Vision: Five Eighteenth-Century Poets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1967), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-724)
725. Bennett, p. 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-725)
726. Wolfson, *Reading John Keats*, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-726)
727. Bostetter, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-727)
728. Byron, Letter to Annabella Milbanke, 6 September 1813, in *BLJ*, III, 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-728)
729. Byron, ‘Journal: 22 November 1813’, *BLJ*, III, 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-729)
730. Relevant here is Byron’s renowned distrust of system, evident in the poet’s declaration that ‘when a man speaks of system, his case is hopeless’. This thesis’s formulation of quest as a mode owes, in part, to Byron’s rejection of any intellectual straitjacket. His suspicion chimes with the way Shelley and Keats, too, consider quest as a mode conducive to generic, formal, and intellectual expansiveness, rather than a ‘system’ of strictly delineated formal or generic conventions. See Byron, Letter to Thomas Moore, 1 June 1818, in *BLJ*, VI, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-730)
731. This point refutes Thomas McFarland’s declaration that ‘the intellectual relationship of Coleridge and Wordsworth has scarcely any cultural counterpart. It is almost impossible to bring to mind any other two figures, so important each in his own right, but also dependent the one upon the other during his richest intellectual years’. As studies by Charles Robinson and William Dean Brewer testify, the connection between Byron and Shelley reveals a similar blend of dependence and autonomy. This thesis’s emphasis on quest extends this formulation to include the poetry of Keats, too, contending that Byron, Shelley, and Keats are, in their use of the questing mode, at once complementary and strikingly singular poets. Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1981), p. 56. See also Charles E. Robinson, *Shelley and Byron: The Snake and Eagle Wreathed in Fight* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) and William D. Brewer, *The Shelley-Byron Conversation* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-731)
732. Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York, NY & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-732)
733. Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-733)
734. A significant influence for this idea is Jerrold Hogle’s reading of Shelley’s poetry and prose. In Hogle’s own terms, his study ‘reveals the fundamental logic of a mobile process—what I will call—transference, a ceaseless transition between elements of thought—which has been suppressed in the most accepted understandings of the Shelley canon’. Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley’s Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York, NY & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), p. vii. [↑](#footnote-ref-734)
735. For a discussion of Byron’s privileging of mobility, see Jerome J. McGann, ‘Mobility and the poetics of historical ventriloquism’, in Jerome J. McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. by James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 36-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-735)
736. This idea grows out of a belief that John Barnard’s understanding of Keats is also relevant to the quest poetry of Shelley and Byron; Barnard states that ‘in both his speculations and his poetry Keats’s mode is essentially exploratory’. John Barnard, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), p. 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-736)
737. Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 8 October 1817, in *Letters of Keats*, I, 169-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-737)
738. Harold Bloom, ‘The Internalization of Quest-Romance’, in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Norton, 1970), pp. 3-23 (p. 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-738)
739. Herbert Tucker, *Epic*: *Britain’s Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-739)
740. For discussion of the Romantic fragment poem that has influenced my readings, see Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-740)
741. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-741)
742. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 6. My understanding of the self-consciousness of these poets’s quests is indebted to Michael O’Neill’s claim that ‘poetic self-consciousness is rarely, if ever, narcissistic in [Romantic poetry] and often accompanies a sharpened alertness to experience’. Michael O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford, Clarendon Press: 1997)*,* p. xv. [↑](#footnote-ref-742)
743. As Michael O’Neill puts it, Keats is ‘a poet of recoil upon the self, of dissatisfaction with previous (and indeed current) achievements’. O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem,* p. 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-743)
744. Shelley, Letter to Leigh Hunt, 15 August 1819, in *Letters of PBS*, II. 109. [↑](#footnote-ref-744)
745. Bloom, ‘Internalization’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-745)
746. For an analysis that affirms the centrality of these terms to Shelley’s poetics, see Daniel Hughes, ‘Kindling and Dwindling: The Poetic Process in Shelley’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 13 (1964), 13-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-746)