

Faculty of English

Communication with the Other World
in
Romantic Poetry

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Declaration

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the relevant Degree Committee.

Communication with the Other World in Romantic Poetry

Greta Colombani

Abstract

From the godly Cynthia in Keats's *Endymion* to the Polar Spirit and his fellow demons in Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', from P.B. Shelley's fairy in 'Queen Mab' to Francesca's ghost in Byron's 'The Siege of Corinth', Romantic poetry is populated – or rather haunted – by supernatural beings coming into contact and often conversing with humans. In doing so, earthly and unearthly interlocutors are faced with the pressing problem of how to communicate across the seemingly unbridgeable distance between their metaphysical dimensions. How can such distance be overcome and messages conveyed over the chasm separating different worlds? How can one effectively reach out to a being that is essentially other from them? And what does it mean to come into contact and commune with otherworldliness? These are some of the main questions that Romantic poets address in their depictions of supernatural encounters and that are at heart of my research.

My dissertation looks at communication with the Other World in the poetry of four major Romantic authors both within and without the traditional canon: Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, John Keats, and Felicia Hemans. It is situated at the intersection of two recent critical trends – a renewed interest in the supernatural aspects of Romanticism on the one hand, Romantic media studies on the other – and focuses on the frequent and meaningful, though so far overlooked, intertwining of these two themes – otherworldliness and communication – in Romantic poems.

My research shows how, in Romantic representations, communication with the Other World acts as a magnifying glass that brings the challenges of ordinary communication in negotiating the gap between self and other to the extreme, providing illuminating insights on the authors' views concerning the possibilities, modalities, and limits of communication. The Romantic period, which follows the eighteenth-century craze for conversation and precedes the advent of telegraphy and Spiritualism, proves a uniquely fascinating moment of transition in conceptualisations of communication, and poetry most suited to its exploration as a particularly important and problematic communicative medium of the time. Envisioning forms of contact across the gulf of Otherness turns out to be a way for the four poets under study to express their aspirations and anxieties about communicating at a distance and in non-informational ways but also about poetry itself, the otherness of its source and language, and how to communicate with an audience that was perceived as increasingly distant.

In order to account for the specific issues pertaining to poetical depictions of otherworldly communication, I have recourse to concepts from linguistics and communication theory (in particular, the multifaceted notion of phatic speech) and set them in dialogue with poetic and lyric theory. By doing so, and by simultaneously paying close attention to the formal aspects of the texts, I not only aim to outline new ways of applying communication theory to the study of poetry, but I will also show how poetry is not just passively illuminated by linguistics. Rather, the former often resists and problematises the assumptions and demands of the latter by portraying instances of communication with Otherness that elude its strict parameters and inhabit a suspended, ever-shifting domain of (im)possibilities only afforded by poetry.

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Introduction

‘However one maps “Romanticism”’, Susan Wolfson claims in *Romantic Shades and Shadows* (2018), ‘the challenge would be to avert from its phantoms, shades and specters’.¹ The remarkable prominence of ghosts and unearthly entities in Romantic poetry is reiterated in equally strong terms by Dale Townshend, who, in his review of Wolfson’s book, argues that ‘[t]o read Romanticism is inevitably to engage with the world of spirits’.² Even a superficial appraisal of Romantic literature reveals that their assessments are right and that poems from the period are crowded with – or rather, haunted by – beings from another world. From the Gothic ghosts of Anne Bannerman’s ballads to Coleridge’s depictions of Death, demons, and spectral voices, from the fairies and phantoms of Shelley’s poems and dramas to the spirits, vampires, and devils of those of Byron, from the supernatural snake women of L.E. Landon and Keats to the array of gods, goddesses, and nymphs populating the latter’s mythological works, the otherworldly is a pervasive presence in the writings of Romantic poets. One might go as far as to call it a defining presence, as Marc Redfield does by asserting that ‘[f]or a text to count as Romantic it sometimes seems a rule that there be a haunting at the heart of it’ and that ‘[w]illingly or not, Romantic criticism has constantly had to answer to specters’.³ This last statement, however, does not entirely hold true. Despite their quantitative and qualitative relevance, critics have seldom devoted special and extensive attention to the supernatural elements in Romantic poetry: they may have been unable to avoid Romantic spectres but generally refrained from truly answering to them.

The birth of Romanticism was chronologically concomitant with a ‘renascent interest in popular occult beliefs towards the end of the eighteenth century’ and the contemporary ‘rise of supernatural fiction’, to use Emma Clery’s phrase, most notably in the form of the Gothic genre. Yet, its participation in this revival of supernaturalism has received less consideration than one would expect, especially since the last few decades of the twentieth century.⁴ Arguing for a re-enchantment of Romanticism in his edited volume *Byron’s Ghosts: The Spectral, the Spiritual and the Supernatural* (2013), Gavin Hopps notes the oddity of ‘how the immaterial came to be quarantined and discredited in a field where once the spiritual, the ideal and the transcendent were central’ and ascribes this discredit to a ‘dominant materialist consensus in Romantic studies’.⁵ According to him,

¹ Susan J. Wolfson, *Romantic Shades and Shadows* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), p. 35.

² Dale Townshend, ‘Romantic Necromancy: Reading and Writing as Ghost-Seeing’, *Criticism*, 62.3 (2020), 485–89 (p. 485).

³ Marc Redfield, ‘Spectral Romanticisms’, *European Romantic Review*, 9.2 (1998), 271–73 (pp. 272, 273).

⁴ Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Culture, 1736-1951* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 77. See Emma J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁵ Gavin Hopps, ‘Introduction: The Re-Enchantment of Romanticism’, in *Byron’s Ghosts: The Spectral, the Spiritual and the Supernatural*, ed. by Gavin Hopps (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 1–29 (p. 9).

Jerome McGann's *The Romantic Ideology* (1983) was the main proponent of this exclusionary critical tendency to dismiss *a priori* any Romantic attempt to move beyond the material reality of this world as 'illusion, projection or escapism'.⁶ A similar stance is adopted by Wolfson, who also identifies McGann's influential book as responsible for defining a 'discursive regime' to which her investigation of 'phantasmic Romanticism' is a response.⁷ Hopps and Wolfson are at the forefront of a newly emerging approach to Romantic poetry which distances itself from McGann-inspired materialism and takes exception to a certain intellectual diffidence towards the supernatural that has long characterised literary studies more broadly.

As Andrew Bennett points out while wondering at the reason why spirits are hardly discussed in the vast secondary literature on Shelley in spite of their ubiquitous presence in his works, 'ghosts are an academic scandal'.⁸ Ghosts are often a source of bafflement and embarrassment for critics, even more so when they exceed the delimitations of designated genres and tropes, as is the case for 'Romantic phantoms' who, as highlighted by Redfield, 'by no means confine themselves to conventionally supernatural haunts' or to the standard machinery of Gothic literature.⁹ They transgress boundaries, as spirits are famed to do, invading texts that are usually perceived to belong to a higher, more serious literature, which ghosts have little to do with and to say about – or so it was generally thought until recent times.¹⁰ The renewed interest in the supernatural dimension of Romanticism that has gained ground in the last decades is, in fact, part of a wider movement in criticism that Hopps calls 'spectral turn' and that proposes to finally do justice to the importance, current relevance, and rich potentialities of the ghostly and unearthly.¹¹

My research is stimulated by and in dialogue with this recent trend in Romantic scholarship (and beyond) but from a different perspective. Though I have repeatedly referred to the broad category of the supernatural, all the studies mentioned so far share a conspicuous narrower focus on phantoms and spectrality. Writing in the 1998 special issue of the *European Romantic Review* on 'Romanticism and its Others', one of the earliest manifestations of this critical turn, Redfield coins the definition 'Spectral Romanticisms' to indicate the common subject of three articles by Karen Swann, Jerrold Hogle, and Laura Quinney that look at various forms of haunting in Romantic texts.¹² In his edited

⁶ *Byron's Ghosts: The Spectral, the Spiritual and the Supernatural*, ed. by Gavin Hopps (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 10.

⁷ Wolfson, *Romantic Shades and Shadows*, pp. 4, 23.

⁸ Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 171.

⁹ Redfield, p. 272.

¹⁰ Peter Cochran, for example, claims that '[s]o-called "Gothic" is traditionally dismissed as a poor relation to so-called "Romanticism"' (Peter Cochran, 'Byron Reads and Rewrites Gothic', in *The Gothic Byron*, ed. by Peter Cochran [Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009], pp. 1–78 [p. 1]).

¹¹ Hopps, 'Introduction', p. 2.

¹² See Karen Swann, 'The Strange Time of Reading', *European Romantic Review*, 9.2 (1998), 275–82; Jerrold E. Hogle, 'The Gothic Ghost as Counterfeit and Its Haunting of Romanticism: The Case of "Frost at Midnight"', *European Romantic Review*, 9.2 (1998), 283–92; Laura Quinney, 'Wordsworth's Ghosts and the Model of the Mind', *European*

volume, Hopps singles out Byron's ghosts as part of a revaluation and 'rethinking of the immaterial', and a similar preoccupation with the phantasmatic is shown by Mark Sandy, who has investigated the spectral presences in Wordsworth's poetry and is now extending his scrutiny to those of Romanticism overall.¹³ Monika Lee argues for a re-examination of the 'ubiquitous' supernatural elements in Shelley's poetry as something more than 'mere decorative motifs' but, though she is among the very few critics to tackle the specific theme of 'dialogue', it is only with disembodied 'ghosts or spirits'.¹⁴ The 'conceit of phantoms' is even at the centre of Wolfson's book, which does not deal with literal apparitions but with 'spectral linguistic agencies', that is, moments in which the textures of writing are perturbed by some *other* force manifesting itself in language, such as 'structural ruptures, disturbances of syntax and grammar, skewed tracks of argument or narrative'.¹⁵ While the study of Romantic spectrality has been and continues to be a fruitful and illuminating line of inquiry, I will approach the Romantic treatment of what lies beyond from a different angle by concentrating on the idea of the Other World.

As Sasha Handley rightly maintains, 'the category of the supernatural must itself be broken down to appreciate the important differences between the phenomena generally included under this heading'.¹⁶ The otherworldly defines a vital subcategory that is characterised by being '[o]f or relating to a world other than the actual or material' (*OED*). Not all supernatural entities featured in Romantic poetry belong to a different dimension or plane of existence and, for example, may instead appear to be 'deeply interfused' (to use Wordsworth's words) with our own world and reality.¹⁷ Some, however, significantly do, though telling the difference is not always easy and there is often a certain degree of ambiguity. The present study aims to shed light on the specific and crucial questions raised by otherworldliness, questions that go unnoticed when adopting the general category of the supernatural or the restricted one of the ghostly. Compared to the latter, the otherworldly allows for the consideration of a more encompassing set of beings, which includes most spirits and phantoms but

Romantic Review, 9.2 (1998), 293–301; and their introduction: Robert Alexander and others, 'Alterity in the Discourses of Romanticism', *European Romantic Review*, 9.2 (1998), 149–60.

¹³ Hopps, *Byron's Ghosts*, p. 10. See Mark Sandy, "'Ghostly Language": Spectral Presences and Subjectivity in Wordsworth's *Salisbury Plain Poems*', in *Romanticism and Philosophy: Thinking with Literature*, ed. by Sophie Laniel-Musitelli and Thomas Constantinesco (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 60–73; Mark Sandy, "'Strength in What Remains Behind": Wordsworth, Spectral Selves, and the Question of Ageing', in *Ghostly Encounters: Cultural and Imaginary Representations of the Spectral from the Nineteenth Century to the Present*, ed. by Stefano Cracolici and Mark Sandy (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 13–24. Sandy is currently working on a study titled *Romantic and Victorian Spectral Presences: From Wordsworth to the Brownings*.

¹⁴ Monika H. Lee, "'Let Me Converse with Spirits": Haunting Interactions in P.B. Shelley's Disembodied Dialogues', in *Romantic Dialogues and Afterlives*, ed. by Anna Paluchowska-Messing and Monika Coghen (La Vergne: Jagiellonian University Press, 2021), pp. 103–15 (pp. 104, 106).

¹⁵ Wolfson, *Romantic Shades and Shadows*, pp. 2, 35.

¹⁶ Sasha Handley, *Visions of an Unseen World: Ghost Beliefs and Ghost Stories in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), p. 6.

¹⁷ The quote from 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', 97 is taken from William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

also entities that fit more ambiguously with conventional hauntings, thus showing how similar concerns are shared by poems that touch upon conventional supernatural themes to varying extents. At the same time, it brings to the fore different, salient issues even when fully-fledged ghosts are taken into account. An emphasis on spectrality tends to draw attention to the immaterial, the invisible, and the incorporeal, yet these attributes will prove to be far from inevitable in Romantic representations of ghostly visitors from another world, or rather the Other World.

The notion of the Other World needs some further clarification. By using the singular form, I do not mean to imply that all the unearthly beings that will be here studied inhabit the same alternative dimension nor that the Romantic poets under scrutiny share a univocal conception of this other plane of existence. Rather, each poem envisions and engages with its own version of the Other World, offering different interpretations that range from an elusive elsewhere to the abyss of the past to the land of the dead. As the examples suggest, these 'other places' present varying degrees of separation and remoteness from earthly life, which do not necessarily entail an absolute and irreconcilable otherness. While the term *Other World* may evoke the idea of an irremediable disjunction between these two levels, it is employed in this study as functional to foreground the existence of a gap or distance between them which these poems emphasise but in relation to the very possibility of crossing or navigating it. What interests me is precisely what encounters take place across the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between this world and the Other in Romantic poetry and, more specifically, what communication. Though not all the otherworldly beings of Romanticism interact, let alone converse, with humans, a significant number does and, in doing so, is faced with pressing problems: how can the chasm between different metaphysical dimensions be overcome, so that messages might be conveyed over such abyssal distance? How can someone effectively reach out to a being that is essentially other, understand and be understood by them? Fundamentally, what does it mean and entail to communicate with an interlocutor from an-Other world, who appears to be so impossibly remote on so many levels? These questions are at the heart of my research, which explores the recurrence, role, and multifaceted significance of communication with the Other World in poems of the Romantic period. By pointing to the gap that in most cases separates human and supernatural beings, the category of the otherworldly is the most suited to address and examine the specific issues that arise when they communicate with each other, or attempt to.

A resurgent fascination with otherworldly communication is typically associated with the Spiritualist frenzy of the second half of the nineteenth century, yet my investigation of the theme in Romantic poetry will reveal how present and meaningful, though unacknowledged, it was in the imagination and literature of previous decades. In a way, the Romantic age is an even more compelling object of study because it shortly precedes the years when, as Handley points out,

‘[c]ontact with the spirit world’ became ‘subject to strict rules of conduct’ following the spread of Spiritualist practices and beliefs.¹⁸ Romanticism belongs to an earlier moment during which interactions between this world and the Other were coming to be regarded with growing interest but were not so univocally codified. In his insightful history of the idea of communication *Speaking into the Air* (1999), John Durham Peters underlines the dominating influence that the ‘spiritualist tradition’ exerted on conceptualisations not solely of supernatural communications but of communication in general by advancing the enduring ‘proposition that communication happens best when bodies and language are transcended in favor of more ethereal modes of thought transference’.¹⁹ John Guillory makes an analogous point when he observes that ‘the prevalence of the spiritual medium marks a transition from the notion of communication premised on face-to-face exchange to one premised on distance’.²⁰ This ‘revolution’ in the history of communication was produced not only by the advent of Spiritualism but also, more primarily, by ground-breaking innovations in ‘techniques of telecommunication’, first and foremost the telegraph, which made possible unprecedented forms of ‘[s]imultaneity across distances’.²¹

Coming immediately before such momentous changes in human possibilities of communicating at a distance, Romanticism is a key period of transition, when the ideal form of communication did not yet correspond to immediate, remote, disembodied exchange. In Walter Ong’s words, it is a period ‘on the verge of the electronic age’.²² Although the first successful demonstration of Morse’s electromagnetic telegraph dates from 1844, experiments in telegraphy were already underway and some of their implications already discussed at the beginning of the century. According to Yohei Igarashi, ‘Romantic poets knew well the early expectations surrounding quick telegraphic communication across previously unthinkable distances, and they pondered the ramifications’.²³ In *The Connected Condition: Romanticism and the Dream of Communication* (2019), Igarashi goes as far as to claim that ‘major Romantic poets and hallmarks of Romantic poetic style respond to the advent of a modern culture of communication’, the ‘origins’ of whose ‘fantasies’ he locates ‘before the emergence of electronic media technologies in the later nineteenth century’, precisely in the Romantic period.²⁴ This revised timeline is admittedly indebted to Romantic media studies, a recent

¹⁸ Handley, pp. 214, 215.

¹⁹ John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 64.

²⁰ John Guillory, ‘Genesis of the Media Concept’, *Critical Inquiry*, 36.2 (2010), 321–62 (p. 348).

²¹ Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, p. 139.

²² Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 161.

²³ Yohei Igarashi, *The Connected Condition: Romanticism and the Dream of Communication* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 4.

²⁴ Igarashi, pp. 2, 7–8.

paradigm within Romantic scholarship that reclaims the importance of Romanticism for media theory and history.

One of the pioneering works in this expanding subfield is Celeste Langan and Maureen McLane's 'The Medium of Romantic Poetry' (2008), whose main contentions are that 'Romantic poetry is both strikingly illuminated by, and capable of illuminating, our multi-mediated situation' and that 'the study of Romantic *poiesis* – poetic making in its broadest sense – belongs as much to media history as to literary scholarship'.²⁵ *Romantic Mediations* (2016) by Andrew Burkett, another leading proponent of this critical wave, well illustrates its primary concerns by investigating 'the connections between Romantic writers and their texts and the history of media technologies', while also exemplifying another recurring aspect of this approach, that is, a certain tendency to think retroactively.²⁶ Focusing on the years previous to 'the proliferation of new technical media' and to the invention of 'the concept of a medium of communication' itself, both of which are placed by Guillory in the late nineteenth century, Romantic media studies go hand in hand with media archaeology. They tend to start from the consideration of later phenomena to then look back at the Romantic period searching for their incipient manifestations, uncovering 'embryonic and developmental media systems', and even putting Romantic texts in direct dialogue with 'post-Romantic techniques and theories' such as photography and phonography, as Burkett does.²⁷

While they may seem to have little in common, my research shares with Romantic media studies a central attention towards communication in the Romantic period, with an emphasis on communication at a distance. Reaching out to the Other World can, in fact, be regarded as the ultimate act of communication, one that extraordinarily takes place across the widest (im)possible distance and thereby acts as a magnifying glass through which the difficulties and challenges of ordinary communication in negotiating spatial separation, or simply the gap always existing between self and others, are foregrounded by being brought to the extreme. As Peters maintains, communication 'works only through distance and otherness', for even when 'two people are within touching distance they do not escape the gap in any act of discourse between the voice that speaks and the ear that hears'.²⁸ This amplifying potential of otherworldly communication will play a prominent role in the poems under scrutiny, where supernatural interactions will be seen to be consistently equated with

²⁵ Maureen McLane and Celeste Langan, 'The Medium of Romantic Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romantic Poetry*, ed. by James Chandler and Maureen N. McLane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 239–62 (p. 239).

²⁶ Andrew Burkett, *Romantic Mediations: Media Theory and British Romanticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), p. 3.

²⁷ Guillory, p. 321; Burkett, pp. 12, 6. See also J. David Black, *The Politics of Enchantment: Romanticism, Media, and Cultural Studies* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009), p. 4.

²⁸ John Durham Peters, 'The Gaps of Which Communication Is Made', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 11.2 (1994), 117–40 (p. 130).

remote communications and their treatment to provide illuminating insights on the authors' views concerning the possibilities, modalities, and limits of communication at large.

The notion of communication is as much at the heart of this study as that of otherworldliness. With their privileged focus on (tele)communicative media and technologies, Romantic media studies are responsible for fostering new discussion around Romantic figurations of communication, as evidenced by the publication in the last year of various studies looking at related issues both within and without this paradigm, such as Orrin Wang's *Techno-Magism: Media, Mediation, and the Cut of Romanticism* (2022), Jillian Hess's *How Romantics and Victorians Organized Information* (2022), and Eric Reid Lindstrom's *Jane Austen and Other Minds* (2022).²⁹ For this reason, alongside the revival of interest in spectral Romanticism, Romantic media studies constitute the other fundamental coordinate for my research, which is positioned at the intersection of these two recent trends in Romantic scholarship but displays sharp differences from both, differences that are partly determined by their very conjunction.

The main elements of divergence between my work and Romantic media studies depend more or less directly on the basic, and rather obvious, fact that the concept of communication here replaces that of the medium as the focal point. While it is true that media usually have a primarily communicative function, it is also true that they presuppose a very specific and narrow conception of communication. As Ong argues, '[t]hinking of a "medium" of communication or of "media" of communication suggests that communication is a pipeline transfer of units of material called "information" from one place to another', a perspective that 'distorts the act of communication beyond recognition'.³⁰ The shortcomings of a media model of communication are also highlighted by Igarashi, who remarks that '[t]here is the feel of a gross reduction when communication is imagined only as the transfer of information, the shorter and swifter the better'.³¹ In order to avoid such reductions, Igarashi eschews 'the recent discursive preponderance of *media*' and instead 'emphasizes communication' in a way that aligns his rich and insightful book with my research.³²

The present study shares Ong's and Igarashi's reservations, distancing itself from media studies by positing and showing that transferring information does not truly capture or exhaust what happens when communicating. As Igarashi puts it, 'communication seems to, and can, involve so much more: it is endlessly complex, diversely and unpredictably instantiated, often frustrated and

²⁹ Orrin N. C. Wang, *Techno-Magism: Media, Mediation, and the Cut of Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022); Jillian M. Hess, *How Romantics and Victorians Organized Information: Commonplace Books, Scrapbooks, and Albums* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Eric Reid Lindstrom, *Jane Austen and Other Minds: Ordinary Language Philosophy in Literary Fiction*, Cambridge Studies in Romanticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

³⁰ Ong, p. 172.

³¹ Igarashi, p. 2.

³² Igarashi, pp. 13, 14.

frustrating, and yet successful enough, enough of the time'.³³ Unpredictability, frustration, and precarious success are even more typical of exchanges with ghosts and unearthly beings, who seldom tell us what we ask them to, most of the time resist our expectations and demands, and often leave us to wonder whether we were in actual contact with them at all. As will be illustrated, crucial aspects of the supernatural communications portrayed in Romantic poems would be – and have been – missed from considering them exclusively through an informational lens. From that standpoint, some of these interactions would not even qualify as proper communication, only abortive attempts, and as such have been frequently dismissed. I aim to rectify these oversights by embracing a more complex and fluid understanding of what it means to communicate, which does not reduce it to the contents transmitted along the channel of a medium and acknowledges its non-informative dimensions on an even more fundamental level than Igarashi, as will soon become clear.

Refusing to give pre-eminence to media over communication, Igarashi adopts a different method from media archaeology. He is not primarily interested in media technologies and their precursors but, as the subtitle of his book recites, in the Romantic '*dream of communication*' which he defines as 'the powerful fantasy that has driven the modern communications order': the fantasy 'of a transfer of thoughts, feelings, and information between individuals made as efficient as possible'.³⁴ Igarashi aims to survey the 'imaginative horizons of communication', which were especially lively during the Romantic period, given the coeval emergence of imaginable but not yet feasible new communicative possibilities, and are most aptly revealed by the 'imaginative genres' of literature.³⁵ A similar 'imagination-centric approach' is shared by the present study, which reads poetic depictions of otherworldly communication not in light of what was technically or technologically possible at the time but of what was conceived and conceivable.³⁶ In doing so, it discards not only the object but also the proleptic perspective that is typical of media archaeologies. Communication with the Other World is exceptionally intertwined with the realm of the imaginable, as its fantasy of contact across a seemingly unbridgeable metaphysical divide stretches the imagination to extreme possibilities that border on, and are often indistinguishable from, the impossible. It is the stuff of dreams par excellence, but these dreams radically differ from that at the centre of Igarashi's book.

By equating the 'Romantic-poetic dream' of communication with the wish 'for a medium that is so transparent – able to transfer messages with the greatest celerity and clarity – that it is no

³³ Igarashi, p. 2.

³⁴ Igarashi, p. 4.

³⁵ Igarashi, pp. 16, 172.

³⁶ Igarashi, p. 16.

medium', Igarashi falls back into the informational model that he declares to reject.³⁷ The attributes of efficiency, immediacy, and transparency that characterise his definition of the Romantic dream of communication all imply the idea that communicating is, first and foremost, some sort of transfer, regardless of how smooth and swift. Though he acknowledges Romantic authors' attempts at 'ironizing information-centric views of communication', the only alternative that he offers is the reluctance or refusal to communicate at all.³⁸ Foregrounding their experiments with 'unintelligibility, tedium, obscurity, figurativeness, and the like', he interprets them as a way to resist and trouble the dominant ideal of a perfectly efficient communication by clouding the medium.³⁹ Nonetheless, communication remains reduced to what it imparts: either you communicate, that is to say, transmit a message, or you simply do not.

A longing for transparent and instantaneous communication is recognised as a recurring theme of Romantic poetry by several other critics, including Langan and McLane, who identify 'the Romantic poetic phantasy par excellence' with 'the imagination of a pure, noiseless, static-free, perfectly transmitting medium'.⁴⁰ One would expect this Romantic dream of immediacy to be fully expressed and realised in instances of otherworldly interactions, where communication should be more likely to assume disembodied and transcendent forms of easeful transmission, but the poems under study will paint a strikingly different picture. Before introducing what alternative ideas and ideals of communication underpin Romantic depictions of supernatural encounters and are uniquely illuminated by them, however, attention should be paid to what lies at the origins of the widely posited Romantic aspiration for immediacy. So far emphasis has been put on the technological and conceptual developments in the history of communication that follow the Romantic period, but the decades preceding it are worthy of even more careful consideration, not least because they directly shaped the Romantic understanding of communication.

As Igarashi himself points out, 'the impossible ideal of communication in modernity' that is the focus of his work is deeply indebted to the philosophy of John Locke.⁴¹ In his historical account, Peters confirms Locke's importance as 'the author, in some sense, of communication as we know it', insofar as he gave 'the first sustained philosophical use of the term "communication" as a central principle of speech and language'.⁴² Whereas previously *communication* 'mainly referred to physical processes of transmission and metaphysical processes of consubstantiation', Locke was among the first to use the word to indicate the interpersonal exchange of thoughts by means of language. As

³⁷ Igarashi, pp. 13, 16.

³⁸ Igarashi, p. 6.

³⁹ Igarashi, p. 170.

⁴⁰ McLane and Langan, p. 258.

⁴¹ Igarashi, p. 20.

⁴² Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, pp. 80, 63.

highlighted by Peters, the conception of communication that he elaborates in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) has '[s]uccessful transmission' as its main 'criterion': in Locke's own words, '[w]hen a Man speaks to another, it is, that he may be understood; and the end of Speech is, that those Sounds, as Marks, may make known his *Ideas* to the Hearer'.⁴³ This view, which equates communicating verbally with conveying mental contents, is essentially informational and still dominates contemporary understandings of communication. A whole second branch of the word's meaning in the *OED* revolves around 'the imparting or transmission of something', and the mention of *information* recurs in several definitions to specify what is being transmitted.

Coming after Locke's revolution in the conceptualisation of communication, the eighteenth century was dominated by, almost obsessed with, practices and theorisations of verbal exchange, which all clustered around the multifaceted notion of conversation. As Katie Halsey and Jane Slinn underline, '[t]he eighteenth century has long been regarded as an "age of conversation"', during which its conceptual and practical formulation 'arrived at pivotal, and unprecedented, stages in its development'.⁴⁴ Conversation was defined, described, and discussed in countless writings in a vast variety of disciplines and genres, and its exercise was so widespread that many aspired and endeavoured to 'supply much-needed rules'.⁴⁵ The unrivalled importance of conversation in this period is well exemplified by Henry Fielding's claim in his 'Essay on Conversation' (1743) that it is the 'grand Business of our Lives, the Foundation of every Thing, either useful or pleasant'.⁴⁶ The pervasiveness of conversation in eighteenth-century intellectual and social life importantly highlights that Romanticism is a pivotal and uniquely fascinating period in the history of communication not only in view of what comes after. It is a vital transitional moment between two ages that are both remarkably, though differently, dominated by a preoccupation with communication. The conversable worlds of eighteenth-century sociability are as influential as the spiritualist and telegraphic revolution of the second half of the nineteenth century.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the paradigm of sociable conversation had taken new directions and, in several respects, declined. Thanks to the development of designated infrastructures such as the road network and the postal service, the interchange of information widened far beyond the social circles of coffee houses, clubs, and the like. These momentous changes

⁴³ Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, p. 84; John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 405.

⁴⁴ Katie Halsey and Jane Slinn, 'Introduction', in *The Concept and Practice of Conversation in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1688-1848*, ed. by Katie Halsey and Jane Slinn (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp. ix–xxvi (pp. xi, ix).

⁴⁵ Stefan H. Uhlig, 'Improving Talk? The Promises of Conversation', in *The Concept and Practice of Conversation in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1688-1848*, ed. by Katie Halsey and Jane Slinn (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp. 1–19 (p. 12).

⁴⁶ Henry Fielding, 'An Essay on Conversation', in *Miscellanies*, ed. by Henry Knight Miller, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), I, 119–52 (p. 121).

are famously registered by Wordsworth's reference to 'the rapid communication of intelligence' in the 1800 preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* and, retrospectively, by Thomas de Quincey's essay 'The English Mail-Coach, or the Glory of Motion' (1849).⁴⁷ Expectations of as quick and efficient a transmission as possible were reinforced by other concomitant phenomena, notably the standardisation of English, which, as Andrew Elfenbein explains, was governed by the idea that language should primarily be an 'effective vehicle of communication' through which to convey messages in the most clear and perspicuous way.⁴⁸ This view contributed to imposing even stronger informative demands on any form of communication, including the poetry of 'Romantic writers', who 'were the first to confront fully standardized English' and its 'hopes that the doors of communication would be open to all willing to learn an easily accessible set of rules'.⁴⁹ The circulation of words and participation in it, however, expanded so much that the aspiration for far-reaching and open exchange seemed to collapse in on itself by the end of the eighteenth century, as communication progressively withdrew from the social scene and assumed increasingly more private, even solitary modes.

The crumbling of the conversable world by the advent of Romanticism is a critical commonplace. As Jon Mee points out, the conversing communities of the previous century gave way to an individualist retrenchment that displaced 'the messiness of social talk' into figurations of 'idealized reciprocal exchange' and compensated the pervasive sense of isolation by imagining 'higher forms of communion' that were 'able to bypass the muddy mediations of verbal exchange'.⁵⁰ According to Mee, the terms *communication* and *conversation* already imply a similar distinction. He understands the former as evoking 'the authentic matching of minds *en rapport*' and identifies an alternative to this 'tendency towards telepathy' in the latter, which corresponds instead to 'the mundane business of making meanings together in language' and 'always takes place somewhere between located subjects'.⁵¹ Because of their eminently social and mundane implications, the word and notion of conversation are fundamentally remote from the theme of the present study. As Lawrence Klein asserts, the 'substance' of eighteenth-century conversation was 'worldly, urbane things', the very opposite of what is here at stake.⁵² In light of all this, it would be tempting to see Romantic representations of supernatural interactions as the epitome of the communicative turn towards higher, even transcendent forms of communion that is commonly associated with the period.

⁴⁷ William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1800*, ed. by Dahlia Porter and Michael Gamer (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2008), p. 177.

⁴⁸ Andrew Elfenbein, *Romanticism and the Rise of English* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 42.

⁴⁹ Elfenbein, pp. 7, 26.

⁵⁰ Jon J. Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 30, 133, 168.

⁵¹ Mee, p. 2.

⁵² Lawrence E. Klein, 'Liberty, Manners, and Politeness in Early Eighteenth-Century England', *The Historical Journal*, 32.3 (1989), 583–605 (p. 587).

The idea of communication that will emerge from the present study, however, is as far from Mee's notions of non-verbal mental union as from Igarashi's overlapping dream of immediacy.

In the poems under scrutiny, otherworldly communication does not dispense with words or bodies. It does not offer an easy and easeful way of gaining access to someone else's interiority – and if it does, it is at an unsustainable cost. There is no immediate and untroubled transmission between souls or minds, no smooth and unmediated transfer of thoughts. The gap between self and other does not disappear in mutual transparency but rather widens to the point of becoming unfathomable. These texts are far less concerned with the fantasy of collapsing distance than with the problem of navigating and crossing it. In a period when messages were expected to be conveyed as swiftly and effectively as possible, they concentrate on the elusive and perplexing ways in which supernatural beings communicate with us, often without saying anything meaningful or anything at all. In doing so, they do not simply reject coeval imperatives to use language to impart information by choosing not to communicate. Rather, they give life and space to alternative modes of communication that resist informational teleology while making something else happen, something that has to do with being in communion and *rapprochement* but not as telepathic and disembodied forms of perfect understanding. These different modalities have so far gone unnoticed because Romantic depictions of communication have not been observed through the lens that is most appropriate to illuminate their specificities: that of communication theory.

Supernatural communication remains, first and foremost, an act of communication and as such should be approached. But first, a clarification: I will not draw from communication theory to give a unique and exhaustive definition of *communication*. Some general assumptions about communication are conveniently foregrounded by Ong when considering how it differs from media: that it is 'intersubjective' and 'never one-way', for it always 'demands anticipated feedback in order to take place at all', regardless of whether that feedback is ultimately given or not.⁵³ Communication always occurs between more than one person, but other than that, it has been characterised in a variety of ways and attributed a variety of requisites. For the purpose of the present study, communication will not be preliminarily defined in narrower or more univocal terms. I invite the reader to initially rely on their everyday understanding of the word so as to leave enough vagueness for the other meanings and properties that will be mobilised and that all contribute to forming a necessarily multifaceted image of what communicating entails in the poems under scrutiny. Communication is rarely pure and never simple. In order to understand how deeply Romantic poets probe and rethink it by imagining it under the most extreme conditions, it is helpful to measure their representations against what we – and their contemporaries – typically assume(d) and expect(ed) communication to be.

⁵³ Ong, p. 173.

Rather than to pinpoint a definition, communication theory is extremely valuable to frame and address the main questions at the heart of Romantic envisionings of otherworldly communication. As previously mentioned, the most pressing problem that interlocutors belonging to different metaphysical dimensions must face is how to bridge the abyssal distance between them and establish contact, in other words, how to open a functioning communicative channel across the divide separating this world and the Other. I am not using the words *contact* and *channel* generically but in the specialised sense formulated by Roman Jakobson in ‘Metalanguage as a Linguistic Problem’. In this seminal lecture, which he first presented as the Presidential Address at the Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America in 1956, Jakobson famously sets out to identify the six basic functions and associated factors that are constitutive of any act of verbal communication. Among them is ‘contact’, which he defines as ‘a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication’.⁵⁴ The function pertaining to contact is called ‘phatic’ and is typical of ‘messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works (“Hello, do you hear me?”), to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention (“Are you listening?” or in Shakespearian diction, “Lend me your ears!” – and on the other end of the wire “Um-hum!”).’⁵⁵ The phatic function presides over the institution of contact between the interlocutors by establishing and keeping open a communicative channel along which messages can be conveyed. As Guillory puts it, ‘[t]he phatic utterance supposedly has no other content than a query about the success or failure of the channel’.⁵⁶ While the preliminary step of creating the conditions that enable the interlocutors to enter in communication is often unremarkable – and therefore unremarked – in ordinary human communications, it becomes especially challenging and crucial when reaching out to or from the Other World. The central issue of supernatural communication is at its core phatic.

Despite the theoretical significance of this concept, Jakobson’s discussion of it only amounts to the few sentences quoted above. As Dipti Kulkarni points out, he ‘does not specify what he means by these terms and neither is there any elaboration in existing literature’.⁵⁷ Jakobson never explained what prerequisites and conditions are necessary to open a communicative channel between people, and ever since then the notion of contact has been ‘presupposed rather than being explored or

⁵⁴ Roman Jakobson, ‘Metalanguage as a Linguistic Problem’, in *Contributions to Comparative Mythology: Studies in Linguistics and Philology, 1972-1982*, ed. by Stephen Rudy (The Hague: Mouton, 1985), pp. 113–21 (p. 113).

⁵⁵ Jakobson, p. 115.

⁵⁶ Guillory, p. 351.

⁵⁷ Dipti Kulkarni, ‘Exploring Jakobson’s “Phatic Function” in Instant Messaging Interactions’, *Discourse & Communication*, 8.2 (2014), 117–36 (p. 119).

investigated', to use Frank Macke's words.⁵⁸ It is clearly beyond the scope and possibilities of the present study to remedy the shortcomings of how linguists have dealt with – or more often *not* dealt with – the phatic, as this can only be the task of proper linguistic research. Nonetheless, by paying attention to the complications of establishing contact in Romantic depictions of otherworldly communication and to the strategies through which such complications are solved or circumvented, my readings of the poems will foreground many key phatic requirements as well as explore different ways in which they can be fulfilled. The phatic, however, has a wider and deeper relevance for my investigation, which emerges when it is considered in all its acceptations.

As Jakobson himself acknowledges, he is not the first to use the term *phatic*. The word was coined by Bronisław Malinowski in 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages', a supplement to *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923) by C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, where he formulates the notion of *phatic communion*, i.e. 'a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words'.⁵⁹ Malinowski mentions 'inquiries about health, comments on weather, affirmations of some supremely obvious state of things' as prime examples of this way of using language in communication 'not in order to inform, [...] certainly not in order to express any thought' but rather to serve 'the direct aim of binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other'.⁶⁰ Phatic communion undermines longstanding assumptions about what communication is for by defining a way of communicating that has a relational, instead of informative, purpose. As with Jakobson's phatic function, however, phatic communion has remained 'a relatively neglected area in linguistics', and its ground-breaking quality has been accompanied by a surprising dearth of further and more extensive enquiries.⁶¹

A fortunate exception is the work of Vladimir Žegarac, which I cursorily mention because it allows me to make an important point. The examples of phatic utterances that Malinowski gives have been interpreted by some linguists as a more or less exhaustive list, an indication that phatic communion is limited to small talk or, as John Laver puts it, that 'the linguistic tokens used in phatic communion are highly conventional' and 'selected from a finite, small set of possible utterances'.⁶² Žegarac adopts the opposite position, arguing that any utterance can be phatic, for the phatic nature

⁵⁸ Frank J. Macke, *The Experience of Human Communication: Body, Flesh, and Relationship* (Lanham, Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), p. 71.

⁵⁹ Bronisław Malinowski, 'The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages', in *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1946), pp. 296–336 (p. 315).

⁶⁰ Malinowski, pp. 313, 315.

⁶¹ Gunter Senft, 'Phatic Communion', in *Culture and Language Use*, ed. by Gunter Senft, Jan-Ola Östman, and Jef Verschueren (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009), pp. 226–33 (p. 228).

⁶² John Laver, 'Communicative Functions of Phatic Communion', in *Organization of Behavior in Face-to-Face Interaction*, ed. by Adam Kendon, Richard M. Harris, and Mary Ritchie Key (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), pp. 215–38 (p. 221).

of a speech act depends on what is its most relevant component, which in turn depends on the context. Whereas in non-phatic utterances ‘the main relevance lies with information which builds to a greater extent on the meanings of the words used’, that is, with the linguistically conveyed content of the message, in phatic communication the propositional meaning has less relevance than ‘the act of ostension, the fact that somebody has spoken’, in other words, the fact that communication is happening.⁶³ It is this context-bound understanding that will prove most productive for the analysis of poetical representations of communication with the Other World, in which phatic speech plays an important part but seldom takes stereotypical, conventional forms.

What phatic communion means and entails when applied to the poems will be tackled in greater detail in the following chapters, but it is here worth making a few further specifications. Although Malinowski’s focus is on ‘primitive languages’, he makes it clear that his insights have a universal appeal and that, when it comes to phatic communion, ‘we use language exactly as savages do’.⁶⁴ As the use of terms like *primitive* and *savages* indicate, Malinowski’s anthropological and ethnological work is outmoded and problematic under several aspects. It is not this work, however, that is of interest to me. As Gunter Senft maintains, despite appearances, ‘The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages’ is a ‘primarily linguistic paper’ and phatic communion a notion that primarily belongs to linguistics.⁶⁵ Still, Malinowski’s and Jakobson’s ideas may appear dated and bound to a specific moment of intellectual history, be it 1920s anthropology or 1950s structural linguistics. There may seem to be no reason why it should be a valuable tool to study Romantic poetry, and to do so today. The former is one of the main claims of my dissertation and will be made apparent through its unfolding, but the latter will be addressed now.

As a matter of fact, the last few decades have seen an unprecedented revival of interest in phatic language, mostly in relation to digital communication, new media, and social networks.⁶⁶ By prioritising establishing and maintaining relationships over conveying information, these virtual forms of communication have laid such an emphasis on the phatic dimension that the term *phatic*

⁶³ Vladimir Žegarac, ‘Phatic Communication’, in *The Pragmatics Encyclopedia*, ed. by Louise Cummings (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 316–18 (p. 318); Vladimir Žegarac, ‘What Is “Phatic Communication”?’ in *Current Issues in Relevance Theory*, ed. by Villy Rouchota and Andreas H. Jucker (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 327–62 (p. 336).

⁶⁴ Malinowski, pp. 315–16.

⁶⁵ Senft, p. 226.

⁶⁶ As a few examples, see Stine Lomborg, ‘Negotiating Privacy Through Phatic Communication: A Case Study of the Blogging Self’, *Philosophy & Technology*, 25.3 (2012), 415–34; Anne Jerslev and Mette Mortensen, ‘What Is the Self in the Celebrity Selfie? Celebification, Phatic Communication and Performativity’, *Celebrity Studies*, 7.2 (2016), 249–63; Carmen Maíz-Arévalo, ‘“Small Talk Is Not Cheap”: Phatic Computer-Mediated Communication in Intercultural Classes’, *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 30.5 (2017), 432–46; Karina Sofiananda Armaza Faraba, Sumarlam Sumarlam, and Dwi Purnanto, ‘Phatic Communication Politeness of Greeting Arek Culture on Account Instagram: Pragmatic’, *International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding*, 5.4 (2018), 56–63.

technologies was invented.⁶⁷ Christian Licoppea and Zbigniew Smoredab argue that nowadays we live ‘in the regime of “connected presence”’ where ‘phatic communication becomes increasingly important, because simply keeping in touch may be more important than what is said when one actually gets in touch’.⁶⁸ A similar point is made by Vincent Miller, according to whom ‘the rise in prominence of phatic media and communication’ has resulted in a phatic culture where ‘content is not king’ and ‘it is the connection to the other that becomes significant’.⁶⁹ The dominant role played by the phatic in digital communications largely depends on the remote nature of the interactions allowed by these new technologies which ‘extend the human body’s capacity to communicate and act across vast distances’.⁷⁰ When people communicate at a distance, in fact, staying in contact and maintaining a connection become more pressing goals. The phatic function of speech acquires pre-eminence when the institution and preservation of the channel of communication cannot be taken for granted. As Žegarac and Billy Clark point out, ‘phatic interpretations become more likely when the social relationship between the interlocutors is in doubt’.⁷¹ Distance – whether physical or metaphysical – is one of the main factors that can put such relationship in doubt and threaten contact itself. Communication with the Other World presents, in fact, a remarkably similar scenario, where the possibility of a functioning channel and relationship between the participants is even more precarious and, therefore, a phatic use of language likely to be even more critical.

Both Jakobson’s and Malinowski’s concepts of the phatic ultimately define ways of using language in communication that are not primarily functional to the transmission of information. For this reason, they will turn out to be instrumental to elucidating how Romantic poems resist and trouble coeval equations between communication and informative exchange, opening up the possibility that the lack of a clear and meaningful message does not automatically translate into the absence or denial of communication. In doing so, communication theories of phatic speech will provide a descriptive language and a set of analytic instruments to enrich and redress our understanding of the ‘Romantic preoccupation with poetry’s uninformative or, better yet, negatively informative character’, as Anahid Nersessian puts it, moving beyond her and Igarashi’s emphasis on the figurativeness and

⁶⁷ See Victoria Wang, John V. Tucker, and Tracey E. Rihll, ‘On Phatic Technologies for Creating and Maintaining Human Relationships’, *Technology in Society*, 33.1 (2011), 44–51.

⁶⁸ Christian Licoppe and Zbigniew Smoreda, ‘Are Social Networks Technologically Embedded? How Networks Are Changing Today with Changes in Communication Technology: The Dynamics of Personal Networks’, *Social Networks*, 27.4 (2005), 317–35 (p. 321).

⁶⁹ Vincent Miller, ‘New Media, Networking and Phatic Culture’, *Convergence*, 14.4 (2008), 387–400 (p. 395). See also James E. Porter, ‘Professional Communication as Phatic: From Classical Eunoia to Personal Artificial Intelligence’, *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 80.2 (2017), 174–93 (p. 180); Michael Schandorf, ‘Mediated Gesture: Paralinguistic Communication and Phatic Text’, *Convergence*, 19.3 (2013), 319–44.

⁷⁰ James J. Hodge, ‘Sociable Media: Phatic Connection in Digital Art’, *Postmodern Culture*, 26.1 (2015).

⁷¹ Vladimir Žegarac and Billy Clark, ‘Phatic Interpretations and Phatic Communication’, *Journal of Linguistics*, 35.2 (1999), 321–46 (p. 333).

incommunicativity of poetic language to explore, instead, its engagement with phatic modes of communicating.⁷²

By reading Romantic poetry through the lens of communication theory, I do not simply intend to apply the tools and insights of the latter to unveil unacknowledged aspects of the former, though this is a pivotal part of what I aspire to do. Poetry is not a passive object to be illuminated through linguistics. The relationship that I am proposing between Romantic poetry and communication theory is dynamic and two-way. The untapped potential of the phatic for the study of poetic portrayals of communication that will emerge from my readings will give added weight to this commonly overlooked notion of linguistics and perhaps even encourage more extensive and systematic considerations within its own field. At the same time, poetry, for its part, will illuminate aspects and dimensions of communication that inevitably elude linguistics itself. William Waters claims that '[t]he ways a poem resembles ordinary communication [...] make us especially aware of how it differs' and that, for this reason, '[p]ragmatics' is 'limited in its ability to characterize the lyric' but also 'supplies the best means for describing and understanding what sense we make of' a poem's very difference.⁷³ My perspective is fundamentally akin to his, but I take a further step: the way in which a poem differs from the speech acts contemplated and defined by pragmatics indirectly points to the limitations of this model and allows for an alternative engagement with communication. Inhabiting a suspended and ever-shifting domain of (im)possibilities only afforded by poetic language, poetical representations of interactions with the Other World will turn out to consistently thwart and problematise the assumptions and demands of communication theory. Combining the latter with poetic theory and with a close attention to the formal texture of the texts will be key to properly account for the specificities of poetry, its language, and how they shape the depictions of communication at the centre of the present study.

Although poetry uses language in a way that is close enough to normal speech to be investigated through the same analytic means, its 'most salient features [...] are not to be found in ordinary speech acts', as highlighted by Jonathan Culler.⁷⁴ Poetic theory, especially lyric theory, is an invaluable gateway to identifying these deviating features and understanding how they work. Culler's own recent *Theory of the Lyric* (2015) will provide a fundamental baseline for my consideration of the lyric qualities of the poems under scrutiny, starting from his very understanding of what counts as lyric. The importance given to lyric theory, in fact, may appear misplaced in a study focusing on texts that, for the most part, do not technically fall into the category of lyric poetry, at

⁷² Anahid Nersessian, *The Calamity Form: On Poetry and Social Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 128.

⁷³ William Waters, *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 3–4, 10, 12.

⁷⁴ Jonathan D. Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 2.

least not according to its canonical definition. While it is true that '[l]yric was finally made one of three fundamental genres during the romantic period' and has a longstanding privileged relationship with Romantic poetics, it is also true that three of the selected poems are not the 'short, nonnarrative, highly rhythmical productions' that are traditionally associated with the genre.⁷⁵ Arguing for 'a broad conception of lyric', Culler replaces these surface characteristics with different parameters that are 'more central to the functioning and the power of lyrics' but are not 'restricted to lyric alone'.⁷⁶ The distinctive elements identified by these four parameters will be variously and significantly present in the poems, testifying to the fact that Romantic authors were concerned with lyric effects and devices even in longer, seemingly narrative texts.

First of all, the 'lyric's attempt to be itself an event rather than the representation of an event', together with its 'ritualistic' dimension, will play an important part in shaping lyric uses of language that are not 'fictional' and create, instead, the sense of something happening in and through the poem itself.⁷⁷ Related discussions of lyric performativity will contribute to foregrounding how poetry often 'communicates' in ways that can be deemed non-informational, insofar as what words *say* is less important than what they *do*, and the very fact that they do something. The poems under study will be shown to skilfully employ such performative effects, turning absence into presence almost as if by magical summoning and self-sustaining the conditions for the impossible communications that they feature as unfolding events rather than mere representations. When looking at poetry from a communicative standpoint, the other two parameters established by Culler are even more relevant. The 'enunciative apparatus of the lyric', which is also linked to its 'relation to voice and voicing', is the feature that most directly makes a lyric poem akin to a speech act, though one *sui generis*.⁷⁸ Questions like how voice is posited and how the impression of a speaking subject affects a poem will be touched upon, but special attention will be paid to how and to what end voice calls. The figures of address that are a prominent component of lyric's enunciative – and, one may add, communicative – frame will constitute a recurring and central theme in the following analysis, especially when they intertwine with lyric's characteristic 'hyperbolic quality', its tendency to amplify and bring to an extreme, by taking the form of apostrophic calling.⁷⁹

Being addresses to variously unavailable, unreachable, and/or unresponsive interlocutors, apostrophes are unsurprisingly one of the primary ways in which communication with the Other World appears in poems, specifically Romantic poems. Apostrophe is, in fact, commonly considered

⁷⁵ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 1, 89.

⁷⁶ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 90, 38, 6.

⁷⁷ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 35, 37.

⁷⁸ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 34.

⁷⁹ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 37.

the ‘foundational master trope in Romantic discourse’, and many of its theoretical discussions, not coincidentally, present a ‘shared focus on Romantic texts’ as the most indicative of its use.⁸⁰ Dominant understandings of apostrophe see it as, in Culler’s words, ‘the embodiment of poetic pretension’, a ‘highly optative’ and ‘anachronistic’ gesture that is a mere ‘evocation of poetic power’, folded on itself and entailing no actual reaching out, just a pretence of it.⁸¹ Culler’s influential theory of apostrophe will be extensively discussed later, but the notion of pretension and its accompanying emphasis on self-reflexive and metapoetic connotations deserve some preliminary considerations. The term *pretension* evokes the idea of an aspiration or claim that cannot be duly supported and is ultimately ‘unfounded’ (*OED*), indeed pretentious. In this context, it implies that apostrophes are unable, and ultimately unwilling, to do what they purport to be doing. In other words, they do not actually tend towards their addressees, for ‘the real relationship is of the mind to itself rather than between the self and an object’, as Monique Morgan puts it.⁸² Similar attitudes towards these ‘excessive, disruptive, and insistently literary’ speech acts are typical of many post-structuralist and deconstructive readings of lyric poetry, which revolve around the mystificatory, gratuitous, and self-referential aspects of apostrophes, dismissing any possibility of them having some sort of genuine communicative intent or purpose.⁸³

The present study intends to distance itself from this established perspective and call it into question by exploring what happens if we take the communicative drive that ostensibly animates apostrophic calling seriously. This will entail a redefinition of what *communicative* means and encompasses, which will be made possible precisely by the concepts of communication theory that I have discussed above. Just as lyric theory has been said to shed light on alternative ways of engaging with communication, so communication theory will prove illuminating to rethink key lyric features. In contrast with their almost proverbial self-reflexivity and self-involvement, apostrophes will turn out to have an eminently phatic communicative tension, and the poem under scrutiny will be shown to seriously entertain and deftly exploit the possibilities of contact opened up by their seemingly gratuitous calling. The relational potentialities of lyric address have been acknowledged by some critics but never considered through a proper and specific communicative lens. Helen Vendler links poems’ frequent addresses to ‘an invisible other’ to the ‘intrinsic and constitutive ability of the lyric

⁸⁰ Eric C. Walker, *Marriage, Writing, and Romanticism: Wordsworth and Austen After War* (Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 259; Alan Richardson, ‘Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art: Everyday Discourse, Overhearing, and Poetic Address’, *Style*, 36.3 (2002), 363–85 (p. 369).

⁸¹ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 229.

⁸² Monique R. Morgan, *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends: Temporality in the Nineteenth-Century British Long Poem* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), p. 9.

⁸³ Richardson, ‘Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art’, p. 364.

to create intimacy', but she is more interested in its ethical rather than communicative import.⁸⁴ Nersessian speaks of 'apostrophe's relational bearing', whereas Ann Keniston remarks that '[a]ll address is motivated by the desire to unmake distance'.⁸⁵ Waters points out that 'key facts have been lost to view in the critical focus on address as a rhetorical trope or as a maneuver of the monologic poetic self' and suggests an alternative 'way of talking about poetry as a form of contact' but deliberately excludes apostrophe from his discussion, safely limiting it to the less baffling and more reasonable instances in which poems 'say *you* to a human being'.⁸⁶

What *unmaking distance* and *contact* precisely mean and how they can be achieved in the context of apostrophic calling remain rather vague in the writings of these critics but will be made clearer by looking at them through the notion of the phatic, which is primarily concerned with both. Identifying a phatic function in apostrophes, however, will not translate into assuming an absolute confidence on the poets' part in their ability to reach out to and elicit actual responses from their metaphysically remote interlocutors. The poems under study will be shown to be always aware of the fundamental precariousness underlying their impossible acts of communication and to variously embrace such uncertainty. At the same time, the most fully realised envisionings and enactments of contact will not result in an optimistic and idealistic stance towards poetry's communicative powers, but rather in an exploration of the potential risks and dangers that arise from seriously committing to the (im)possibility of entering into communication and rapport with Otherness.

Poetry's unique ability to sustain impossible communication makes it an especially suited means to envisage – and study – communication with the Other World. Poetry itself is intrinsically related to otherness on several levels. It is a kind of language that is *other* compared to ordinary plain prose and governed by an *other* logic. Even more significantly, it is words that seem to come from another place, another source, another world. As Culler puts it, 'lyrics are language, but language shaped in other ways, as if from elsewhere', language endowed with 'a special otherness', which makes it peculiarly suited to gain access and give voice to other forms and dimensions of alterity.⁸⁷ Wolfson formulates the idea of poetry as if coming from somewhere else – or someone else – in evocatively otherworldly terms when she claims that 'imagination is always coursing between self and other, mediating possession by spirits – "inspiration" by another name'.⁸⁸ As with the case of

⁸⁴ Helen Vendler, *Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 1, 9.

⁸⁵ Nersessian, p. 135; Ann Keniston, *Overheard Voices: Address and Subjectivity in Postmodern American Poetry* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p. 51.

⁸⁶ Waters, pp. 4, 1.

⁸⁷ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 138.

⁸⁸ Susan J. Wolfson, 'Byron's Ghosting Authority', *ELH*, 76.3 (2009), 763–92 (p. 771).

apostrophe, these characteristics of poetry that most associate it with otherworldly communication had a special prominence in Romantic practice and poetics.

The first decades of the nineteenth century saw lively discussions around the ways in which poetic language diverged from the rules of grammar and the conventions of standardised English and, as a result, an increasing awareness of its distinct nature from prose. As Elfenbein argues, '[i]n the Romantic period, poetry becomes poetic; novels, novelistic; and prose, prosaic'.⁸⁹ Poetry emerged not only as a specific way of using language but also as a specific – and especially important – way of communicating. Igarashi points out that 'writing in this epoch was [...] the epicenter of the dream of communication' and that 'poets of the period composed their works with a heightened awareness of poetry as a communicative medium'.⁹⁰ Poetry was 'the central literary expression of the age', both an extremely meaningful and problematic form of communication, whose ability to effectively communicate with its distant other (the reader) was becoming an increasingly pressing concern.⁹¹ The idea of poetry and inspiration as coming from elsewhere also has particular relevance to Romanticism, as the longstanding belief that poetic creation occurred under some *other* influence beyond the poet famously experienced a new revival and conceptualisation in the form of what Lucy Newlyn calls the Romantic 'spiritualization of authorship as "genius"'.⁹² Both these elements of the strong and multifaceted relationship that links Romantic poetry and otherworldly communication will be addressed more extensively during the analysis of the texts.

The present study will examine the poems of four major Romantic authors both within and without the traditional canon: Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, John Keats, and Felicia Hemans. These writers, who have been selected for the centrality that the theme of otherworldly communication is given in some of their works, all belong to the so-called 'second generation' of Romantic poets, not coincidentally. This later generation of poets shared the aspiration and struggle to find their own voice and vision in the shadow of Wordsworth, an endeavour that often led them to position themselves 'against Wordsworthian solipsism', as Suzanne Barnett points out.⁹³ A harsh criticism of Wordsworth's solipsistic and uncommunicative poetics was voiced, for example, by William Hazlitt, who was an important point of reference for the 'second-generation' Romantics. In his review of *The Excursion* (1814), he denounced how Wordsworth's 'intense intellectual egotism swallows up every thing' to the point that '[e]ven the dialogues introduced in the present volume are soliloquies of the

⁸⁹ Elfenbein, p. 13.

⁹⁰ Igarashi, pp. 8, 6.

⁹¹ Dorothy Mermin, *The Audience in the Poem: Five Victorian Poets* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), p. 3.

⁹² Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 266.

⁹³ Suzanne L. Barnett, *Romantic Paganism: The Politics of Ecstasy in the Shelley Circle* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 89.

same character'.⁹⁴ The common interest in Otherness and in possibilities of communicative contact with it that characterises the poets under scrutiny can be understood as a way in which they distanced themselves from the perceived egotistical character of Wordsworth's poetry, and indeed they will all be shown to write partly in response to what they deemed the most self-absorbed tendencies of his writing.

At the same time, these writers' crucial engagement with otherworldly communication in poems that do not neatly fall into conventional supernatural modes can be read as a further stance against the previous generation, insofar as it violates the separation – and hierarchy – between the spheres of the 'every day' (reserved for Wordsworth) and the 'supernatural' (assigned to Coleridge) that underlay the original plan for the *Lyrical Ballads*, as famously recounted in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817).⁹⁵ That poems dealing with supernatural themes ended up being not only distinct but also marginal in this project is highlighted by Coleridge himself, who remarks how his 'compositions, instead of forming a balance, appeared rather an interpolation of heterogeneous matter' among Wordsworth's works, whose number was 'so much greater'.⁹⁶ The way in which the poems under scrutiny transgress the boundaries of supernatural poetry as a separate and minor genre by directly dialoguing with the 'higher' lyric tradition of Romanticism will allow for a fundamental questioning of the self-absorption that is commonly associated with the latter (as with apostrophe, its representative trope) and for a reconsideration of some of its defining features under the sign of an attentiveness to Otherness.

The following chapters will take the form of case studies focusing on a poem by each of the four selected authors and, as their titles indicate, on the form of otherworldly communication that dominates it. The first chapter will be devoted to Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' and visitation. It will dwell upon the contradictory movements and paradoxical addresses that shape the unfolding of Shelley's unconventional hymn to this mysterious entity, showing how he mobilises, and at the same time rewrites, well-established paradigms to make sense of supernatural interactions as well as foundational gestures of Romantic poetry. The second chapter will consider canto IV of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and necromancy. Focusing on the gladiator episode and establishing a dialogue between these stanzas and Byron's more overtly supernatural drama *Manfred*, it will explore how the boundary between present and past, the living and the dead, is probed and made permeable in the poem, which is itself turned into a necromantic circle by Byron's skilful use

⁹⁴ William Hazlitt, *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. by Duncan Wu, 9 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), II, p. 114.

⁹⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by Adam Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 208.

⁹⁶ Coleridge, p. 208.

of the performative potential of lyric language. In the third chapter, I will look at Keats's *Isabella* and communion. My reading will illustrate how the poem exposes the nightmare of self-annihilation that hides behind the dream of full communion, the threat that lies at the heart of intersubjectivity itself, and how such tale – as well as the very way in which it is told – tests and troubles coeval assumptions on the nature and purpose of communication, giving voice to concerns that are also pressingly present in Keats's letters. The fourth and last chapter will discuss Hemans's 'A Spirit's Return' and evocation. The in-depth analysis of this generally overlooked poem will foreground a neglected side of Hemans's poetic production and aspirations, arguing that her portrayal of a perfectly successful otherworldly exchange establishes a correspondence between invocation, evocation, and vocation as a strategy for her to claim a traditionally masculine power of voice, while being simultaneously framed within – and destabilised by – a far more precarious human communication which mirrors her ambivalent feelings about her own audience.

The order in which the poems will be considered does not merely follow the chronological one of their publications but also creates a progression from the most tentative and uncertain instance of communication with the Other World to the most triumphant and fully-realised, in other words, from failure to success. This progression, however, will be consistently eroded and undermined, and the dichotomy between success and failure variously called into question as unable to capture what truly happens in communication, especially when it takes place with the Other. In the Romantic poems under study, communication in the face of Otherness will emerge as a transformative and disruptive experience that blurs binaries and boundaries and is often as elusive as the protagonist of the poem that will open my exploration of the impossible and shadowy ways in which poetry allows us to make contact across abyssal distances and unfathomable gulfs.

1. Visitation: Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty'

1.1 'Marvellous equilibrium of uncertainty'

Singling out 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' as representative of Shelley's poetic attitudes towards communication with the Other World might seem an odd choice. Composed in the summer of 1816 during his stay at Lake Geneva with Lord Byron, John Polidori, Mary Godwin, and Claire Clairmont, the poem is written in the form of an untraditional hymn addressed to the 'Spirit of Beauty' (13), and its composition during the 'haunted summer' at Villa Diodati, a summer full of ghost stories and tales of the supernatural, could be nothing but a suggestive coincidence.⁹⁷ Shelley's poetry does not lack more traditional and straightforward examples of supernatural beings, from the Gothic ghosts of his first collection in collaboration with his sister Elizabeth, *Original Poetry by Victor and Cazire* (1810), to the titular fairy of *Queen Mab* (1813) and the phantasms of his lyrical dramas *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) and *Hellas* (1822). The ample presence of 'unearthly beings' in Shelley's poetry was acknowledged as early as 1937 by Oscar Firkins who attempted a quite systematic yet partial survey of their occurrences.⁹⁸ At first glance, Intellectual Beauty may seem somewhat out of place among the more canonical legions of spirits, fairies, and genii that Firkins mentions. Its very eccentricity, however, makes the poem particularly interesting as an introductory case study, for it testifies to the merits of moving beyond strict definitions of the supernatural in favour of the more encompassing notion of the otherworldly. 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' will be seen to mobilise the main questions at the heart of Romantic envisionings of communication with the Other World, ranging from the mode and means of such communication to its purpose and effects, thus showing how the theme can be found in important texts of the Romantic canon that do not phrase it in the most explicit or conventional way.

Nonetheless, a reading of Shelley's poem as pertinent to otherworldly communication, however broadly defined, may give rise to some perplexity, considering that the status of Intellectual Beauty has elicited a divided response from critics. Some argue, as Ronald Tetreault does, that the 'Spirit of Beauty' (13) has 'no more metaphysical substance than colours or sounds', while other interpretations are less monolithic.⁹⁹ Edward Duffy, for instance, acknowledges that the hymn deals with 'the momentary advent of a godlike presence' but claims that, in spite of its 'supernatural

⁹⁷ Unless otherwise specified, all quotes from Shelley's poems are taken from Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd ed (New York: Norton, 2002).

⁹⁸ See 'Unearthly Beings' in Oscar W. Firkins, *Power and Elusiveness in Shelley* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1937), pp. 81–88.

⁹⁹ Ronald Tetreault, *The Poetry of Life: Shelley and Literary Form* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 87.

machinery', the poem is concerned with 'human motive and act'.¹⁰⁰ Still, when he then says that the poem encourages the reader to 'ask to just what in the world (or out of it) one might felicitously address the speech-act of a hymn', the parenthesis opens a slight possibility of taking the poem in a different, otherworldly direction.¹⁰¹ Most readings of Shelley's poem recognise that Intellectual Beauty is addressed as if it had a godlike quality but tend to consider it as a mere rhetorical device or figurative strategy to represent something for which Intellectual Beauty stands, be it the aesthetic perception of beauty, an abstract concept, the sublime experience, or the mysteriousness of human existential being.¹⁰² This metaphorical approach stems, at least in part, from a certain discomfort with the idea of the atheist and sceptical Shelley devoting a traditionally religious type of poem to an otherwise undefined 'unseen Power' (1), discomfort that is most evident in Spencer Hall's statement that Intellectual Beauty is 'not to be interpreted as an antecedent and independent ontological principle or divinity whose actual noumenal existence Shelley affirms'.¹⁰³

Whether Shelley believed in the existence of an otherworldly entity perfectly corresponding to Intellectual Beauty in the reality beyond the text, however, is irrelevant to the present study, which is less concerned with the poets' beliefs about an Other World than with the ways in which the possibility of communicating with it is imagined in their poetry. That Intellectual Beauty will be contemplated as a poetic reality, without taking into consideration what it might metaphorically stand for, constitutes a key way in which the following analysis stands out against much of the dominant criticism on the hymn. Still, it is worth pointing out, as Monika Lee does, that the view of Shelley as 'an advocate of materialism' has long been accompanied by his opposite reception as 'a proponent of spirituality (i.e., Neo-Platonism, Manicheanism, Orphism)' and that his thought is riven by a tension between 'skepticism and metaphysical longing'.¹⁰⁴ In *A Defence of Poetry* (written in 1821), whose relationship to 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' will be briefly discussed at the end of this chapter, Shelley defines 'religion' as the 'partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world', seemingly acknowledging the existence of the latter while denouncing the unsuitability of orthodox religion to fully grasp 'the evanescent hues of this ethereal world' in favour of poetry.¹⁰⁵ The idea of another world beyond this one also recurs in 'An Essay on Christianity', published posthumously in

¹⁰⁰ Edward Duffy, *The Constitution of Shelley's Poetry the Argument of Language in Prometheus Unbound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 25, 26.

¹⁰¹ Duffy, p. 28.

¹⁰² See, respectively, Tetreault, p. 87; Jerrold E. Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 63; Paul Whickman, 'The Poet as Sage, Sage as Poet in 1816: Aesthetics and Epistemology in Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"', *Keats-Shelley Review*, 30.2 (2016), 142–54 (p. 143); Spencer Hall, 'Power and the Poet: Religious Mythmaking in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 32 (1983), 123–49 (p. 129).

¹⁰³ Hall, p. 125.

¹⁰⁴ Monika H. Lee, "'Nature's Silent Eloquence": Disembodied Organic Language in Shelley's *Queen Mab*", *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 48.2 (1993), 169–93 (pp. 169, 192).

¹⁰⁵ Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 512, 532.

1859, where he claims that '[t]he Stoic the Platonist and the Epicurean, the Polytheist the Dualist and the Trinitarian' only agree in regarding the name *God* 'as a common term devised to express all of mystery or majesty or power which the invisible world contains'.¹⁰⁶ As Jennifer Wallace highlights, Shelley's own sustained interest in Platonism has often been associated with a 'notion of mystic transcendence to a world of greater reality, greater beauty, greater unity', and indeed Platonic philosophy offered him a prominent model of the universe as divided into different levels of reality, from the physical and mutable to the transcendent and eternal.¹⁰⁷

Despite these clarifications and Shelley's openness to – even familiarity with – the concept of some sort of Other World, however, the fundamental question at the heart of my reading of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' remains open: that is, whether Intellectual Beauty is conceived and envisioned as otherworldly *within* the poem. Its otherworldly origin is most clearly hinted by its recurring visitations. In the opening lines of the poem, Intellectual Beauty is said to be 'visiting | This various world' (3-4), a fact that is repeated shortly after: 'it visits with inconstant glance | Each human heart and countenance' (6-7). It is reasonable to assume that, if someone visits a place, they do not belong to that place: in this case, then, that Intellectual Beauty does not belong to this world. The idea of a movement across a seemingly unbridgeable space, such as the one separating different metaphysical dimensions, is reinforced on a formal level. The enjambment between lines 3 and 4 seems to re-enact the passage from a world to another by creating a gap between 'visiting' (3) and the destination, while at the same time overcoming it. Together with other elements that will be taken into account, the desultory visitations and frequent absences of Intellectual Beauty give it a certain supernatural quality, but they may not be sufficient to claim with absolute certainty that it goes – or more precisely, returns – to another world instead of merely disappearing from this one.

A degree of unresolved ambiguity informs the way in which 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' contemplates the possibility of otherworldly communication and is constitutive of the poem itself. As will be repeatedly seen, Shelley's hymn questions rather than affirms, opens rather than closes. The impression is that of a poem resting on ever-shifting grounds and deriving its force from 'this marvellous equilibrium of uncertainty'.¹⁰⁸ The expression comes from Tetreault, who uses it with regard to another poem by Shelley, 'A Summer-Evening Churchyard, Lechlade, Gloucestershire' (1816). Tetreault believes that when Shelley is able to maintain this equilibrium, 'he writes his best poetry', but he fails to acknowledge that 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' is one of these instances.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by E. B. Murray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 249.

¹⁰⁷ Jennifer Wallace, 'Shelley, Plato and the Political Imagination', in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. by Anna P. Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 229–41 (p. 230).

¹⁰⁸ Tetreault, p. 44.

¹⁰⁹ Tetreault, p. 44.

The present analysis attempts to do justice to the poem's unresolved tension by navigating and embracing the uncertainty at the heart of it, even when it comes to questions about otherworldliness and communication. Such uncertainty should not be mistaken for the negating power of scepticism. While it is true that 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' does not affirm with certainty, it is also true that it does not categorically deny. The critics who are alert to the ambiguities of the hymn often tend to interpret them as signs of a sceptical and ironic attitude underlying it.¹¹⁰ Hall, for example, states that his reading of the poem 'will concentrate more on poetic function than on referential or symbolic meaning' and therefore 'will tend to find irony, qualification, and uncertainty where more standard readings find epiphany and revelation'.¹¹¹ The former claim, however, does not necessarily imply the latter. Paying attention to the poetic subtleties and seemingly contradictory details of the text will be shown to sometimes lead to the opposite conclusion, that is, finding authentic longing where sceptical and ironic readings, which have become themselves standard, see only denial and parody.

Appealing to irony is also one of the strategies through which critics have dealt with – and attempted to counteract – the discomfort elicited by Shelley's use of the traditionally religious form of the hymn. Jerrold Hogle acknowledges that Shelley employs 'a lyric mode long connected with the desire for or the address to a God' but argues that 'as others have seen, Shelley's use of "Hymn" and a hymnlike verse-form is highly ironic'.¹¹² Other critics have gone further, denying altogether that Shelley's poem is a hymn. According to Stuart Curran, 'the major hymn of British Romanticism is, in fact, an ode'.¹¹³ Curran defines the genre of the hymn as an address 'to a divine, an immortal being, in whose efficacy, on both cosmic and personal planes, one has the certainty of belief'.¹¹⁴ He maintains that, when certainty turns into uncertainty and presence into absence, the hymn itself turns into an ode, which is why Shelley's poem must fall into the latter category. If Shelley had wanted to write an ode, however, he would have called it so. The term was not unknown to him, as he used it in the title of some of his most famous poems, notably 'Ode to the West Wind' (1819) and 'Ode to Liberty' (1820). Since Shelley clearly perceived the two genres as distinct and different, by explicitly calling this poem a hymn, he equally clearly intended to place it within the specific framework of that tradition. The fact that the poem plays with and sometimes defies (albeit not necessarily through irony) the expectations that are inherent to this genre, including those of certainty, does not mean that

¹¹⁰ Gerald McNiece even calls the poet an 'ironist': see Gerald McNiece, 'The Poet as Ironist in "Mont Blanc" and "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 14.4 (1975), 311–36..

¹¹¹ Hall, p. 125.

¹¹² Hogle, *Shelley's Process*, p. 62. See also Adam R. Rosenthal, 'The Gift of the Name in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 55.1 (2016), 29–50 (p. 29).

¹¹³ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 63.

¹¹⁴ Curran, pp. 56–57.

it must be read as belonging to another, quite the contrary: the play only makes sense in relation to the declared framework.

The framework of the hymn is particularly relevant to the present analysis because it is that of a speech act addressed to an unearthly being and therefore actually encourages a reading of Shelley's poem around the theme of otherworldly communication. Associating Shelley's poem with the hymn genre, however, requires some caveat. The congregational use of these texts, their fruition through song, their complex authorship, and their reliance on belief determine a set of tools, concerns, and fruition modalities which is hardly comparable to that of a lyric poem like 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty'. Such fundamental differences should always be borne in mind, but it should also be remembered that the Christian tradition was not the only one available to Shelley. As John Knapp argues, 'twentieth-century critics are often reluctant to acknowledge Shelley's "Hymn" as a hymn because they mistakenly measure it against a vague, and yet unyielding, model of the Christian hymn'.¹¹⁵ Though the Christian associations of the word *hymn* are neither absent nor irrelevant, some significant aspects of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' may pass unnoticed when it is not considered in relation to a more variegated tradition including classical hymns, which by the beginning of the nineteenth century had survived only in their literary form.¹¹⁶ A prime example is the fact that the poem follows the basic structure of the *hymnos kletikos* as described by Kurt Schlueter in relation to Shelley's other hymn 'To Night' (1821): invocation to the addressee (lines 13-15), praise of their powers (lines 32-36), *mnemosyne* (lines 55-60), concluding prayer or request (lines 78-81).¹¹⁷ Even if the conventions of classical hymnology evoked in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' will be seen to be drastically reinvented and even upturned by Shelley, their use is an important strategy through which the poem engenders and flouts expectations about its engagement with otherworldly communication.

It should be clear by now that the aim of this chapter is not to *resolve* Shelley's poem and interpret it as an unproblematic poetic enactment of communication with the Other World in the form of a hymn to a transcendent entity. It is thanks to (rather than in spite of) its 'marvellous equilibrium of uncertainty' that 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' will be shown to mobilise different, even conflicting possibilities of envisaging supernatural interactions and thereby reimagine traditional religious paradigms as well as typically Romantic gestures like apostrophically reaching out and

¹¹⁵ John Knapp, 'The Spirit of Classical Hymn in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"', *Style*, 33.1 (1999), 43–66 (p. 54).

¹¹⁶ Shelley's interest in classical hymnology is testified by his 1818 translations of some of the Homeric hymns, but he must have already been familiar with it thanks to his education: see Kurt Schlueter, 'Shelley's "To Night" and the Prayer Hymn of Classical Antiquity', *Studies in Romanticism*, 36.2 (1997), 239–60 (p. 244). Satya Pachori goes as far as to consider 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' in relation to Sir William Jones's poem inspired by Indian hymns, 'A Hymn to Narayana' (1785): see Satya S. Pachori, 'Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" and Sir William Jones', *The Comparatist*, 11 (1987), 54–63.

¹¹⁷ See Schlueter, pp. 242–43.

introspectively turning inwards.¹¹⁸ Embracing the elusiveness of ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ in its resistance to the grasp of rigid interpretations is a way not only of respecting a cardinal principle of the poem but also of mirroring its own engagement with the equally elusive power to which it is devoted. From the very first stanza, in fact, Intellectual Beauty is characterised as ungraspable and ‘inconstant’ (3, 6) and compared to fleeting and intangible natural phenomena, such as ‘summer winds’ (4), ‘moonbeams’ (5), ‘hues and harmonies of evening’ (8), ‘clouds in starlight’ (9), and ‘memory of music fled’ (10).

These opening lines provide fundamental preliminary clues about the evasive Intellectual Beauty, first of all by suggesting its identification with the ‘awful shadow of some unseen Power’ (1). The shadow appears to act as a mediating agent between the human world, which it visits, and a power that is so out of reach that it even remains linguistically indefinite. In doing so, the shadow resembles conventional intermediaries of supernatural encounters, like angels and necromancers, and its aspect is indeed somewhat personified in ghostly terms: it has a ‘wing’ (3) and ‘glance’ (6) and ‘[f]loats’ (2), as spirits often do in Shelley’s poetry.¹¹⁹ The fact that the shadow is then called ‘Spirit of Beauty’ (13) and ‘Spirit fair’ (83) reinforces its spectral connotations, but, at the same time, the ambiguity of the term *spirit* suggests that Intellectual Beauty may be less ‘a separate entity [...] invested with some degree of personality and form’ (*OED*) than ‘an animating or vital principle’ (*OED*), as it does appear at times to be. It is said to ‘shine upon | [...] human thought and form’ (14-15) with its ‘hues’ (14) and to be able to pervade ‘[man’s] heart’ (41) (albeit only transitorily) as if it were some kind of energy or power. This characterisation makes the ‘shadow’ (1) more akin to another traditional model of supernatural triangulation that is evoked by term itself. As Duffy acknowledges, ‘one pertinent valence of “shadow” is its long historical service in giving expression to’ the common belief that human beings can have access to the transcendent only through ‘shadows or adumbrations, the light they afford necessarily an accommodation to human “organs” of reception’.¹²⁰ A similar notion can be found not only in religious thought but also in Plato’s philosophy, with which Shelley has been said to be familiar, in particular in the allegory of the cave and the idea that, bound by their limited sensory perceptions in the physical world, humans can only see shadows of real things.

Making accessible to human senses what exceeds them is often required in supernatural communication to fulfil the basic phatic condition according to which a message cannot be properly

¹¹⁸ Tetreault, p. 44.

¹¹⁹ See, for example, ‘Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills’, 337-40; *Prometheus Unbound*, III. 1. 43-45, 4. 124; *Hellas*, 412-17.

¹²⁰ Duffy, p. 29.

transmitted unless it is perceivable to the interlocutor.¹²¹ In ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, this accommodation seems to be effected by the shadow, but a closer look shows how Shelley makes use of this well-established model of mediation at the same time as he actually subverts it. According to what has been just said, the shadow should be the medium through which the ‘unseen Power’ (1) is made sensorily accessible, hence visible. This assumption, however, is undermined in the following line where the shadow is revealed to be itself ‘unseen’ (2), as inaccessible as the power of which it should be the perceptible emanation. This ‘latent paradox’ is noticed by Hall, who rightly argues that ‘the opening proposition holds out yet frustrates a form of thought typically used in religious and metaphysical discourse’ but wrongly concludes that it ‘functions ironically to make us understand the essential uncertainty religious phrasings commonly seek to hide’.¹²² Once again, irony is a simplistic answer to the paradoxes of ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, as Shelley embraces – rather than simply exposing – such uncertainty, making it clear that his own poem rests on it. If it is true that, by making the shadow as unseen as the power, he confounds the expectations elicited by this religiously and metaphysically charged image, it is also true that he does not reject it as utterly unsuitable. The shadow still acts as a ‘medium of visitation’ in the rest of the poem: it is the ‘shadow’ (46) that becomes present to the speaker in the fourth stanza, and it is the ‘shadow’ (59) that ‘fell on’ (59) the speaker when he was a boy.¹²³ As well illustrated by this first stanza, the unfolding of Shelley’s poem is characterised by an eliding movement through which it not only simultaneously employs and thwarts traditional paradigms but also destabilises its own meanings in their making and, in doing so, captures something of the paradoxical and tentative experience of approaching the Other.

1.2 Impossible invocations and paradoxical questions

Starting from the beginning of the second stanza, Shelley’s poem takes the form of a communicative act directed towards Intellectual Beauty, which is invoked and its powers celebrated in perfect hymn-like fashion: ‘Spirit of Beauty, that dost consecrate | With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon | Of human thought or form’ (13-15). The end of the address, however, baffles expectations. ‘Where art thou gone?’ (15), the speaker asks, revealing that the supposed recipient of the hymn is actually elsewhere. Since an absent interlocutor usually cannot hear, let alone reply, the question is seemingly

¹²¹ See for example Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 14–16; Enrico Cheli, *Teorie e tecniche della comunicazione interpersonale: Un’introduzione interdisciplinare* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2004), pp. 108–9.

¹²² Hall, p. 136. According to Hall, the ‘standard paradigm of symbolic thought’ evoked by these lines is the idea that ‘an unknown cause can be represented by a known effect’, but the images of the ‘shadow’ and the ‘unseen Power’ (1) foreground less the question of knowability than that of perceptibility (Hall, p. 136).

¹²³ Duffy, pp. 28–29.

impossible, one that defies its purpose and is destined to remain unanswered. As Adam Rosenthal puts it, ‘why address this absent spirit when the hymn may not reach its vacant ears?’¹²⁴ The exact nature of the speaker’s question is even more paradoxical, as he not only addresses something that he knows is no longer present but also asks it where it is gone: that is, he wants the absent interlocutor to tell him the coordinates of its own absence. From a normal communicative perspective, the utterance does not seem to make sense and immediately confronts the reader with the violation of a basic prerequisite of communication: spatiotemporal copresence.

In communication theory, spatiotemporal copresence is the assumption that the interlocutors must occupy the same time and space in order for contact to be established. It contributes to the creation of what Jakobson elliptically calls ‘a physical channel’ and is specified more clearly by Frank Macke in his attempt to make explicit the ‘common presupposition’ of phatic contact: ‘the unstated premise that communication occurs “within” a space, a space that is populated by (at least) two separate bodies able to identify and acknowledge one another as addresser and addressee’.¹²⁵ The way in which Macke talks of ‘space’ and ‘bodies’ may seem obsolete in the age of digital communications across distance, and indeed spatiotemporal copresence can be virtual as well as physical.¹²⁶ The virtual aspect, however, does not undermine the necessity of copresence nor the validity of Macke’s statement if interpreted in broad terms. Even when the spatial or temporal element of copresence is virtual, the interlocutors are believed to occupy the same spatial or temporal dimension, albeit not in immediate proximity to one another. The same does not apply to communication with the Other World, in which, by definition, interlocutors belong not simply to distant places but to entirely different metaphysical dimensions. The lack of spatiotemporal copresence is the most immediate problem that otherworldly communication poses and will be seen to be a recurring theme in the Romantic poems under consideration, especially in its physical acceptance. As specified in the introduction and confirmed by the following readings, in the period preceding the invention of the telegraph, face-to-face conversation was still deemed the default – and ideal – form of communication, though ways of communicating that took place in conditions of virtual copresence were known and commonly practiced: letter-writing above all.

The concern for copresence (or rather for the lack thereof) that ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ betrays is also shared with the hymn genre, especially its classical tradition. As Schlueter points out, classical hymns often feature ‘the speaker’s request that the invoked deity appear’, for ‘in original

¹²⁴ Rosenthal, p. 40.

¹²⁵ Jakobson, p. 113; Frank J. Macke, ‘A Semiotic Phenomenology of “Contact”: The Phatic Function of Body and Flesh in Jakobson’s Model of Communication’, *American Journal of Semiotics*, 27.4 (2011), 81–94 (p. 81).

¹²⁶ See Bruno G. Bara, *Cognitive Pragmatics: The Mental Processes of Communication*, trans. by John Douthwaite (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), p. 60: ‘when physical copresence is absent, an attempt at communicating takes place in a spatiotemporal dimension that is virtual.’

liturgical usage the speaker thought the deity's presence to be necessary for the deity to be able to put his powers into effect and grant the plea that occasioned a particular prayer'.¹²⁷ Spatiotemporal copresence is a 'precondition' for an effective communication with a divine interlocutor, and the invitation to the absent god to come is such an important feature that it gives the name to a specific sub-genre of hymns: the *hymns kletikos*, 'which literally means calling upon someone in the sense of wishing their presence'.¹²⁸ However, while the speaker of classical hymns remedies the problem by simply asking the divinity to come, confident in their summoning powers, that of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' opts for the more puzzling and apparently pointless act of asking the 'Spirit of Beauty' (13) where it is gone. In doing so, he evokes the phatic importance of copresence but does not seem to be actively trying to fulfil this basic requirement of both worldly and otherworldly communication. He rather chooses to address an unavailable interlocutor regardless of their absence, an act that frequently recurs in lyric poetry under the name of apostrophe.

Apostrophe is a rhetorical figure consisting in 'turning away' (according to the literal meaning of the word in ancient Greek) from the original audience of the utterance to address a second auditor. Popular conceptions of apostrophe have often tended to limit this wide definition to encompass only a certain kind of second auditors, identifying the figure with an 'address of an absent, dead, or inanimate being by a first-person speaker', as Barbara Johnson does.¹²⁹ The range of addressees that apostrophes contemplate has been variously defined, but they all have in common a certain degree of unavailability. In his insightful study of lyric address, William Waters restricts the term *apostrophe* 'to mean only address to unhearing entities', while Jonathan Culler reserves it for 'absent or impossible interlocutors'.¹³⁰ Culler is responsible for one of the most influential theories of apostrophe, which he first formulated in *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981) and then developed in *Theory of the Lyric*. The former famously claims that, by calling out to someone or something that is beyond the reach of the speaker, 'apostrophes may complicate or disrupt the circuit of communication, [...] but above all they are embarrassing'.¹³¹ Culler insistently emphasises this point and understands apostrophe to be 'the figure of all that is most radical, embarrassing, pretentious, and mystificatory in the lyric' to the point of identifying it 'with lyric itself'.¹³² The embarrassment that he associates with apostrophes appears to stem from their being 'functionally gratuitous invocations', that is to say, from their seemingly serious commitment to an impossible and hence purposeless act of

¹²⁷ Schlueter, p. 243.

¹²⁸ Schlueter, p. 243.

¹²⁹ Barbara Johnson, 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 29–47 (pp. 29–30).

¹³⁰ Waters, p. 3; Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 188.

¹³¹ Jonathan D. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 150.

¹³² Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 151.

communication directed towards ‘what is not an actual listener’.¹³³ A similar commitment can be found in the apostrophes to the absent and evasive Intellectual Beauty that recur throughout Shelley’s poem.

In the second stanza of ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, the unavailable ‘Spirit of Beauty’ (13) continues to be addressed in a paradoxical way: ‘Why dost thou pass away and leave our state, | This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?’ (16-17). The question is as impossible as the first, and the speaker appears to be aware of it, as shown by the fact that he immediately compares it to other questions that are destined to remain unanswered:

Ask why the sunlight not for ever
Weaves rainbows o’er yon mountain river,
Why aught should fail and fade that once is shewn,
Why fear and dream and death and birth
Cast on the daylight of this earth
Such gloom – why man has such a scope
For love and hate, despondency and hope? (18-24)

All these questions revolve around the mutability of natural and human life. In other words, they ask why these things cannot be constant and permanent, just as the poet asks Intellectual Beauty why it must ‘pass away’ (16) and leave us at times, like rainbows or hope. The idea that asking the ‘Spirit of Beauty’ (13) the reason for its inconstancy is as futile as asking the reason for the transience characterising the natural and human world is reinforced by the syntax of the lines. The two sets of questions present significantly different syntactical structures: while the former are direct interrogative sentences addressed to Intellectual Beauty, the latter are indirect interrogative clauses that depend on the imperative ‘ask’ (18). Though somewhat ambiguous, the meaning of the imperative seems to be directed to an impersonal *you* and to mean something along the lines of ‘if you want to know why the spirit of beauty sometimes disappears, you might as well wonder why these other things do the same: in both cases you will not be answered’. The following questions would then turn out to be rhetorical, that is, questions one asks without expecting an answer. The unlikelihood of ever receiving a reply to these queries is further confirmed by the first lines of the third stanza, when the poet states that ‘[n]o voice from some sublimer world hath ever | To sage or poet these responses given’ (25-26).

The rhetorical nature of the poet’s questions has been used by critics to support the idea of the poem as fundamentally ironic and sceptical. Hall, for instance, argues that ‘the unanswerable rhetorical questions, which are the only possible answers to those posed in lines 15-17, intimate a

¹³³ Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 157; Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 212.

skeptical and realistic poetic consciousness lurking behind the conventional elegiac rhetoric'.¹³⁴ The lines would then convey a radical distrust in the possibility for human beings, on the one hand, to unveil the mystery of the 'Spirit of Beauty' (13) and of earthly life and, on the other, to establish communication with the former. The rhetorical questions may seem to be delegated to an impersonal *you*, but as a matter of fact the act of asking is not so much delegated as evoked only to be denied: no one is supposed to truly ask them, for they are mentioned as mere examples of futile questions. If this aspect of the questions at lines 18-24 reflects on the questions at lines 15-17 as their unanswerability does, the poet's utterances would involve no authentic attempt to reach out to the 'Spirit of Beauty' (13). They would rather foreground the very impossibility and futility of communicating with Intellectual Beauty as well as with 'some sublimer world' (25). Such a reading of these lines is not misguided, but it only gives a partial picture. A sceptical attitude, in particular towards communication, is clearly not extraneous to these stanzas, and yet it is far less adamant than usually assumed.

As Rosenthal points out, 'one may be tempted to take the culminating queries of stanza two at face value and to read them as mere rhetorical questions', yet 'their grammar forces a more nuanced interpretation'.¹³⁵ He speculates about other possible recipients of the imperative, but another detail, which he notices but to which he gives no particular importance, is far more telling: although the questions have been said to be indirect, they end with a question mark. The resulting impression is that, at some unspecified point between lines 18 and 24, the questions turn from indirect to direct and, more importantly, from being delegated to the recipient of the imperative to being asked by the speaker himself in the present of the poetic utterance. The final question mark destabilises the syntax and the overt meaning of the lines by suggesting that, even though the speaker knows that such questions are unanswerable, he still cannot refrain from asking them – and from asking them to the 'Spirit of Beauty' (13). If addressed to anyone, in fact, the questions at lines 18-24 must be intended for Intellectual Beauty, not only because it is the recipient of the ones preceding them as well as the only addressee of the poem, but also because of some formal aspects of these lines.

When only their poetic form is taken into consideration, all the questions in the second stanza appear to be somewhat equivalent. The anaphoric use of 'why' in the first part of the lines 16, 18, 20, and 21, along with the fact that they all begin with two stressed syllables, does not reproduce any difference between the two sets of questions. It rather creates the impression that they are on the same plane, that is, that they are all asked by the speaker to the 'Spirit of Beauty' (13). Furthermore, the rhythmical movement of the stanza gives a sense of urgency to the utterances of the speaker, who

¹³⁴ Hall, p. 141.

¹³⁵ Rosenthal, pp. 39–40.

seems to ask these questions animated by some genuine impetus, despite his awareness of the impossibility – or at least unlikelihood – of ever receiving a reply. The double stress at the beginning of lines 16, 18, 20, 21, and 23, together with the feminine endings of lines 18-19 and the enjambments between them and between lines 22 and 23, rhythmically conveys a crescendo of pressing questions, which reaches its climax when the scheme of the lines is disrupted, as if it could no longer contain the urgency of the speaker: line 22 overflows into line 23, so that the last ‘why’ ends up occupying a medial position, and the flow of the last two lines is interrupted by two pauses. A similar urgent rhythm characterises the first address to the ‘Spirit of Beauty’ (13) at the beginning of the stanza: the initial inversion in line 13 gives a sense of acceleration, which intensifies after the medial pause due to two consecutive enjambments at the end of lines 13 and 14 until another medial pause in line 15 slows down the pace and leads to the actual question. The effect is that of the animated speech of someone who is so eager to ask the question that they rush over what comes before, in this case the relative clause separating the calling and the querying.

The sense of urgency that is conveyed by the rhythmic movement of the stanza somewhat contradicts its manifest meaning and undermines the poet’s sceptical attitude. It creates the impression that he is genuinely keen to ask these impossible questions. As a result, the queries at lines 18-24 are not to be considered as ‘mere rhetorical questions’.¹³⁶ They certainly retain their more explicit rhetorical nature to a certain extent, but the point is that they are not *merely* so: they are simultaneously *non-rhetorical*, that is, questions that are asked earnestly, as if truly expecting an answer. A tension ensues between the overt content of the lines and their formal texture, between scepticism and an opening to apparent impossibilities. In a fashion that is typical of ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, the tension is not resolved and the two contrasting motions coexist in the poem. The result is a paradoxical communicative act defying the very assumptions about what allows communication to take place, as an authentic communicative intent can be found in utterances that seem destined to fail from the very beginning. The rhythmic urgency of the speaker’s questions suggests that he is truly reaching out to the ‘Spirit of Beauty’ (13), even though the nonfulfillment of the most basic phatic condition of copresence should be enough to discourage him to do so. He genuinely commits himself to an act of impossible communication. The ways in which ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ resists and challenges common notions about communication will be discussed more extensively later, but now further attention should be paid to how this different interpretation of the second stanza affects the meaning of the following one.

The opening of the third stanza has been said to deny that any ‘voice from some sublimer world hath ever’ (25) given responses to the questions indirectly posed in the previous lines. This

¹³⁶ Rosenthal, p. 40.

passage is particularly relevant insofar as it is one of the few explicit mentions of communication with the Other World in the poem. It implies that an otherworldly interlocutor is expected to answer the queries about the mystery of life on earth, as doing so is presumably beyond human possibilities. Yet, by stating that no supernatural ‘voice’ (25) has ever replied, the poem seems to evoke the idea of otherworldly communication only to negate it. The emphasis on impossible communication in the second stanza would thus become an emphasis on the impossibility of communication with the Other World in particular. On a closer look, however, the latter is not categorically denied, as the lines do not claim that these questions will never be answered but simply state that they have not so far. The poem has been seen to actually suggest that these queries *may* receive a reply by non-rhetorically posing them to the ‘Spirit of Beauty’ (13), albeit in a way that is neither straightforward nor unquestionable but only intimated by a misplaced question mark. In other words, the poem opens the possibility that these questions are not from their very nature unanswerable but may be replied to under different circumstances, circumstances that do not involve a ‘voice from some sublimer world’ (25).

The reason for the failure of this communicative endeavour can be differently identified depending on which part of the phrase is given more weight. The mistake could have been to expect a reply from ‘some sublimer world’ (25), either because this other world is communicatively inaccessible or because it does not exist, but the lack of answers could also be attributed to other factors. As Rosenthal puts it, ‘responses there may be, but not in the form of a sublimer voice’s gift’.¹³⁷ Though he goes on to maintain that ‘the poet thereby denies the presence of a speaking subject’, this is not a necessary consequence of his potential denial of voice.¹³⁸ The speaker may rather be dismissing the vocal mode as inadequate to communicate with the Other World, a point to which I will return later. Another meaningful option is offered in the following lines, which state that the ‘vain endeavour’ (28) to communicate and receive answers from ‘some sublimer world’ (25) is recorded by ‘the name of God and ghosts and Heaven’ (27). These names stand for the various ways in which human beings have traditionally conceived their relationship with the Other World, which are all exposed as misguided and ineffective. Responses have been denied to humans because they sought them through the names created by these false systems of thought. Shelley returns to the idea of ‘poisonous names with which our youth is fed’ (53) in the fifth stanza, where they are equally ineffective to establish ‘high talk with the departed dead’ (52).

The fact that communication fails to be established when the wrong names are used resonates with notions of communication theory and foregrounds another important condition of contact.

¹³⁷ Rosenthal, p. 41.

¹³⁸ Rosenthal, p. 41.

Calling someone's name is an eminently phatic act: it often occurs at the beginning of an interaction to 'attract the attention of the interlocutor', which Jakobson considers to be one of the main functions of phatic speech, and to signal that the utterance is addressed to them, thus contributing to establishing and keeping open the communicative channel.¹³⁹ The same applies to communication with the Other World, though often in the magical sense of an actual conjuration. In evocations, for example, calling the name of the spirit or supernatural being that one wants to summon works as an irresistible spell that binds them to come and speak, as if it had an amplified form of phatic power. Relevantly to Shelley's poem, Ken Dowden describes the calling of the god's name in eminently phatic terms when speaking of classical hymns: 'You invoke a god by loudly calling his or her name [...], in effect ensuring that the divine audience is *attentive*'.¹⁴⁰ If calling someone by their name is a precondition – or at least a facilitating factor – for the creation of phatic contact, addressing 'some sublimer world' (25) by the wrong names of 'God and ghosts and Heaven' (27) cannot but result in failure. The poet calls these names '[f]rail spells' (29), alluding to the longstanding idea of the magical power of otherworldly names but also highlighting that these ones do not succeed in performing their summoning magic.

Regardless of its cause, failed communication haunts Shelley's poem. It is explicitly conveyed by the term 'vain endeavour' (28) and has been repeatedly evoked during the analysis. The phrase 'impossible communication' has been used several times to refer to the speaker's utterances inasmuch as they seem destined to fail: they are impossible because they address an absent interlocutor; they are impossible because they do not fulfil the requirements that would make it more likely for them to reach it; they are impossible because they ask questions that cannot be answered. The speaker's addresses to Intellectual Beauty appear to be doomed to failure not only because they do not comply with the phatic preconditions that allow contact to be established and even refuse to adopt the strategies through which they are usually fulfilled in similarly extraordinary communicative situations, as exemplified by other hymns, but also because the purpose of communication seems unattainable. In these stanzas, the latter seems to coincide with getting a reply. Earlier attempts to communicate with the Other World are called 'vain' precisely because no 'responses' (26) have ever been given. In a way that is in line with the most common understandings of communication, a successful exchange is presented as characterised by reciprocity and the imparting of information: questions need to be answered.

¹³⁹ Jakobson, p. 115.

¹⁴⁰ Ken Dowden, 'Rhetoric and Religion', in *A Companion to Greek Rhetoric*, ed. by Ian Worthington (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 320–35 (p. 324). A similar remark with regards to Christian hymns can be found in John R. Watson, *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 29.

The formal texture of the stanzas has been seen to complicate and undermine the apparent impossibility of the speaker's utterances, or at least to show him fully engage in an apparently impossible communicative endeavour. He asks questions even though he is aware of the futility of asking, and does so with authentic urgency. He challenges the very conditions that are commonly believed to make communication both possible and effective, and he commits to impossibility without seeming to acquiesce to failure or adopt an ironic stance. If it is true that the speaker's utterances betray a genuine communicative tension towards the absent interlocutor, however, it is also true that they do not actually receive reply in the end. Not only are the simultaneously rhetorical and non-rhetorical questions at lines 18-24 left unanswered, but the first question that the poet explicitly and directly asks to the 'Spirit of Beauty' (13) is also never replied to throughout the hymn. In spite of everything, ordinary communication norms seem to prevail over their poetic defiance and this act of impossible communication to remain destined to fail – if by failing we indeed mean not being answered. In the context of communication and of this poem, however, failure and success are particularly loaded and complex notions, as the next section will show. Even though the speaker's questions do not receive reply, something else happens.

1.3 'Vain endeavour', 'frail spells'

The idea that the communicative endeavour at the heart of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' fails is complicated and challenged by the fourth stanza of the poem, which shows how the lack of answers does not ultimately translate into a communicative impasse. In the second part of the stanza, the apostrophes to Intellectual Beauty intensify thanks to the anaphora of the stressed '[t]hou' at the beginning of lines 42 and 44, but this time they are followed by an imperative instead of a question: 'Depart not as thy shadow came' (46). The request is in contradiction with everything that has been said so far, especially the first query to the 'Spirit of Beauty' (13): 'where art thou gone?' (15). The premises of the two sentences are radically opposite: while the question presupposes that the interlocutor is absent, the request rests on the assumption of its presence, as it makes no sense to ask not to leave to someone who is already absent. Something occurred between the two addresses to Intellectual Beauty in the second and the fourth stanza, something that is clearly stated in the line: 'thy shadow came' (46). The absent interlocutor has somehow become present. Intellectual Beauty has come to visit '[t]his various world' (4).

As with all visitations, its presence is necessarily precarious. At the same time that the speaker registers it, he also acknowledges its fleeting nature, and the first thing he does is to ask for the enduring of a situation that already seems about to come to an end. 'Depart not' (47), he urges in the

following line, ‘lest the grave should be, | Like life and fear, a dark reality’ (47-48). The repetition betrays a pressing desire, but the rest of the sentence expresses awareness of the impossibility of seeing his request met. The grave is a ‘dark reality’ (48) for human beings, as confirmed by the final rhyme between ‘be’ (47) and ‘reality’ (48). The shadow is doomed to depart, it cannot stay in this world but temporarily, as the poem made clear from the very beginning. That its presence is unstable and even phantasmatic (it only involves a shadow) is also stressed on a formal level. The imperatives ‘[d]epart not’ (46, 47) convey the sense of only a half-presence: the succession of two stressed syllables slows down the rhythm and produces almost a little pause between ‘depart’ and ‘not’, as if to suggest that the shadow is suspended between absence and presence, just as there is a moment of suspension before the poet’s request to depart turns out to be the opposite. The presence of the ‘Spirit of Beauty’ (13) already linguistically contains – and entails – its absence.

However precarious and only momentarily glimpsed the apparition of the shadow is, something major must have happened to turn absence into presence over the course of three stanzas. One might argue that the poem happened (and only the poem could have happened), which is true but requires some more specific considerations. Nancy Moore Goslee rightly notices that the speaker’s plea ‘implies that the spirit [...] is here’ and that the stanza ‘marks the most immediate sense of Intellectual Beauty’s presence in the poem’.¹⁴¹ She adds that the speaker’s ‘invocation, then, has at least for the moment come close to succeeding’, but it is not entirely clear whether she refers to the invocation in stanza two or four.¹⁴² The request not to depart could be said to somewhat succeed in the sense that, while it is uttered, the shadow is assumed to still be present, but it cannot be held responsible for the apparition that constitutes its very premise. While discussing, instead, the first invocation at the beginning of the second stanza, Brian McGrath makes an interesting remark: ‘The poet’s direct address to the Spirit of Beauty comes just as the poet’s confidence wanes, as if the power of poetic address (the power of apostrophe) could bring before the poet this Power that is so quickly disappearing’.¹⁴³ McGrath presents this possibility as entirely hypothetical: the fact that the poet invokes the absent Intellectual Beauty *as if he could* make it appear by simply calling it does not mean that he actually *can*. If indeed the second stanza makes no such suggestion, the fourth one, however, does: the apostrophe seems to have reached its unavailable addressee and to have brought it before the speaker. His questions may fail in eliciting a reply from the ‘Spirit of Beauty’ (13) but ultimately succeed in evoking its presence. Perhaps failure is not the most appropriate term to describe the outcome of this impossible communication.

¹⁴¹ Nancy Moore Goslee, *Shelley’s Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 59.

¹⁴² Goslee, p. 59.

¹⁴³ Brian McGrath, ‘Shelley, among Other Things’, *MLN*, 133.5 (2018), 1188–1205 (p. 1192).

That poetry, in particular lyric poetry, uses language less to say or represent than to make things happen is a widespread idea in poetic theory, which goes under the name of lyric performativity. As Culler points out, the notion of the performative originally developed by Austin in his theory of speech acts has had a great appeal for literary critics, who have interpreted it in different, looser terms and placed literary discourse among the ‘performative linguistic practices that bring into being that to which they refer or accomplish that of which they speak’.¹⁴⁴ Culler, however, usefully argues for a stricter definition of literary performativity which leaves more general considerations about the status of literary discourse aside and allows to ‘retain some distinctiveness for genuinely performative effects’.¹⁴⁵ Not only is his narrower definition characteristic of lyric poetry specifically (being it an event that makes something happen in the present of the poetic utterance), but, even more narrowly, it refers only to ‘the special cases whereby a poem succeeds in bringing about what it describes’.¹⁴⁶ As an example of this peculiar phenomenon, Culler analyses Sappho’s ‘Ode to Aphrodite’, whose formal texture ‘creates the remarkable effect of an appearance by Aphrodite *in the present*, even though the poem claims to represent the appearance and the speech of past occasions’.¹⁴⁷ The poem somehow accomplishes what it describes: it asks Aphrodite to come and, thanks to the performative effect of lyric language, the deity does make her appearance in the present of the poetic utterance.

‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ presents a different and less straightforward but extremely interesting kind of performative effect. Since the speaker does not explicitly invoke the presence of the ‘Spirit of Beauty’ (13), its apparition cannot be said to performatively enact what the poem says. Yet, it is nonetheless the performative result of the speaker’s invocations, as becomes clear if notions of communication theory, notably the phatic function of speech, are taken into account. The first invocation to Intellectual Beauty ends with a paradoxical question that has been said to be destined to failure: it cannot be answered, and indeed it is not. The utterance, however, also acts at another communicative level that does not pertain to its content. Being the first direct address of the speaker to the ‘Spirit of Beauty’ (13), it has a decidedly phatic role: it is, first and foremost, an attempt to establish communicative contact with it. As Donald Mastronarde points out in his study of contact in Greek tragedy, the act itself of asking a question has a strong phatic component: ‘As an act of speech, the posing of a question seems to involve automatically a listener or sounding-board [...] with whom the questioner intends to make contact or believes he already has contact’.¹⁴⁸ The authentic urgency

¹⁴⁴ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 126.

¹⁴⁵ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 127.

¹⁴⁶ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 129.

¹⁴⁷ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 14.

¹⁴⁸ Donald J. Mastronarde, *Contact and Discontinuity: Some Conventions of Speech and Action on the Greek Tragic Stage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 6.

of the speaker in posing impossible questions can then be read in a different light, as stemming less from the eagerness of receiving a reply to queries that he is aware will not be answered than from the eagerness to establish phatic contact with Intellectual Beauty. Because the interlocutor is absent and apparently unreachable, contact too would seem destined to fail, but the speaker's utterances somehow manage to make the shadow present and, in doing so, 'posit the conditions for [their] own effectiveness', to use Angela Esterhammer's formulation of performativity.¹⁴⁹

Such an effect is inextricably linked to the poem's use of apostrophes and, at the same time, helps shed new light on the general function and workings of these 'unusual speech acts of strange address'.¹⁵⁰ Lyric apostrophes have been said to be impossible utterances according to the parameters of ordinary communication, and for this reason, as Waters highlights, they have been widely interpreted as 'not genuinely communicative'.¹⁵¹ Their incommunicativity is epitomised by what Culler calls 'the empty "O" that often accompanies apostrophe' and that 'beautifully illustrates the semantically empty play of language'.¹⁵² This 'O' is empty insofar as it does not communicate any semantic meaning: it is 'gratuitous' and constitutes apostrophe as an 'utterance of a special kind' that is marked as 'pure voicing' and 'not as mundane communication'.¹⁵³ Like the 'O' that is its distinctive – though by no means essential – feature, apostrophe does not convey any semantically relevant content. In Culler's words, it is 'voice' that 'calls in order to be calling'.¹⁵⁴ This definition has led apostrophe to often be understood as self-reflexive and devoid of any authentic communicative tension, at the risk of becoming 'an act of radical interiorization and solipsism' or a self-referential metapoetic gesture that 'works to establish a relation to the poetic tradition' by being a mere 'repetition of earlier poetic calls'.¹⁵⁵

Imparting information, however, is not the sole purpose of communication. In their influential work *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (1967), Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don Jackson draw a distinction between the 'content level' and the 'relationship level' of communication: the former is the part that 'conveys information' and is synonymous 'with the content of the message', whereas the latter 'refers to what sort of a message it is to be taken as, and, therefore, ultimately to the relationship between the communicants'.¹⁵⁶ Though Culler does not draw upon any notion of communication theory, he may be seen to gesture towards a similar relational function when

¹⁴⁹ Angela Esterhammer, *Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism*. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 9.

¹⁵⁰ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 212.

¹⁵¹ Waters, p. 3.

¹⁵² Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 212.

¹⁵³ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 213.

¹⁵⁴ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 216.

¹⁵⁵ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 225, 216–17.

¹⁵⁶ Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), p. 33.

he maintains that the figure of apostrophe ‘seems above all to seek to establish relations between self and other’.¹⁵⁷ The kind of relationship that he believes apostrophes to create is determined by their ‘animate presuppositions’.¹⁵⁸ According to him, ‘the function of apostrophe is to constitute encounters with the world as relations between subjects’.¹⁵⁹ By addressing an unhearing and impossible interlocutor as if they could ‘respond in some way, if only by listening’, apostrophes ‘posit’ them as ‘a subject’, even when they would not normally fall into this category: in other words, they animate them.¹⁶⁰

The conception of apostrophe as an ‘act of animation’ is shared by several critics and theorists, most notably Barbara Johnson, but rests on a limited consideration of its addressees.¹⁶¹ In spite of the rather broad definition that he has been said to provide, Culler ends up laying special emphasis on poems ‘daring to address the sun, the winds, the stars’ and, therefore, on natural entities as the prototypical recipients of apostrophic calling.¹⁶² While the animating power of apostrophic calling in giving subjecthood and voice makes reasonable sense if applied to nature or inanimate objects, it is far less pertinent to otherworldly interlocutors. One of the main shortcomings of most common theories of apostrophe is the fact that they do not differentiate between its potential addressees but rather place ‘winds, flowers, mountains, gods, beloveds’ on the same plane, as if they were interchangeable.¹⁶³ Supernatural beings and flowers, however, are not equivalent, and addressing them does not have the same function and implications. Entities from the Other World cannot be animated because they already possess animation and agency, often to a higher, more numinous degree than the human speaker. Even in these cases, the content-wise empty speech act of apostrophising has its purpose in the relational aspect of the utterance, but the relationship that it engenders and sustains revolves less around ‘throw[ing] voice, life, and human form into the addressee’ than around calling as if to genuinely reach out to them, notwithstanding the impossible presuppositions of this gesture that Culler finds so embarrassing.¹⁶⁴

From this perspective, the most penetrating interpretation of (Romantic) apostrophe and criticism of Culler’s position are offered by Gavin Hopps. In ‘Romantic Invocation: A Form of Impossibility’ (2007), whose title already betrays an engagement with impossibility that is aligned

¹⁵⁷ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 225.

¹⁵⁸ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 240.

¹⁵⁹ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 156.

¹⁶⁰ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 237.

¹⁶¹ Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 6. See, for example, Johnson, ‘Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion’; J. Douglas Kneale, ‘Romantic Aversions: Apostrophe Reconsidered’, *ELH*, 58.1 (1991), 141–65 (p. 156); Thomas M. Greene, ‘Poetry as Invocation’, *New Literary History*, 24.3 (1993), 495–517 (p. 513).

¹⁶² Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 229.

¹⁶³ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 217.

¹⁶⁴ Johnson, ‘Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion’, p. 30.

with mine, Hopps calls into question two widespread assumptions about ‘the act of invocation in poetry’: that it ‘is not doing what it purports to do’ and that ‘it is not able to do what it purports to do’.¹⁶⁵ While acknowledging the ‘hyperbolic calling, gratuitously sustained stammering and invocatory postponement of invocation’ that often characterise Romantic apostrophes, Hopps maintains that these elements foregrounded by Culler do not ‘necessarily argue against the utterance’s aspirations’: as a matter of fact, they even ‘paradoxically assist the utterance’s reaching out towards – even as it appears to languish away from – its addressee’.¹⁶⁶ What apostrophes aspire to do is precisely reaching out to their addressees and thereby ‘instantiat[ing] a mode of relation’ that, according to Hopps, ‘narrows or helps us traverse the distance between the caller and that which is called’.¹⁶⁷ Not coincidentally, Hopps comes to this conclusion by considering apostrophes as ‘acts of gratuitously calling out to the transcendent’, replacing Culler’s predilection for natural interlocutors with an attention to transcendence that is simultaneously closer to and distant from my focus.¹⁶⁸ Hopps adopts ‘a theological point of view’ in an attempt to ‘take the metaphysical implications of apostrophe seriously’, and his understanding of apostrophic calling derives from a comparison with liturgical invocations.¹⁶⁹ His view of Romantic apostrophe as a ‘wagering on the possibility of transcendence’ is affected by – and affects – what he believes to be the Romantic attitude and ‘belief’ towards it, a question that has been said to be beyond the scope of this study.¹⁷⁰

While I agree with Hopps that apostrophe’s ‘apparent gratuity and the desire it betokens to dwell in calling make sense in a way that has been ignored by Culler’, I maintain that poetically entertaining the possibility of an impossible communication does not necessarily equate to making claims on the metaphysical reality of the involved parties.¹⁷¹ Looking at apostrophes only from the former standpoint, that is to say, as communicative acts that can be approached through the lens of communication theory, actually provides illuminating insights on such a purportedly ‘extravagant’ speech act, especially on exactly what kind of relation it aims to instantiate and how.¹⁷² Hopps’s remark that apostrophe is a way to bridge the distance between the caller and the called acquires a more specific and cogent meaning when considered in relation to the fact that calling is a fundamentally phatic gesture. By calling out to someone, we aim first and foremost to establish contact with them, overcoming the distance between us through the opening of a communicative

¹⁶⁵ Gavin Hopps, ‘Romantic Invocation: A Form of Impossibility’, in *Romanticism and Form*, ed. by Alan Rawes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 40–59 (p. 46).

¹⁶⁶ Hopps, ‘Romantic Invocation’, pp. 53–54.

¹⁶⁷ Hopps, ‘Romantic Invocation’, p. 50.

¹⁶⁸ Hopps, ‘Romantic Invocation’, p. 50.

¹⁶⁹ Gavin Hopps, ‘Beyond Embarrassment: A Post-Secular Reading of Apostrophe’, *Romanticism*, 11.2 (2005), 224–41 (pp. 224, 229).

¹⁷⁰ Hopps, ‘Romantic Invocation’, pp. 57, 40.

¹⁷¹ Hopps, ‘Romantic Invocation’, p. 50.

¹⁷² Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 212.

channel. We send forth a semantically empty utterance not because we have no actual intention of communicating, but because what we say is far less important than the fact that we are saying it – more precisely, that we are calling. Seen in this light, Culler’s assertion that, in apostrophes, ‘voice calls in order to be calling’ can be interpreted in a different way: not as indicative of the gratuitous and self-referential nature of apostrophes but of their distinctly phatic function.¹⁷³ Voice calls in order to be calling insofar as its utterances are functional to make and maintain contact rather than conveying any kind of informational content. Instead of making its addressee animate, apostrophe strives to make them communicatively available.

Although lyric address has been sometimes read in connection to Jakobson’s functions of language, the phatic has been so far overlooked. Johnson associates the vocative ‘O’ with the ‘conative function, or the pure presencing of the second person’ in opposition to the ‘emotive function, or the pure presencing of the first person’ of the expressive ‘oh’, and Douglas Kneale similarly relates the ‘vocative form of discourse’ to Jakobson’s conative function.¹⁷⁴ While it is undeniably true that apostrophe (as a vocative gesture towards a *you*) has a conative component, which Jakobson identifies with an ‘[o]rientation toward the addressee’, it is also true that it does not exclusively concern its recipient but relationally involves the caller: calling always entails two poles and the arc that it draws to join them, however tentatively and precariously.¹⁷⁵ This phatic potential of apostrophes has gone unnoticed presumably because of the impossibility that has been seen to characterise their communicative endeavour and that has often appeared to readers as an embarrassing ‘relic of archaic beliefs’.¹⁷⁶ It is definitely not my intention to contend that apostrophes are genuine attempts to extradiegetically establish communication with those they call upon. Rather, I argue that the possibility of phatic contact with an ordinarily unavailable interlocutor opened up by apostrophes is seriously contemplated, explored, and exploited by the poems under scrutiny, which, in doing so, create remarkable effects of ghostly copresence and sustain a distinctly poetic mode of impossible communication.

Culler points out that ‘few are the poets who actually have the temerity to imagine an explicit response’ to their apostrophic calling.¹⁷⁷ Shelley is one of them, though his temerity lies less in imagining a response in the sense of an answer than in imagining an effect. How the apparition of Intellectual Beauty is a performative accomplishment of the speaker’s calling can be finally clarified. As Culler maintains, apostrophe as ‘a special sort of linguistic event in a lyric present’ has primarily

¹⁷³ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 216.

¹⁷⁴ Johnson, ‘Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion’, p. 31; Kneale, p. 142.

¹⁷⁵ Jakobson, p. 114.

¹⁷⁶ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 155.

¹⁷⁷ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 237.

to do with ‘the power of poetry to make something happen’, in other words, with performativity.¹⁷⁸ The apostrophes in ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ do not performatively realise their content, as performative speech acts are generally deemed to be, but rather their phatic implications: they create themselves the conditions for the communicative contact that they are seeking to establish. The manifestation of the shadow testifies that its invocation almost magically brought about the very copresence that was both the prerequisite and the desired outcome of this phatic gesture. The seemingly futile act of calling out to an absent addressee turns out to be a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Curran maintains that Intellectual Beauty is invoked ‘as if absence could be inverted into presence by simple intensity of desire’, but it is not something as vague as the intensity of desire that transforms absence into presence.¹⁷⁹ It is the linguistic fabric of lyric address, which performatively enacts the phatic function of the speaker’s communicative act. When considered from the perspective of performative and phatic speech, the impossible communication at the heart of Shelley’s poem is far from being a failure. On the contrary, it succeeds in the extraordinary act of turning a poetic invocation into something close to an actual summoning, thus suggesting a different idea of what constitutes the purpose and success of communication. If getting answers to impossible questions is not the main outcome – and perhaps not even the main goal – of the addresses to Intellectual Beauty, the hymn then implies an alternative model of communication where the exchange of information plays a less important role than making something happen, something that coincides with the institution of a communicative channel between the interlocutors for the sake of being and staying in contact. ‘Depart not’ (46) is what the speaker wants from the ‘Spirit of Beauty’ (13) once it is fleetingly present before him.

The phatic tension of the poem is not limited to apostrophes, questions, and other forms of address, but it can also be related to its overall definition as a hymn. In this regard, it is interesting and enlightening to consider Mihhail Lotman’s ‘Impossible Communication: The Logical-Semantical Structure and Communicative Perspective of Hymn’ (2013), a study of the hymn genre from the standpoint of communication theory. Whereas most classical hymns consist, in Schlueter’s words, in ‘a logically coherent and perfectly ordered form of speech’ that, despite addressing an extraordinary interlocutor, employs quite ordinary communicative strategies with the clear ultimate purpose of having their request heard and fulfilled by the deity, Lotman finds Christian hymns, which do not revolve around the fulfilment of a prayer, far more communicatively baffling.¹⁸⁰ Though ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ has been said to follow the rhetorical structure of the classical hymn on the

¹⁷⁸ Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, pp. 213, 155.

¹⁷⁹ Curran, p. 62.

¹⁸⁰ Schlueter, p. 243.

surface, it does not share its communicative straightforwardness. It does end with a request at lines 78-81 ('Thus let thy power [...] to my onward life supply | Its calm'), but such a request can hardly be considered the culmination of the poem, the main objective to which everything else is functional and subordinated. It looks more like a coda, which does not carry greater communicative weight, quite the contrary, and is another way in which Shelley subverts – while drawing on – the conventions of classical hymnology.

According to Lotman, hymns are anything but communicatively straightforward. As indicated by the title itself, he considers them instances of 'impossible communication', but he understands the phrase differently from how I have used it so far. Lotman paraphrases it as 'irrational and superrational forms of communication', giving more emphasis to a lack of rationality or rationale in the utterance than to its defiance of the conditions that are supposed to make communication possible and effective.¹⁸¹ According to him, despite being 'a form which is clearly oriented towards communicativity', the communicative aims of the hymn are 'totally enigmatic'.¹⁸² The heart of the problem lies in the fact that the express purpose of the hymn is typically to praise, but the speech act of praising God does not seem to make sense from an informational standpoint.¹⁸³ Its informative value is at the very least doubtful, as to praise means to inform someone of their own quality and, in the specific case of God, to inform someone omniscient of something that the human speaker cannot even fully apprehend. The subtleties of Lotman's argument can be overlooked, since they do not concern 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' nor can they be directly referred to the communicative situation of the poem. What is most significant about Lotman's essay is that it shows the inadequacy of a model of communication only relying on informative value to account for the hymn as a communicative act. The communicatively impossible – in the sense of irrational – aspect of the hymn only emerges if it is considered exclusively in terms of an exchange of information, but this idea stems from a limited and outdated view of what constitutes communication. When considered as a kind of communication that is not primarily aimed at conveying information to the interlocutor, the hymn ceases to be pointless.

Although he does not explicitly denounce the shortcomings of an idea of communication as exclusively informative, Lotman seems to come to a similar conclusion, as he ultimately claims for the hymn a different function depending on a different use of language. According to him, 'the primary illocutive purpose of hymn is declarative': it is a speech act that affects or changes reality by

¹⁸¹ Mihhail Lotman, 'Impossible Communication: The Logical-Semantical Structure and Communicative Perspective of Hymn', in *Il senso delle soggettività: Ricerche semiotiche*, ed. by Bianca Terracciano and Dario Mangano (Roma: Ed. Nuova cultura, 2013), pp. 72–80 (p. 72).

¹⁸² Lotman, p. 73.

¹⁸³ The OED defines the hymn as '[a] song of praise to God', the same definition given by Augustine: see M. Pauline Parker, 'The Hymn as a Literary Form', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 8.4 (1975), 392–419 (p. 399).

being uttered and whose aim, in this case, is ‘to preserve the harmony of the universe’.¹⁸⁴ Lotman’s interpretation, however, may seem quite far-fetched, and indeed it relies almost entirely on a single text, *Sanctus*, which he identifies as paradigmatic of the genre as a whole. Lotman fails to see that another purpose can be found in hymns without falling into the informative trap but also without having to go to such lengths. He cannot see it because he does not take into consideration the phatic function of speech and the coexistence of a ‘content’ and ‘relationship’ dimension in communication. If the content level is irrelevant in the case of hymns, it is reasonable to assume that the relationship level plays a greater role. Hymns would thus aim less to gratuitously convey information to God than to establish or confirm a relationship with him, something that is arguably more immediately pressing than the harmony of the universe for a human speaker addressing a transcendent interlocutor that they cannot be certain to reach. This relationship has a prominent, albeit not exclusive, phatic nature. In hymns, human beings may be seen to reach out to God for the mere sake of coming in contact with him, as made evident by those instances mentioned by Lotman when we ‘do not ask for a certain thing, but only for [God] to hear our prayer’: we call only to be heard.¹⁸⁵

Leaving aside the different focus and theme, my conclusions diverge from Lotman’s not only because I have recourse to other notions of communication theory but also because my approach is significantly different. At the beginning of his essay, Lotman makes it clear that he ‘will leave aside all aspects of verbal art related to it; just the logical-communicative aspects of hymn will be addressed’.¹⁸⁶ The present study aims, instead, to combine communication theory precisely with close attention to the aspects of verbal art in the poems under scrutiny and see how the two perspectives enrich, question, and converse with each other. The focus on the formal nuances and subtleties of Shelley’s hymn has had a fundamental part in shedding light on the phatic purpose and performative effect of the speaker’s utterances. It also plays the equally important role of showing how the poem undermines any settled position and discourages the reader from accepting even the almost magical summoning of Intellectual Beauty as a solution to its unsolved tension and contradictory motions. The fact that the speaker’s questions accomplish something different does not erase the fact that they are nonetheless posed and left unanswered. As highlighted by Susan Wolfson in her seminal study of the Romantic interrogative mode, ‘the event of an unanswered question retains a disruptive effect’.¹⁸⁷ At the same time, the apparition of the shadow only results in a precarious half-presence, already on the verge of ineluctable absence, less triumphant than one would expect.

¹⁸⁴ Lotman, p. 79.

¹⁸⁵ Lotman, p. 77.

¹⁸⁶ Lotman, p. 72.

¹⁸⁷ Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 21.

While it is true that, by posing questions that do not receive reply but make something else happen, the hymn suggests a different function for communication, thus jeopardising the idea of its failure, it is also true that this non-failure does not equate to absolute success. The spell of speaker's words both succeeds and fails. Though not 'vain' (28), it appears to be just as '[f]rail' (29) as the others: its 'uttered charm might not avail to sever, | From all we hear and all we see, | Doubt, chance, and mutability' (29-31). That doubt, chance, and mutability cannot ever be severed from what we hear and see is confirmed by the fact that the latter is placed between the verb and its object, as if they were so inseparable as to violate the conventions of grammar. The 'Spirit of Beauty' (13) might work this magic, but its charm is too fleeting, and so is that of the poet. The presence of the shadow in this world – and in the hymn – cannot last, and the summoning force of the speaker's utterances cannot make it. Even if the voice of the poet is so powerful that, by calling the absent interlocutor (that is, by making it present linguistically), it bestows upon it some sort of actual presence, turning an invocation into an evocation does not turn out to be the triumph that one would assume it to be. In 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', there is no place for triumph, only for '[f]rail spells' (29). Whether the success of communication is measured by the exchanged information or by the phatic creation of contact, the very parameters of success and failure turn out to be inadequate to account for the communicative experience of the hymn. Uncertainty surrounds even the performative magic of the speaker's calling, and yet, in spite of it, the poem still addresses and calls, for that is what poetry does. In doing so, it moves beyond the notions of success and failure by poetically inhabiting the impossible dimension opened by its seemingly pointless communicative endeavour. Impossibility, Shelley's hymn suggests, is less a sign of failure than a condition of the relationship with the Other.

1.4 Reaching out vs turning inwards

The potential futility of calling is more decidedly foregrounded in the fifth stanza, which resembles most closely the *mnemosyne* section of the hymn (where an event of the past is usually told as evidence of a pre-existing relationship between the human speaker and the divine addressee) and opens with the most explicitly represented attempt to communicate with the Other World of the whole poem:

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.
I called on poisonous names with which our youth is fed;
I was not heard – I saw them not – (49-54).

Similar accounts of youthful aspirations to converse with the dead recur a few times in Shelley's poetry, most notably in 'Alastor' (1816), where the speaker recalls having 'made my bed | In charnels and on coffins' (22-23) in the hope of 'still[ing] these obstinate questionings | Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost, | Thy messenger, to render up the tale | Of what we are' (26-29). The passage presents striking similarities with 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty': the speaker is addressing a mysterious, possibly otherworldly entity that he calls 'Mother of this unfathomable world' (18), from whom he longs to receive answers about the mystery of the interlocutor and of human life and with whom he attempted to establish communication through an intermediary, a 'messenger' (28). The possibility of communicating with the dead must have particularly captured Shelley's imagination, given that he revisits the same scenario in at least two of his main poems. Both in 'Alastor' and in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', however, these attempts seem to result in nothing but a frustrated wish.

In the hymn, the speaker's juvenile hopes for otherworldly communication in the form of 'high talk with the departed dead' (52) remain unfulfilled: 'I was not heard – I saw them not' (54). It comes as no surprise that the dead never answered his calls, given that he addressed them by the 'poisonous names' (53) of religion and superstition that the poem has already denounced as false and inadequate. The syntax of line 54 implies an even bleaker option. The fact that the speaker is the grammatical subject of the sentence both when he is the object of the perception ('I was not heard') and when he is the subject ('I saw them not') insinuates that he is the only one with agency, in other words, that there is no one else in those chambers and that any prospect of communication is but a fancied impossibility. Yet, once again, the poem destabilises negative certainties as much as positive ones. If it is true that the speaker was 'not heard' (54) and that the passive form hints that there was no one to hear him, it is also true that the chambers are earlier said to be 'listening' (50). Just as he is haunted by his failure to reach out to the dead, so the lines are haunted by the very opposite thing: the possibility that someone was indeed listening. This possibility of presence and contact comes to reality in the second part of the stanza, which suddenly changes direction at line 55, featuring what Hogle aptly calls 'an alternative to the moment of divine descent that has long been conventional in the hymns of various faiths'.¹⁸⁸

'When musing deeply on the lot | Of life' (55-56), the speaker recounts, '[s]udden, thy shadow fell on me; | I shrieked, and clasped my hands in extacy' (59-60). At last, he comes into contact with Intellectual Beauty (or, more precisely, with the mediating shadow), and their encounter comprises first contemplation, then ecstasy. It begins with the speaker musing 'deeply' (55), and the new meditative tone of the lines is conveyed by the sudden but smooth transition from the previous scene. As Daniel Westwood points out, 'the syntactical ambiguity of "when musing deeply on the lot",

¹⁸⁸ Hogle, *Shelley's Process*, p. 65.

which might either begin a new sentence or mark a continuation of [the preceding one] compounds this sense of the poem swirling in the mists of contemplation'.¹⁸⁹ This introspective moment, however, is soon interrupted by the abrupt visitation of the shadow at line 59, which results in an ecstatic experience accompanied by some of its typical outward displays: he shrieks and clasps his hands. At first glance, the two motions may seem contradictory, given that musing deeply entails a turning inwards inside oneself whereas ecstasy a going out of oneself, but they actually work in perfect synergy and their combination will be key to illuminate Shelley's complex representation of contact with mysterious Otherness.

In her discussion of Shelley's attitude towards language and its limitations, Suzanne Barnett argues that ecstasy provided him with a paradigm of experiences that 'tested the boundaries of self and other' in ways that words cannot.¹⁹⁰ Though the ecstasy of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' is more reminiscent of a religious epiphany of union with God than of the 'pagan-inspired ideology of ecstatic dissolution' to which Barnett refers, they both constitute 'a unique opportunity for a mortal to participate in the divine' and, more importantly, to do so by means that are alternative to communication and voice.¹⁹¹ The stanza seems almost to compare these two methods and contrast their very different outcomes: while the first part outlines the poet's unsuccessful attempts to talk with the dead, the second focuses on the descent of the shadow upon him in a moment of wordless ecstasy. Ecstatic experience as a mode of interaction transcending language seems to succeed where verbal communication fails. After calling out proves to be vain, the shadow manifests in a more immediate and intimate way to the speaker, who suddenly and mysteriously senses its influence upon him. In doing so, Intellectual Beauty fulfils its visiting function on a different level than has been seen so far. It does not simply visit this world in the general sense of coming and temporarily staying here, but it also performs an act of visitation according to its 'divine or supernatural' meaning, i.e. '[t]he action, on the part of God or some supernatural power, of coming to, or exercising power over, a person or people for some end' (*OED*).

The feeling of the otherworldly presence does not seem to come from any sense in particular, an idea that is also found in another poem by Shelley dealing with the overcoming of the boundary between life and death. In 'A Summer-Evening Churchyard', the speaker is wandering among the dead 'sleeping in their sepulchres' (19) when he hears 'a thrilling sound' (20).¹⁹² Hearing, however,

¹⁸⁹ Daniel Westwood, 'Movement in "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 48.1 (2017), 32–39 (p. 36).

¹⁹⁰ Barnett, p. 10.

¹⁹¹ Barnett, pp. 218, 102.

¹⁹² Quotes from 'A Summer-Evening Churchyard' are from Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. by Jack Donovan and Cian Duffy (London: Penguin Books, 2016). The prominence of the acoustic dimension in Shelley's early supernatural – and more conventionally Gothic – poems is highlighted in David Duff, 'Harps, Heroes and Yelling Vampires: The 1810 Poetry Collections', in *The Neglected Shelley*, ed. by Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 51–76.

is not the most accurate verb. The strange sound is only '[h]alf sense' (21), for the other 'half' is 'thought' (21). This could lead to interpret it as a figment of the speaker's imagination: he hears something and thinks – somewhat delusively – that it comes from the dead in their graves. Yet, the rest of the poem leads to another interpretation. The stanza ends by stating that the sound's 'awful hush is felt inaudibly' (24), thus suggesting that it is less a mere product of the speaker's mind than a different kind of auditory sensation, one that it is felt without being heard. This paradoxical perception eludes or bypasses his senses but somehow still reaches him. A similar idea is evoked in *Queen Mab*, when it is said that 'the Spirit felt the Fairy's burning speech' (2): the disembodied soul of Ianthe feels instead of hearing the words of the fairy queen. Shelley appears to have developed his own version of the longstanding belief that supernatural beings communicate in a way that dispenses with sensory signifiers and that humans can have some, albeit limited, access to this mode under certain circumstances. This possibility is the other side of the approximation discussed in the first section. If it is true that the distance between the human and the otherworldly is overcome by one part approximating the faculties of the other, it is also true that the process that can go both ways.

The two sections of the fifth stanza of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' re-enact a contrast between modes of interaction that roughly correspond to these two options: on the one hand, communication through perceptible speech; on the other, an immediate manifestation within the speaker's mind or soul. While the former entails a calling out to the ghosts of the dead, the latter consists in the opposite motion of turning inwards and 'musing deeply' (55). Rather than striving to approach the other by projecting his voice outside himself, the speaker withdraws into his own interiority as if tuning into his self. Such a moment of introspection is reminiscent of the inward turn that is commonly believed to be one of the most important and pervasive characteristics of Romanticism and Romantic poetics. In line with the general Romantic trend prioritising interiority and looking inwards, it is when the speaker abandons his attempts to reach out and turns within that he succeeds in coming into contact with Intellectual Beauty. This inward motion has been identified by many critics as a main feature of the poem, which is consequently believed to share the subjectivism and self-reflexivity usually associated with this aspect of Romanticism. Curran maintains that Shelley's poem 'turns inward to explore its own impulse', while Tetreault argues that, because 'transcendent otherness has no authority for Shelley', the poet 'must turn within'.¹⁹³ According to him, 'the Hymn ultimately locates its centre in the self of the lyric process'.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, Paul Whickman asserts that, following the inner revelation at the end of the fifth stanza, the poem

¹⁹³ Curran, p. 61; Tetreault, p. 89.

¹⁹⁴ Tetreault, p. 91.

suggests that ‘the move [...] is one towards a worship of the poet’s own mind, or, as is often referred to in relation to Wordsworth, the egotistical sublime’.¹⁹⁵

All these critics interpret the inward turn of the poem as affirming not only the centrality but the absolute priority of the self over anything else. In these readings of the hymn as self-reflective and self-absorbed, there is no room for the other, let alone the Other, which is displaced and ultimately denied. Everything seems to take place and exist only in the interiority of the poet, which is the source of all value and poetry. In a fashion that is not uncommon to accounts of Romanticism, subjectivity turns into subjectivism and introspection into internalisation, hence the idea of ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ as dominated by a typically Romantic movement of lyric withdrawal culminating in something closer to solipsism. While it is true that one of the key moments of the poem involves a typically Romantic turn within, it is also true that this introspective motion is defined in very different terms. The category of the egotistical sublime, which is evoked by Whickman and best embodied by the self-centred poetry of Wordsworth, does not adequately describe Shelley’s poem. It may be suited for the poet of ‘Alastor’, who, while listening out for a supernatural other, only hears a voice that is ‘like the voice of his own soul’ (153) and turns out to be, in Barnett’s words, ‘the ultimate image of self-involvement’.¹⁹⁶ However, both the Preface and the poem itself actually criticise the ‘self-centred seclusion’ of ‘the Poet’, whose character is a critical representation of Wordsworthian sublime egotism.¹⁹⁷ As Barnett highlights, ‘Alastor’ records ‘Shelley’s profound disenchantment with Wordsworth by portraying ‘a Wordsworthian “Poet of nature”’ who ‘submits to solipsism and perishes’.¹⁹⁸

‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ presents a strikingly different picture. When the speaker turns inwards, what happens is the opposite of a solipsistic triumph of self-absorption: ‘thy shadow fell on me’ (59). Rather than being confronted with nothing but his own self, he is visited by the Other. The ecstatic nature of this experience, which initially seemed in contradiction with the introspective motion constituting its prelude, actually contributes to redefining this typically Romantic moment as an occasion of opening to the other (potentially the Other) instead of folding back on oneself. As suggested by its very etymological meaning, ecstasy entails a displacement of the self that commonly results in a blurring of the boundaries with the (often divine) other and in a moment of union with them. The poem ultimately seems to do the opposite of ‘displacing the locus of “Power” from the other to the self’ and to come closer to what Hall describes as ‘the sense of being interpenetrated or

¹⁹⁵ Whickman, p. 152.

¹⁹⁶ Barnett, p. 226.

¹⁹⁷ Shelley, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 73.

¹⁹⁸ Barnett, p. 90. See also Tetreault, pp. 46–60.

enveloped or dissolved by a power from outside the self'.¹⁹⁹ Turning inwards proves to be a way of welcoming and coming into contact with the Other within, in this case the 'Spirit of Beauty' (13), whose ability to penetrate and pervade human beings had already been foregrounded. Instead of worshipping the self-creating powers of his own mind, the speaker thus becomes himself 'a vehicle, a transmitter, a hierophant' of something that comes from without and is beyond his will.²⁰⁰

A similar possession by the other is also the aspiration of Shelley's most famous poem 'Ode to the West Wind', where the speaker's repeated invocations culminate in the following request: 'Be thou, Spirit fierce, | My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!' (61-62). The speaker wishes for an identification of self and other that would make him the medium of the other's voice: 'Be through my lips to unawakened Earth | The trumpet of a prophecy!' (68-69). There is, however, a fundamental difference between the two poems. In 'Ode to the West Wind', the speaker attempts to achieve spiritual union with the addressee by asking for it while calling out to the wind, that is to say, by having recourse to the vocal and communicative mode that the fifth stanza of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' seems to dismiss in favour of the immediacy of ecstatic revelation. The ode, which Barbara Johnson calls 'the ultimate apostrophic poem', appears to be a celebration of the phatic and almost magical powers of poetic addresses.²⁰¹ The first three stanzas consist of a series of elaborate apostrophes ending with the eminently phatic pleas 'O hear!' (14, 28, 42): the speaker wants nothing but to be heard and thereby establish a communicative contact with his addressee. The final request of becoming one with the spirit of the wind relies on the success of the previous invocations in making it an available interlocutor, despite the fact that, unlike the hymn, the ode does not feature a performative realisation of the summoning powers of poetic voice. Even though the fifth stanza of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' suggests that calling is a less effective way of coming into contact with the Other compared to direct inner manifestation, it should not be forgotten, in fact, that the preceding stanza showcased the ability of the poet's utterances to turn absence into presence and, even more importantly, that this tale of the triumph of ecstasy over speech is told in a poem, which is itself a verbal address to the 'Spirit of the Beauty' (13) and one that seems to succeed, at least for a fleeting moment.

Just as it constantly stays in balance on the threshold between certainty and uncertainty, so 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' is animated by an unsolved tension between opposite modes of approaching its elusive and mysterious addressee: reaching out vs turning inwards, communication vs ecstasy, calling vs being possessed. Shelley's poem mobilises all these different possibilities of envisioning contact with the Other World, exploring their implications and limitations without

¹⁹⁹ Tetreault, p. 86; Hall, p. 132.

²⁰⁰ Hall, p. 147.

²⁰¹ Johnson, 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion', p. 31.

resolving their conflicting coexistence but rather navigating the rich ambiguities it creates. These dichotomies have been said to roughly reimagine two well-established paradigms of otherworldly communication, but they also both have a specific relevance to discourses about poetry, Romantic poetry in particular. On the one hand, reaching out corresponds to the phatic gesture of apostrophic calling, which, as pointed out in the introduction, has a privileged relationship with Romantic poetry. Culler himself acknowledges the strong associations between the figure of apostrophe and Romanticism when he mentions that the former is often seen as ‘a feature of romantic poetry now left behind by a more ironic age.’²⁰² On the other hand, the act of turning inwards as a way of ecstatically opening oneself to the visitation of the Other evokes a long-standing notion of poetic creation as *furor poeticus* or, in Susan Stewart’s words, ‘willed possession’, a sought-for and consensual invasion of the self by the other.²⁰³ This conception has accompanied the history of poetry since classical times but, as Stewart herself notes, was particularly prominent in early nineteenth-century theories of ‘romantic inspiration’ and of the poet as prophet.²⁰⁴ One of the most famous examples of this Romantic view of poetry is usually found precisely in ‘Ode to the West Wind’, in the speaker’s desire to turn his voice into a medium of prophecy by becoming one with the spirit of the wind.

‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ has similarly been interpreted as concerned with ideas about poetry and creativity, even though they are less overtly present in the text. Hall, for instance, states that, through this poem, Shelley ‘assumes the role of poet-prophet’ and that ‘like the biblical prophet, the Shelleyan poet-prophet must rely upon a Power beyond himself’.²⁰⁵ The descent of the ‘Spirit of Beauty’ (13) upon the speaker thus becomes a way of representing poetic inspiration as a power beyond himself. As John Jay Baker highlights, ‘poetic vocation has traditionally been represented as the interpellation of one being by another’, which almost takes the form of a ventriloquisation of the poet’s voice: ‘A presence intervenes in the life of the poet to become permanently identified with the voice of poetry’.²⁰⁶ Baker, however, argues that the self-reflexivity of Romantic poetry alters this model so as to avoid ‘investing a discrete subject with authority as the source of poetic vocation’, which is instead located in ‘a free selfhood’.²⁰⁷ He interprets ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ accordingly as ‘a poem of self-accounting’, but the complex way in which Shelley redefines the Romantic inward turn undermines his reading and suggests that, if the poem is an account of poetic vocation, it is one that finds its source less in the self than in the Other within.²⁰⁸

²⁰² Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 188.

²⁰³ Susan Stewart, ‘Lyric Possession’, *Critical Inquiry*, 22.1 (1995), 34–63 (p. 36).

²⁰⁴ Susan Stewart, ‘Lyric Possession’, p. 36.

²⁰⁵ Hall, pp. 126, 147.

²⁰⁶ John Jay Baker, ‘Poetic Calling, Poetic Failure: Self-Reflexivity in Texts of Hölderlin, Wordsworth, and Shelley’, *MLN*, 105.5 (1990), 914–38 (p. 914).

²⁰⁷ Baker, p. 914.

²⁰⁸ Baker, p. 921.

If considered from this perspective, the choice of the hymn genre would acquire a new significance, not at all ironic. In those years, as Watson points out, hymn-writing was becoming ‘more closely connected with conceptions of inspiration (often prophetic, in the Ezekiel sense) and of imagination’ and therefore with Romantic poetry.²⁰⁹ In hymns, these notions were associated with the idea of ‘a poetic power that was seen as an emanation from the divine’, the religious version of conceptions of inspiration as originating from something other – or Other – than the poet.²¹⁰ The framework of the hymn genre may then have been employed by Shelley also as a way to poetically envision and explore his own relationship with the elusive and mysterious source of poetry, which he famously defines as ‘indeed something divine’ in *A Defence of Poetry*.²¹¹ According to Tilottama Rajan, in this seminal text of Romantic poetics, ‘poetry seems to be a ghostly rather than spiritual force’.²¹² As a matter of fact, Shelley’s description of poetic creation in the *Defence* is strikingly reminiscent of the inconstant and fleeting visitations of the unseen shadow of Intellectual Beauty. Poetry, he argues, ‘is not subject to the control of the active powers of the mind, and [...] its birth and recurrence has no necessary connexion with consciousness or will’.²¹³ The ‘mind in creation’ is under an ‘invisible influence, like an inconstant wind’ that ‘awakens [it] to transitory brightness’ but cannot be ‘durable’, and ‘the conscious portions of our nature are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure’.²¹⁴ Shelley seems to contemplate the otherness of poetry in two different – albeit not necessarily conflicting – ways: on the one hand, as a ‘power’ that ‘arises from within’ almost in the sense of being a manifestation of the unconscious mind; on the other, as a sort of record of the otherwise unspecified ‘visitations of the divinity in man’.²¹⁵ Poetry is envisioned as an emanation from an other/Other that appears to be both within and without the self.

The hymn’s exploration of the unpredictable comings and goings of Intellectual Beauty and of its fleeting visitations in the speaker (and in the poem itself) can thus be seen to foreshadow some of Shelley’s pivotal ideas about poetic creation as expressed in *A Defence of Poetry*. ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, however, lacks the adamant confidence of the essay and eschews its assertive mode. In doing so, it behaves in a way that differs from what poetry is said to do in the *Defence*. Contrary to the claim that poetry ‘subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things’, the hymn encompasses discordant elements without subduing them and without resolving them into

²⁰⁹ Watson, p. 302. Benjamin Brawley points out that some hymns of the period are perfect examples of ‘the romantic spirit that brought to literature a revival of the sense of the connection between the visible world and the world of the unseen’ (Benjamin Brawley, ‘English Hymnody and Romanticism’, *The Sewanee Review*, 24.4 [1916], 476–85 [p. 484]).

²¹⁰ Watson, p. 303.

²¹¹ Shelley, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 531.

²¹² Tilottama Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 282.

²¹³ Shelley, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 534.

²¹⁴ Shelley, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, p. 531.

²¹⁵ Shelley, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, pp. 531, 532.

harmonious unity but keeping them in tension and destabilising any attempt at reconciliation.²¹⁶ Rather than being ‘at once the centre and circumference of knowledge’, the poem seems to inhabit its margins and loopholes, where nothing is known with certitude and everything is constantly questioned.²¹⁷ It is precisely by embracing this unresolved tension and uncertainty that ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ manages to poetically capture the paradoxes and complications of coming into contact with Otherness, including the otherness of poetry.

²¹⁶ Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 533.

²¹⁷ Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, p. 531.

2. Necromancy: Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, canto IV

2.1 'Wrecks of another world'

'But when the rising moon begins to climb | Its topmast arch, and gently pauses there; [...] Then in this magic circle raise the dead' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV. 1288-89, 1295).²¹⁸ These lines, which might at first seem taken from a necromantic scene fit for a Gothic novel, belong to the nocturnal depiction of the Coliseum in canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, written in 1817 and published in 1818 during Byron's self-exile in Italy. The 'magic circle' is not the perimeter drawn by a conjurer to summon spirits but the ruined arena itself. And yet, just as in a real necromantic ritual, the dead do rise within the Coliseum's wall. The speaker 'see[s] before [him] the Gladiator' (1252) and witnesses him return to life to re-live his death. The necromantic implications of the scene have not gone unnoticed by the few critics who have been more alert to the supernatural imagery in Byron's poetry. According to Bernard Beatty, the Coliseum scene is the prime example of how 'the writer' in canto IV is 'sometimes analogous to the magician or necromancer, who can summon up the dead within a prescribed circle of incantation, as Manfred does'.²¹⁹ Dale Townshend similarly argues that 'Byron repeatedly finds himself in the position of a spectral conjurer, calling up spirits' and that '[t]he act of spectral conjuration reaches its crescendo in canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*', where 'the ruins of the coliseum lend themselves to Byron as a makeshift spectral circle in which the act of conjuration might be performed'.²²⁰

Both Beatty and Townshend make this point in their contributions to Gavin Hopps's edited volume *Byron's Ghosts*, the first book-length study of spectrality in Byron's poetry. Hopps's choice to focus on him, of all the Romantics, in his attempt to challenge 'the materialist bias in romantic studies', is particularly significant, for the latter 'has become especially entrenched in writing on Byron'.²²¹ Although his poems are populated with a crowd of spirits and other supernatural beings, ranging from the vampire in *The Giaour* (1813) and the phantom of Francesca in *The Siege of Corinth* (1816) to the otherworldly biblical figures of *Cain* (1821) and *Heaven and Earth* (1823) and the ghost of the Black Friar in the last cantos of *Don Juan* (1823-24), these entities 'tend to be passed over as poetic conventions, imaginative conveniences or synecdochic ciphers of psychological states, which

²¹⁸ All quotes from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* are taken from George Gordon Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), II.

²¹⁹ Bernard Beatty, 'Determining Unknown Modes of Being: A Map of Byron's Ghosts and Spirits', in *Byron's Ghosts: The Spectral, the Spiritual and the Supernatural*, ed. by Gavin Hopps (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 30-47 (p. 31).

²²⁰ Dale Townshend, 'Conjuration and Exorcism: Byron's Spectral Rhetoric', in *Byron's Ghosts: The Spectral, the Spiritual and the Supernatural*, ed. by Gavin Hopps (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 97-130 (p. 122).

²²¹ Hopps, 'Introduction', p. 12.

aren't of any real interest in themselves', even more than it happens with the other Romantics.²²² Hopps's consideration of the worldly and sceptical Byron – who was famously left out of M.H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) because of his satirical attitude towards Romantic transcendence – as a poet seriously concerned with the ghostly invites a radical reappraisal of his work and of his place within the Romantic canon.²²³ The present chapter follows in Hopps's footsteps insofar as it takes the supernatural apparatus of Byron's poetry seriously, arguing that he shares his fellow poets' fascination with the (im)possibilities of communication with the Other World. This, however, does not necessarily conflict with Byron's long-established interest in the realm of the material. By shifting the focus from the ghostly to the otherworldly, I aim to challenge the dichotomy between Byron as 'a radical materialist' and Byron as 'a poet of the immaterial', showing how materiality actually plays an important role in how he envisions contact with another dimension and how the categories of the immaterial and the spectral do not exhaust Byron's figurations of the supernatural.²²⁴

As in the previous chapter, issues relating to otherworldly communication will turn out to be relevantly present in a text that may seem less directly concerned with conventional representations of the supernatural: canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. Drawing inspiration from Beatty's and Townshend's suggestive but undeveloped insights and pushing them further, I will understand necromancy as something more than an evocative analogy. Necromancy, which constitutes one of the most established models of communication with the Other World, will provide the lens through which the Coliseum stanzas explore the canto's fundamental question of how to come into contact with what is no more, as well as an alternative way of thinking about the highly recurring figure of apostrophe. Reading the gladiator scene as an instance of necromantic communication will put it in relation to the summoning invocations to otherworldly entities that punctuate the whole canto, thus identifying a coherent and cohesive agenda.²²⁵ In order to shed light on the role of necromancy in canto IV, I will establish a dialogue between this poem and *Manfred*, Byron's work that deals more explicitly with necromancy and conjuration, starting, however, with its least conjurational moment: Manfred's Coliseum soliloquy at the beginning of the last scene.

²²² Hopps, 'Introduction', p. 13. Similarly, James Twitchell complains that 'critics have assumed that *Manfred*, like other supernatural Romantic poems, really does not depend on the spirit level for "meaning"' (James Twitchell, 'The Supernatural Structure of Byron's *Manfred*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 15.4 [1975], 601–14 [p. 602]).

²²³ On Byron's complicated position in the Romantic canon, see Tony Howe, *Byron and the Forms of Thought* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 3–6.

²²⁴ Hopps, 'Introduction', p. 13.

²²⁵ A few examples of the apostrophised interlocutors throughout canto IV are Venice (169), Torquato Tasso (334), Horace (685), Sylla (740), a statue (775), the Roman she-wolf (785), a column (983), Egeria (1027), Love (1081). Others will be discussed later in the chapter.

A connection between the two Coliseum scenes, which were written only a couple of months apart, has been posited but rarely thoroughly investigated.²²⁶ An exception is offered by Janice Koelb, who points out that ‘*Childe Harold*’s 18 Coliseum stanzas [...] develop the same concerns found in the descriptive soliloquy and make more explicit certain ideas that were only latent in *Manfred*’s description’.²²⁷ By identifying Byron’s Coliseum with ‘a Wordsworthian emblem of mind’, however, her reading reduces the physical place to a mental projection, a shadow theatre for the motions of a single psyche.²²⁸ I will return to the issue of psychologising, even solipsistic interpretations at the end. First, I will show how the seemingly tame (supernaturally speaking) soliloquy in *Manfred* prepares the ground for the necromantic imagery in canto IV through a carefully constructed thematic and formal texture which *Childe Harold* reprises and revises in subtle ways that even Koelb fails to take into account. Byron’s Coliseum will turn out to be less an image for the perimeter of consciousness than a magic circle where contact with the Other becomes possible.

After summoning an array of ‘unheavenly spirits’ (*Manfred*, III. 1. 37) and ‘hold[ing] converse with the things | Which are forbidden to the search of man’ (34-35), at the beginning of the fourth scene of act III Manfred is contemplating the night sky alone in his tower.²²⁹ His constant efforts at evoking and commanding ‘the dwellers of the dark abodes’ (36) are replaced by an unusual introspective mood, as Manfred recollects spending a similar night at the Coliseum when he was ‘wandering’ (III. 4. 9) in his ‘youth’ (8). From the beginning, the most salient aspect of Manfred’s memory appears to be his situatedness in the space shaped by the amphitheatre: ‘I stood within the Coliseum’s wall, | ’Midst the chief relics of almighty Rome’ (10-11). He is *inside* the perimeter, *among* the ruins. The following description of the nocturnal landscape is equally filled with spatial indicators and creates a very precise topography of the place, which is dominated by the inside-outside axis and by the poles of distance and proximity. ‘The watchdog bayed *beyond* the Tiber’ (15), ‘from *afar*’ (14), while ‘[m]ore *near* from *out* the Caesars’ palace came | The owl’s long cry, and, interruptedly, | Of *distant* sentinels the fitful song | Begun and died upon the gentle wind’ (16-19, italics mine). The negotiation between near and far is at times especially meticulous: ‘Some cypresses’ (20) ‘[a]ppeared to skirt the horizon’ (21) from ‘*beyond* the time-worn breach’ (20) but

²²⁶ See Stephen Cheeke, *Byron and Place: History, Translation, Nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 103; Robert Dingley, ‘Byron and the Coliseum: The Art of Recycling’, *The Byron Journal*, 33.1 (2005), 25–35 (p. 31).

²²⁷ Janice Hewlett Koelb, “‘Till the Place Became Religion’: Byron’s Coliseum”, in *Poetics of Description: Imagined Places in European Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 155–87 (p. 156). A similar point is made by Drummond Bone but without any reference to the commonalities of the two Coliseum scenes: ‘[c]anto IV of *Childe Harold* continues, more calmly, uncertainly but recognizably, the movement of Byron’s thought most dramatically laid out in *Manfred*’ (Drummond Bone, ‘*Childe Harold*’s Pilgrimage IV, *Don Juan* and *Beppo*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Byron*, ed. by Drummond Bone [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], pp. 151–70 [p. 156]).

²²⁸ Koelb, p. 156.

²²⁹ All quotes from *Manfred* are taken from George Gordon Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), IV.

‘[w]ithin a bowshot’ (22, italics mine). The wall of the Coliseum is the boundary line that divides the space into an inside and an outside: on the one hand, ‘the gladiators’ bloody Circus’, which ‘stands, | A noble wreck in ruinous perfection’ (27-28); on the other, ‘Caesar’s chambers, and the Augustan halls’ (29), which ‘[g]rovel on earth in indistinct decay’ (30). While the ancient buildings outside are reduced to a hopeless state of ruin, relics of an unsalvageable past that are now reclaimed by nature, the Coliseum still ‘stands’ (27) and, as the ‘wide and tender light’ (32) of the moon shines upon it, ‘the gaps of centuries’ (35) are ‘fill’d up, | As ’twere, anew’ (34-35).

Within the arena, the chasm between past and present seems to become bridgeable, an idea that is also conveyed by syntax. The description of the ruins revolves around distance and proximity not only in a spatial sense but also in a temporal one. The entire first part is written in the past tense, as suited to the recollection of a past event: Manfred ‘stood’ (10), the trees ‘grew’ (12) and ‘[w]aved’ (13), the stars ‘[s]hone’ (14), the watchdog ‘bayed’ (15), and so on until lines 22-23: ‘where the Caesars *dwelt*, | And *dwell* the tuneless birds of night’ (italics mine). The transition from the past to the present may at first seem the natural consequence of the comparison between the past and present condition of the place. After these lines, however, Manfred continues talking in the present tense: the grove ‘springs’ (24) and ‘twines’ (25), while the ivy ‘usurps’ (23-26). This description of the plants growing amid the relics is a direct continuation of that at lines 12-22, which makes the temporal difference between the two sections remarkable. The string of present-tense verbs culminates with the ‘stands’ of the ‘bloody Circus’ (27), a strong assertion of the persistence of the past into the present. Yet, as the interplay of tenses suggests, the past is not simply *preserved in* the present but can itself *become* again present. If the perimeter of the Coliseum represents a dividing line between in and out, then and now, it is a far more permeable boundary than initially assumed. Not only is there a symbolic ‘breach’ (20) in its wall, but also the whole passage abounds in enjambments that emphasise the existence of a gap – be it between the lines of the poem or between what is and what once was – while at the same time crossing it, so that it ends up being both amplified and ‘fill’d up’ (34).²³⁰

The same effect is created by the use of dashes, which occur before crucial points of the passage: the recollection of the night at the Coliseum (line 9), the transition from the past to the present (line 22), the acknowledgement of the permanence of the arena compared to the other monuments (line 26), and the invocation to the moon where the possibility of bridging the ‘gaps of centuries’ (35) is explicitly introduced. All these moments have to do with overcoming the distance between past and present. The dash itself visually creates a gap on the page and at the same time fills

²³⁰ All lines between 12 and 18 and between 20 and 23 end with enjambments.

it up. Byron's 'suggestive dashes' have often captured critics' attention.²³¹ As Anthony Howe points out, they cut 'into the presentness of the page' and, in doing so, gesture 'at what they confess to be beyond them'.²³² What lies beyond the presentness of the page – and of the place – in this case is the vibrant pastness of what was, and yet can be again. The dash does not simply gesture at what is beyond but also intimates the possibility of welcoming it within, in the breach that it opens. Byron's thematic and stylistic emphasis on gaps and their filling up is particularly interesting. The existence of a metaphysical divide between the interlocutors has been identified as the main challenge posed by communication with the Other World and the bridging of such divide as the main phatic condition in order to establish an effective communicative channel. The way in which the overcoming of the gulf between past and present is conceptualised and given prominence in *Manfred's* soliloquy evokes similar, arguably phatic concerns by foregrounding the question of contact across an unfathomable distance. The analogy is even more apt because, in Byron's poems, gaining access to what is no more means getting in touch with something more mysterious and numinous than one might normally imagine.

Byron's idea of the past exceeds its more ordinary and mundane conceptions, which is the reason why it is relevant for the present study. Ruins are not seen as mere by-products of history, the waste of the irreversible passing of time, but as the '[w]recks of another world, whose ashes still are warm' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV. 414) and which can be brought back to life. Likewise, the dead are not buried and gone but populate this other world, remote yet not inaccessible. As Beatty points out, Byron does not imagine the dead to be 'in an eternity apart from time' but rather conceives them as 'ghosts' insofar as they are 'shadowy but unobliterated past presences that haunt the places where they lived and died, still fashioning the shapes and utterances of those who are aware of them'.²³³ The otherworldly quality of the remains of the past and the haunting influence of the dead also emerge in *Manfred*, though here the Coliseum lacks the full-blown necromantic power of canto IV. In addition to being presented as an effect of moonlight (the 'light' at line 32 is the syntactic subject of 'fill'd up' at line 34), the filling up of the 'gaps of centuries' (*Manfred*, III. 4, 35) happens only '[a]s 'twere' (35), a parenthetical phrase suggesting that the expression is somewhat figurative ('in a manner of speaking') or not entirely exact ('in a way'). Though the dead are not summoned within the arena, they are evoked in *Manfred's* mind, whose heart runs over '[w]ith silent worship of the great of old' (39). These are the 'dead, but sceptred sovereigns, who still rule | Our spirits from their urns' (40-41), a statement that is enclosed between two dashes. Another insightful interpretation of

²³¹ Corin Throsby, 'Being Neither Here nor There: Byron and the Art of Flirtation', in *Byron's Ghosts: The Spectral, the Spiritual and the Supernatural*, ed. by Gavin Hopps (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 202–14 (p. 203).

²³² Howe, p. 98.

²³³ Beatty, p. 33.

the role of Byron's dashes is offered by Jane Stabler, who argues that they 'always register the presence of another questioning intelligence'.²³⁴ The gaps opened by the dashes may here register precisely the overpowering, yet hidden presence of these ruling dead.

The chasm between past and present, whose existence is highlighted by both the content and form of this passage, turns out to be less the mere lapse of centuries than some sort of in-between dimension inhabited – and crossed – by dead that 'still' (40) have an overbearing influence upon the living. The relationship between the two parts is characterised by great imbalance, and there is no attempt at establishing any kind of communicative contact. The 'sceptred' (40) dead only elicit a 'silent worship' (39), a negation of communication that greatly differs from the animated, though often strained or faulty, exchanges between Manfred and the otherworldly beings that he endeavours to 'compel [...] to [his] will' (*Manfred*, I. 1, 49). When Stephen Cheeke interprets *Manfred*'s Coliseum as a place where some kind of 'mysterious communion' is achieved, he is probably too haunted by the other Coliseum scene.²³⁵ In the drama, the filling up of 'the gaps of centuries' (35) results not so much in communion as in domination, but things change, subtly yet radically, in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

2.2 In the magic circle, here and now

The opening of the Coliseum section in canto IV immediately displays various similarities with *Manfred*. Illuminated by 'moonbeams' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV. 1147) in a clear 'Italian night' (1152), the 'Coliseum stands' (1147), an extant ruin of the past endowed with more-than-natural qualities: 'There is given | Unto the things of earth, which time hath bent, | A spirit's feeling, and where he hath leant | His hand, but broke his scythe, there is a power | And magic in the ruined battlement' (1155-59). This unspecified numinous feeling is related to the passage of time but does not directly derive from it: it is 'given' (1155) but not by time itself. By whom remains a mystery, as the syntax purposefully hides the agent. As the following stanzas confirm, the arena has undergone some sort of magical transformation which turned it into an actual necromantic 'circle' (1295). There is no room for 'as 'twere' in canto IV: the 'gaps of centuries' *are* 'fill'd up [...] anew' (34-35), and the dead gladiator *does* 'raise' (1295) within the perimeter of the ancient arena. The choice of the verb *raise* is rather interesting, as Byron employs a normally transitive verb in an intransitive way. The *OED* only mentions an early sixteenth-century example for the obsolete use of *raise* in the relevant phrase 'to rise to life', while registering other minor intransitive instances in less pertinent

²³⁴ Jane Stabler, 'Byron, Conversation and Discord', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 139 (2007), p. 118.

²³⁵ Cheeke, p. 12.

semantic fields. Byron's seeming solecism may be explained as a case of reflexive use where the personal pronoun *themselves* is omitted, but its semantic context as well as the syntactic inversion of verb and subject also evokes its more prominent – and necromantic – transitive meaning 'to restore (a dead person or animal) to life' (*OED*). The verb simultaneously intimates and elides the existence of a necromancer, as agency is again kept hidden by syntax: do the dead *raise themselves* within the magic circle of the Coliseum or does someone *raise them*?

In line with the limitations of necromancy, the raising of the dead gladiator is bound by temporal and spatial restraints. The wording of lines 1288-95 is reminiscent of a spell, which works exclusively as long as the right circumstances present themselves: 'when the rising moon begins to climb | Its topmost arch' (1288-89), '[w]hen the stars twinkle through the loops of time' (1289), '[w]hen the light shines serene but doth not glare' (1294). At the same time, the dead can only return to life within a certain delimited space, 'a prescribed circle of incantation', as Beatty calls it, which these stanzas clearly define and whose necromantic implications should be considered more seriously and extensively than has been done so far.²³⁶ The whole passage stresses the fact that the speaker is 'here' (1270, 1271, 1274) as opposed to the '[t]here' (1265, 1266) of the gladiator's home in Dacia in lines that present a similar spell-like pattern to that of lines 1288-95. Just as the Coliseum's wall represented a boundary between an inside and an outside in *Manfred*, so a similar tension between *here* and *there* characterises the configuration of space in canto IV.

Drawing a closed line that works as a '*perimeter* of spiritual agencies' and a 'protective enclosure', within which 'an encounter is brought about', is a crucial part of rituals involving contact between this world and the Other, as William Hanks points out.²³⁷ Even if Hanks's focus is on shamanic healing practices and exorcism, his insights are relevant to other kinds of summoning rituals, and his approach is generically interesting because it draws on communication theory, though a branch (participant role theory) that I will not take into account. Hanks's remark that 'space making and transformation is the core focus' of supernatural conjurations resonates with the Coliseum scene in *Childe Harold* as well as with more canonical representations of necromancy in contemporary Gothic novels.²³⁸ In Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), which Byron certainly read, for example, Matilda's and the Wandering Jew's drawing of a physical circle plays a key role in their evocations of Lucifer and the Bleeding Nun.²³⁹ Peter Cochran maintains that '[s]everal small details from the novel may have stayed with Byron, at least until the writing of *Manfred*' and mentions 'Matilda's

²³⁶ Beatty, p. 31.

²³⁷ William F. Hanks, 'Exorcism and the Description of Participant Roles', in *Natural Histories of Discourse*, ed. by Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 160–202 (p. 172).

²³⁸ Hanks, p. 172.

²³⁹ See Matthew G. Lewis, *The Monk: A Romance*, ed. by Christopher J.M. MacLachlan (London: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 149, 236.

ability to summon Lucifer himself' among them, but he does not establish any connection with specific moments of Byron's poetry.²⁴⁰ The 'magic circle' (1295) of the Coliseum serves a similar purpose of *space making* by delimiting a perimeter within which an encounter with the Other can be temporarily – and safely – experienced, but it departs from the standard imagery of the Gothic insofar as the circle does not seem to be drawn by a necromancer. It rather coincides with the shape of the ruined building, so that the place itself acquires a new, crucial importance.

Cheeke has extensively argued that 'the notion of *being there* represents the most powerful and complex aspect of Byron's work'.²⁴¹ According to him, 'Byron inaugurates a sense of being connected to history through being there on the very spot', and the Coliseum is immediately mentioned as the prime example of this phenomenon.²⁴² However, it is not just the historical past of places to which the poet gains access. As Cheeke acknowledges, Byron's writing gives the impression that a 'direct connection with the buried subjectivity of the lived experiences associated with those places' is also 'somehow (supernaturally) possible' by being there.²⁴³ Cheeke's insights about how Byron's engagement with place combines 'a strict literalism and material reality of place' with 'a supernaturalism centred upon the notion of a "magic spot"' are valuable and enlightening.²⁴⁴ Otherworldly intimations have been detected in Byron's depictions of ruins, but the reverse is equally true: the materiality of the place becomes prominent when bridging the gap between this world and the Other. Only within the physical – as well as 'magic' (1295) – perimeter of the Coliseum can the speaker stand 'before' (1252) the long-dead gladiator. The gladiator himself, both a historical figure and a revenant, confirms the importance of materiality, albeit of a different kind, as he is supposed to have been modelled after the statue of the dying Gaul in the Capitoline Museum. This detail points to the pivotal role that the material plays in how Byron envisions even an encounter with someone from the Other World, thus troubling Hopps's strong oppositional stance towards materialism.

That 'being there on the very spot', as Cheeke puts it, constitutes a way of coming into contact with the dead related to that place is most clearly – and not coincidentally – suggested in the line following the revelation of the necromantic nature of the gladiator scene: 'Heroes have trod this spot – 'tis on their dust ye tread' (1296).²⁴⁵ The physical act of walking on the same ground establishes a connection between the dead and the living, which is reinforced by the correspondence between the verbs 'trod' and 'tread' (1296), as the one between 'dwelt' (22) and 'dwell' (23) stressed the connection between past and present in *Manfred*. The emphasis on occupying the same place acquires

²⁴⁰ Cochran, p. 34.

²⁴¹ Cheeke, p. 6.

²⁴² Cheeke, p. 6.

²⁴³ Cheeke, p. 13.

²⁴⁴ Cheeke, p. 104.

²⁴⁵ Cheeke, p. 6.

further importance when considered within the communicative frame of the present study. As already stated, physical copresence was deemed to be a crucial phatic condition in these years preceding the advent of telecommunication technologies. A tension towards spatial copresence as a prerequisite for communication has been identified in ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ but has far greater prominence in Byron’s representations of moments of contact between this world and the Other that are actually prompted by being in the same space. The ‘magic circle’ (1295) of the Coliseum scene brings this idea to completion by giving full-blown necromantic power to the phatic fact of ‘*being there*’.²⁴⁶ Cheeke’s definition, however, is imprecise. Byron focuses not so much on being *there* as on being *here*, a seemingly slight but fundamental difference that entails another significant aspect of how the gladiator stanzas perform *space making*.

I have said above that this magic circle is not drawn by a necromancer but rather offers itself in the form of an already existent, historically and supernaturally charged, material place. This, however, is only partially true. As Hanks argues, ‘the merely physical copresence of interactants’ is necessary but not sufficient to bring about an otherworldly encounter.²⁴⁷ *Space making*, as the name itself suggests, involves the ‘*production and transformation of a lived space*’, which is a fundamental aspect of ‘ritual performance’ and achieved through it.²⁴⁸ The ‘human and spirit participants’ become ‘co-occupants in the spatiotemporal manifold of the ritual event’, not only of the place itself.²⁴⁹ Hanks’s emphasis on rituality will shortly turn out to be relevant, but first it should be pointed out that, in line with his claims, space is not just (co-)occupied but *made* in the Coliseum episode. The necromantic circle is not simply found but (re)created in and through the poem, most notably by means of highly recurring spatial deictics like ‘here’ (1182, 1235, 1243, 1270, 1271, 1274) and ‘this’ (1171, 1186, 1295, 1926).

In ordinary instances of communication, deictics depend for their interpretation on the situational context in which they are uttered and received, but these external referents are not available, at least not in the same way, in poetry. Since they cannot safely refer to a shared extradiegetic context, deictics acquire a different function beyond that of ‘context-dependent’ terms: as Susan Stewart puts it, ‘they themselves define and create the circumstances of specific contexts’.²⁵⁰ Deixis seems to pose a challenge to any attempt at understanding poetry through pragmatics, as it brings to the fore how poetic language works differently from everyday speech. However, as Bonnie Costello points out, although ‘[p]oetry has its own special language, [...] it is built up from, and often

²⁴⁶ Cheeke, p. 6.

²⁴⁷ Hanks, p. 166.

²⁴⁸ Hanks, p. 162.

²⁴⁹ Hanks, p. 198.

²⁵⁰ Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 150.

imitates, ordinary language and draws out implications of our usage'.²⁵¹ The consequences of this view, which are seldom taken into serious consideration, are consistent with the general approach of the present work: on the one hand, looking at how linguistic features in poetry deviate from their ordinary use may shed light on aspects and potentialities of the latter; on the other, taking into consideration the insights on everyday speech provided by linguistics when reading poetry may 'help foreground the opportunities that poets exploit'.²⁵² The poetic peculiarity of deictics makes sense only in relation to their ordinary function, which never ceases to haunt them. As Eileen Sperry points out, 'the deictic markers that fill the lines of lyric remind us, over and over again, that there is something that lies just beyond us, a specificity we cannot access in its entirety'.²⁵³

These complexities are well illustrated by the spatial deictics of the Coliseum scene, which gesture at the somewhat unreachable materiality of the place beyond the page while establishing themselves a reference context that does not strictly depend on it. They not only specify that the speaker is within the Coliseum when the encounter with the dead happens, but they also create the impression that the poem itself is happening on this very spot and, even more interestingly, that the encounter with the dead gladiator is happening in the same space as the poem: *here*. The utmost indicator of spatial proximity becomes unexpectedly vague. *Here* is the Coliseum, but *here* is also wherever the poem is being uttered or received. Strictly speaking, these places cannot – or, at least, do not likely – coincide, yet the poem superimposes them and, in doing so, creates 'effects of presence', to use Culler's expression.²⁵⁴ A similar point is maintained by Heather Yeung, who argues that '[t]he disembodiment or linguistic neutrality exerted by the use of grammatical deixis in the poem, however paradoxical it may initially seem, in fact adds to the sense of embodiment and presence that the poem effects on its reader'.²⁵⁵ By transcending context dependence and actively giving shape – rather than simply referring – to space, 'the poetic use of deixis points us toward a peculiarly poetic space of utterance' in a way that is specific to poetry, in particular lyric poetry, as opposed not only to ordinary language but also to other literary genres.²⁵⁶ William Waters agrees that lyric deictics are 'epistemologically different from those of narrative fiction', while Culler links the 'deictic apparatus of the here-and-now of enunciation' to the performative character of lyric poetry as one of the strategies through which it presents itself 'as an event' rather than its representation.²⁵⁷

²⁵¹ Bonnie Costello, *The Plural of Us: Poetry and Community in Auden and Others* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 2.

²⁵² Costello, p. 4.

²⁵³ Eileen Sperry, "'Now Let Us Sport Us While We May": First Person Plural and the Lyric Voice', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 48.3 (2019), 197–212 (p. 212). See also Costello, p. 105.

²⁵⁴ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 16.

²⁵⁵ Heather H. Yeung, *Spatial Engagement with Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 45.

²⁵⁶ Yeung, p. 45.

²⁵⁷ Waters, p. 7; Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 16.

In the Coliseum scene of canto IV, Byron employs and exploits the effects of presence created by lyric deixis with special intensity, as they interplay with the passage's focus on the actual apparition of someone who was supposed to be long gone. Just as the dead gladiator is made present within the perimeter of the arena by some necromantic power, so the arena, and with it the gladiator himself, is made present within the perimeter of the poem by its deictic apparatus. The effect of the deictic *here* is comparable to the very act of drawing a magic circle. Through it, space is made and transformed. The spatial materiality of the Coliseum is gestured at but, at the same time, recreated through and transfigured into the poetic – and virtual – space of enunciation. As Clara Tuite observes, '[t]he repeated "here" urges recognition of this moment of enunciation as one of transformation', which involves 'closing the gap between present and past'.²⁵⁸ What is supposed to be the tale of a past experience in Rome is actually presented as an event unfurling in the here and now of the poetic utterance.

This impression of presence and presentness is also achieved through another deictic feature: the present tense.²⁵⁹ Even if the scene described technically already happened and is only being retold, the poem uses present-tense verbs: the speaker 'see[s]' (1252), the gladiator '[c]onsents' and 'conquers' (1254), his head 'sinks' (1255), his last drops of blood 'fall' (1257), and the arena 'swims' (1259). The gap between the past and the present is twice overcome, not only through the dead gladiator's re-enactment of his death but also through the poem's re-enactment of that night. As Gillen D'Arcy Wood points out, '[o]ne of the signatures of Byron's style in *Childe Harold* is that he continually returns us to the dramatic present of composition', though this present is less dramatic than lyric.²⁶⁰ A similar use of the present tense to recount a past event, in fact, has been found in *Manfred*, but the drama never gives the sense that the past is being made present in and through the poetic act. Its revival by means of the unusual transition from past to present tense seems to remain bound to the mental experience of Manfred who is reliving the memory. This difference in effect is to be ascribed precisely to the different genre of the two works.

The dramatic form of *Manfred*, however eccentric, means that the text consists of fictional utterances pronounced by fictional characters. What Manfred says depends on this reference context in a way that is closer to ordinary speech than to lyric poetry. He could never say *here* in the same way as the speaker of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, for his *here* is unambiguously the '[i]nterior of

²⁵⁸ Clara Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 165.

²⁵⁹ As Keith Green points out, '[t]ense [...] can be deictic inasmuch as it can be used to encode specific temporal relations with respect to the encoder' (Keith Green, 'Deixis and the Poetic Persona', *Language and Literature*, 1.2 [1992], 121–34 [p. 123]).

²⁶⁰ Gillen D'Arcy Wood, *Romanticism and Music Culture in Britain, 1770-1840: Virtue and Virtuosity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 210.

the Tower’, as specified in the stage direction.²⁶¹ The immediacy of the apparition in canto IV, on the other hand, relies on the ability of lyric deictics to ‘create the urgency of things taking place, but without confining location’.²⁶² It takes advantage of what Heather Dubrow calls the ‘fluidities of deixis’ characterising lyric poetry, where *here* can be both the Coliseum and the poem as well as the physically impossible, virtually (and poetically) attained coincidence of the two.²⁶³ The same applies to the present tense. As pointed out by Culler, ‘lyrics use a special nonprogressive present with verbs of action to incorporate events while reducing their fictional, narrative character and increasing their ritualistic feel’.²⁶⁴ By ‘ritualistic’ Culler intends all the elements of a lyric poem that lack ‘a mimetic or representational function’.²⁶⁵ The ritualistic dimension of the lyric depends upon the fact that, contrary to dramatic monologues and plays, it does not offer ‘representations of speeches by fictional characters’.²⁶⁶ As examples of ritualistic features, Culler mentions ‘rhythm, lyric address and invocation, and sound patterning of all kinds’, all the ‘incantatory elements’ that, in their most heightened form and usually through ‘various forms of repetition’, make the poem sound almost ‘as spell or chant’.²⁶⁷ A similar incantatory feeling has been detected in the most formulaic and repetitive passages of the Coliseum stanzas.

At this point, one might argue that these observations, however valid in themselves, are not truly relevant to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, which is a narrative rather than lyric poem. With its four cantos, 4655 lines, and declared purpose of recounting the travels of the titular character, *Childe Harold* is considerably distant from the short, nonnarrative texts that are usually associated with the lyric genre. As specified in the introduction, however, the present study adopts a broader definition of lyric poetry, according to which characteristically lyric features can be found in texts deviating from the more canonical formulations of the genre. Byron’s extremely long and seemingly narrative poem is a perfect example of this. Critics have already acknowledged the existence of a tension between a narrative and lyric dimension in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, which becomes even more prominent after the dismissal of the character of Childe Harold in canto IV. James Hill understands this tension as an interplay between ‘an objective, external “narrative” world through which the pilgrim passes, and the subjective, interior “lyric” world of the narrator himself’, but it actually has

²⁶¹ Byron, IV, p. 97.

²⁶² Costello, p. 105.

²⁶³ Heather Dubrow, ‘“Nor Is Here One Single Here”: Towards a Reevaluation of Immediacy in the Sonnet Tradition’, *Literary Imagination*, 12.3 (2010), 296–306 (p. 301).

²⁶⁴ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 288. For an in-depth study of the lyric present, see George T. Wright, ‘The Lyric Present: Simple Present Verbs in English Poems’, *PMLA*, 89.3 (1974), 563–79.

²⁶⁵ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 37.

²⁶⁶ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 37.

²⁶⁷ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 350, 16.

more to do with how language itself works in the poem.²⁶⁸ In the Coliseum stanzas, spatial deictics and present-tense verbs are used in a typically lyric fashion and with typically lyric effects, as they ‘attempt to create the impression of something happening now, in the present time of discourse’ which Culler identifies as a ‘distinctive feature of lyric’.²⁶⁹

Byron skilfully plays with the performative potential and ritualistic dimension of lyric poetry by having recourse to them in a scene that, thanks to its necromantic theme, can itself be considered akin to the performance of an actual ritual. Necromancy has always attached great ‘significance’ to ‘ritual’, and indeed it has usually taken the form of a ritual practice, which requires ‘the right ceremonial time and place’, ‘magical utensils’, spells, and a ‘protective circle’.²⁷⁰ Most of these features have been seen to be somehow present in the gladiator episode, especially the latter, whose special relationship to ritual performance is also foregrounded by Hanks. The ritual nature of the necromantic conjuration portrayed reinforces and amplifies the ritualistic quality of the lyric devices employed, and vice versa, for they are both functional to make something happen, within prescribed perimeters (be it a magic circle or the poetic space of utterance) and for a limited period of time (as long as the rite or the poem lasts). In Culler’s theory, the non-fictional and non-mimetic ritualistic aspects of lyric contribute to its ‘performative character’, which he defines as ‘ritual that seeks to make something happen’.²⁷¹ Discussing Roland Greene’s original formulation of the ritualistic dimension of lyric poetry, Culler points out that, ‘while it alludes to anthropological and religious domains that may or may not be relevant’, the term highlights ‘the possibility of making something happen in the world’, for ‘practitioners of rituals hope they will be efficacious’.²⁷²

What happens in effective necromantic rituals – that is, temporary contact with the dead – does seem to happen in canto IV. Necromancy ultimately encompasses not only what the poem *tells* but also what it *does*. By linguistically conveying the impression that the gladiator’s return to life is taking place in the here and now of the poetic event, the poem itself turns out to be ‘*this magic circle*’ (1295, italics mine) within which the dead are raised. Just as the purpose of the magic circle is to phatically create a shared space within which ‘an encounter’ between interlocutors belonging to different worlds can be ‘brought about’, so the discussed formal features perform the same phatic function insofar as they create a linguistic effect of spatiotemporal copresence with the long-gone

²⁶⁸ James L. Hill, ‘Experiments in the Narrative of Consciousness: Byron, Wordsworth, and *Childe Harold*, Cantos 3 and 4’, *ELH*, 53.1 (1986), 121–40 (p. 122). Hill notices Byron’s eccentric present tense but understands it as an influence from both drama and lyric without taking into account the fundamental difference between these two uses: see Hill, pp. 126–27.

²⁶⁹ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 37.

²⁷⁰ Conny Lippert, ‘Necromancy’, in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, ed. by William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith (Chichester Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 463–65 (p. 464).

²⁷¹ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 125.

²⁷² Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 123.

gladiator.²⁷³ The lyric apparatus constitutes the poetic space of utterance as a necromantic perimeter where *there* can be *here*, *then* can be *now*, and the ‘gaps of centuries’ (*Manfred*, III. 4, 35) can be ‘fill’d up’ (34). Beatty’s insight that ‘the writer’ is ‘sometimes analogous to the magician or necromancer, who can summon up the dead within a prescribed circle of incantation’ turns out to have deeper implications than he himself realised.²⁷⁴ The possibility of a necromantic agency at work, which is evoked and left open by the unusual use of the verb *raise*, may then be registering the workings of the poem itself. In a sense, it is the speaker – and, by extension, the poet – who raises the dead by making the gladiator present and available, however fleetingly and precariously, within the ‘ritualistic space’ of these stanzas.²⁷⁵

The summoning of the dead within the circle of the arena and of the poem, however, differs from most typical necromantic encounters, insofar as it does not seem to result in communication as commonly understood: the speaker and the gladiator do not exchange words and do not address one another. Necromancy is traditionally, first and foremost, aimed precisely at communicating. Walter Stephens lists ‘necromancy’ among the ‘practically attested varieties of communication’ with the Other World, and Erika Bourguignon highlights that ‘[t]he principal purpose of seeking such communication with the dead is to obtain information from them, generally regarding the revelation of unknown causes or the future course of events’.²⁷⁶ The usually verbal and specifically informative aspects of necromancy are not to be found in the gladiator scene, but this does not necessarily translate into the absence of communication. As the previous chapter has started to show, there are ways of conceiving communication that do not revolve around information exchange, and Romantic poets were keen on exploring them in their works, especially when grappling with communications that must cross unfathomable distances. The following sections will show how, in *Manfred* and canto IV of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, Byron envisions similar alternative possibilities, though from a different angle and with a different focus.

2.3 Triangulated calling, ghostly readers, dead authors

The necromantic climax of the dead gladiator’s apparition is carefully prepared in the preceding stanzas by more easily recognisable acts of otherworldly communication, consisting in three

²⁷³ Hanks, p. 172.

²⁷⁴ Beatty, p. 31.

²⁷⁵ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 37.

²⁷⁶ Walter Stephens, ‘Strategies of Interspecies Communication, 1100-2000’, in *Conversations with Angels: Essays Towards a History of Spiritual Communication, 1100-1700*, ed. by Joad Raymond (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 25–48 (p. 32); Erika Bourguignon, ‘Necromancy’, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. by Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), x, 345–47 (p. 345).

apostrophes to divine and/or supernatural entities. While the first address calls upon a deified personification of ‘Time’ (1162, 1165, 1169), which has ‘made a shrine | And temple’ (1171-72) in the ruins of the Coliseum, the second invocation is addressed to ‘great Nemesis’ (1181), the goddess of retribution and revenge in ancient Greek and Roman religion. The speaker turns to her precisely to demand ‘vengeance’ (1194) against those who wronged him, whose hatred has caused him to suffer many ‘things to be forgiven’ (1210), ‘[f]rom mighty wrongs to petty perfidy’ (1216), ‘[f]rom the loud roar of foaming calumny | To the small whisper of the as paltry few, | And subtler venom of the reptile crew’ (1218-20). These stanzas are usually interpreted (and rightly so) as alluding to Byron’s biographical circumstances at the time of composition. Forced to leave England by scandals and debts, Byron here expresses his desire to receive retribution for the way in which his countrymen mistreated him by deploying a clearly autobiographical poetic persona. Byron himself programmatically declares in the dedicatory letter opening canto IV that the poem’s speaker will be ‘little slightly, if at all, separated from the author speaking in his own person’.²⁷⁷

In order to get his revenge, the poet ‘call[s]’ (1187) for Nemesis’s assistance and does so ‘[h]ere, where the ancient paid [her] homage long’ (1182). As in the rest of the Coliseum section, being *here* on the very spot is presented as a condition which facilitates, even prompts, contact with the Other World. It is ‘in *this* | Thy former realm’ (1186-87, italics mine) that Nemesis is invoked. In a fashion typical of the poem, spatial copresence is opposed to – and complicated by – temporal separation: the Coliseum was Nemesis’s realm, but it is no longer. The enjambement creates a gap in which the proximity evoked by the suspended deictic ‘this’ (1186) coexists with the distance implied by ‘former’ (1187). This time, however, the gap of centuries is not filled up by a magical return of the past in – and as – the present. Though the speaker sounds rather confident in his ability of calling Nemesis ‘from the dust’ (1187), contact is uncertain at best. ‘Does thou not hear my heart?’ (1188), he asks, and his tone is both incredulous and defeated, as if he could not contemplate the possibility of not being heard and yet was forced to acknowledge it, at least linguistically through the use of negation. By commanding Nemesis to awake, the speaker strengthens the impression of her present unavailability as an interlocutor, while at the same time putting complete trust in the power of his injunction to overturn the situation: ‘Awake! thou shalt, and must’ (1186).

As an apostrophe to an absent and possibly unhearing interlocutor which relies on itself for the creation of the very conditions for its communicative success, the invocation to Nemesis shares some key features with the addresses in ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’. Unlike Shelley’s poem, these stanzas do not feature textual evidence of their performative powers, but the apostrophe still seems to call in order to conjure. The summoning function of calling in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, a poem

²⁷⁷ Byron, II, p. 122.

that is ‘insistently apostrophic’ in that it is rife with addresses to dead, absent, unearthly, fictional, and variously unavailable interlocutors, has been highlighted and investigated by Hopps.²⁷⁸ Hopps identifies a similar strain toward evocation in other apostrophes, such as the invocation to the Muse opening canto I, ‘which – as a peculiarly “preposterous” gesture – is both prompted by, and conjures the presence of, that to which it calls’.²⁷⁹ The apostrophe to Nemesis, however, lacks the paradoxical reticence of the one to the Muse, in which the poet calls while at the same time claiming that his lyre ‘dares not call thee from thy sacred hill’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, I. 4). The invocation to the goddess of vengeance presents no such apophatic gesture. Rather, as Koelb points out, it ‘sounds like magisterial Manfred’s voice’, who imperiously commands spirits to ‘[a]pppear’ (*Manfred*, I. 1. 49) from the very first scene of the drama.²⁸⁰

The connections with *Manfred* are not limited to the conjuring stance adopted by the speaker but include a more specific common element: the presence of Nemesis. This detail, which has not received particular attention from critics, sheds interesting light on the underestimated relationship between the two texts as well as on why necromancy is useful to think about apostrophe in Byron’s poetry.²⁸¹ While in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* Nemesis is invoked in her capacity as goddess of retribution, her traditional function in ancient mythology is only alluded to in *Manfred* (II. 3. 62-65) and does not constitute the main purpose of her character, which is, instead, to make possible the encounter between Manfred and the ghost of his beloved Astarte. In spite of his summoning abilities, Manfred cannot directly conjure and initiate communication with the dead, so he asks Nemesis to ‘call up Astarte’ (*Manfred*, II. 4. 83) on his behalf and ‘bid her speak’ (104). His request is promptly (and effectively) fulfilled by the goddess, who orders Astarte to ‘[a]pppear’ (96) and ‘[s]peak to him who hath spoken’ (108). Whereas the efficacy of the invocation to Nemesis in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* in making her an available interlocutor remains uncertain, as is typical of most lyric apostrophes, Nemesis’s necromantic gesture in the drama has an unequivocally successful outcome: as soon as she performs her conjuration, ‘[t]he Phantom of ASTARTE rises and stands in the midst’.²⁸²

Similarly to how the apparition of the gladiator in canto IV revolves around the notion of the magic circle, this other necromantic moment of Byron’s poetry borrows another key traditional aspect of necromancy, which is also found in coeval Gothic representations: its triangulated nature. When the Wandering Jew summons the Bleeding Nun in the *The Monk*, he acts as a mediator for the benefit

²⁷⁸ Matthew Bevis, ‘Byron’s Hearing’, in *The Art of Eloquence: Byron, Dickens, Tennyson, Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 29–85 (p. 40).

²⁷⁹ Gavin Hopps, ‘Shades of Being: Byron and the Trespassing of Ontology’, in *Byron’s Ghosts: The Spectral, the Spiritual and the Supernatural* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 48–82 (p. 49).

²⁸⁰ Koelb, p. 182.

²⁸¹ Tuite is one of the very few critics who acknowledges that the Nemesis of *Manfred* is ‘an intertextual precursor’ for the Nemesis of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* but does not further develop this point (Tuite, p. 163).

²⁸² Byron, IV, p. 84.

of Raymond, who is the one who actually needs to talk to the ghost. In *Manfred*, Nemesis plays an analogous intermediary role, which appears to be far more prominent than her traditional duties as goddess of vengeance. Her function as intermediary of otherworldly communications is not mentioned in canto IV, a poem written so shortly after, if not indirectly when the speaker invokes her as '[t]hou, who didst call the Furies from the abyss, | And round Orestes bade them howl and hiss' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV. 1183-84). Nemesis's summoning powers are listed among her main attributes, but the context is remarkably different from the necromantic mediation of *Manfred*. While absent thematically, a model of triangular communication is nonetheless implied in these lines by their very apostrophic form.

Triangulation has accompanied the notion of apostrophe since its first formulations in classical rhetoric, which have been seen to imply the existence of someone from whom we turn and someone else to whom we turn even at the etymological level. According to Alan Richardson, the 'triadic communicative relation' that 'informs classical accounts of apostrophe' has been wrongly overlooked in more common modern conceptions of the trope as an address to an unhearing (because absent, dead, inanimate, abstract, etc.) interlocutor.²⁸³ He singles out Culler's influential reading in *The Pursuit of Signs* as a prime example of the widespread – though, according to him, misguided – tendency to understand this figure of speech through a 'dyadic, "I-thou" (or rather, I-"you") model', which elides 'its pragmatic function' and the 'role' of the 'overhearer (or "side-participant")'.²⁸⁴ Culler slightly revised his views in *Theory of the Lyric*, where he gives more importance to 'triangulated address – address to the reader by means of address to something or someone else'.²⁸⁵ Whether this new emphasis has anything to do with Richardson's criticism is not known, but Richardson's perspective is worth some consideration not only because of his focus on 'Romantic art', which confirms the existence of a special link between apostrophe and Romantic poetry, but also because of his methodological approach.

'In stark contrast to the exotic and aberrant role given to apostrophe by Culler and other deconstructive rhetoricians', Richardson argues that the figure of apostrophe should be understood in relation – rather than in opposition – to ordinary speech.²⁸⁶ According to him, popular theories of apostrophe as inherently embarrassing and metapoetically self-referential provide a partial and distorted picture, which accounts for 'only one end of a larger continuum' between poetic and familiar use.²⁸⁷ Whereas Culler maintains that apostrophes lift the lyric 'out of ordinary communicational

²⁸³ Richardson, 'Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art', p. 368.

²⁸⁴ Richardson, 'Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art', p. 368.

²⁸⁵ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 186.

²⁸⁶ Richardson, 'Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art', p. 368.

²⁸⁷ Richardson, 'Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art', p. 366.

contexts' through a 'gratuitous' and 'ritualistic' act, Richardson contends that they are comparable with 'utterances in everyday discourse' and endowed with a pragmatic function.²⁸⁸ He identifies these 'quotidian' instances of apostrophe with mundane 'remarks nominally intended for uncomprehending addressees that are clearly meant to be overhead by a second auditor'.²⁸⁹ He borrows the example of a man who curses a late bus from Culler himself, who claims that if the man 'continues apostrophically when other travellers join him on the corner, he makes a spectacle of himself'.²⁹⁰ Richardson counters this observation by pointing out that 'the man looks much odder if he apostrophizes the bus when no one is present' and that he is actually 'intending the remark to be overhead'.²⁹¹ Culler's position is more nuanced than Richardson likes to admit, but still there are some fundamental differences between the two critics. If it is true that the word *spectacle* implies the presence of some kind of audience for whose benefit the gesture is performed, it is also true that Culler employs it in an idiomatic expression that stresses once again the embarrassing nature of apostrophe. He then specifies that the man's utterances 'work less to establish an *I-Thou* relation between him and the absent bus than to dramatize or constitute an image of self', thus offering an interpretation which seems to go beyond the dyadic model but still revolves around one of its two components.²⁹² This important self-fashioning function of apostrophe will be explored in the chapter on Hemans.

Richardson breaks away from this binary scheme and replaces it with a triadic model. Instead of shifting the emphasis from the communication with the *you* to the constitution of the *I*, he chooses to focus on a third element, which he calls the *overhearer* or, borrowing a term from communication theory, the *side-participant*. Whereas the presence of a third party is only marginally suggested in Culler's account, Richardson places it at the centre of his understanding of apostrophe by drawing inspiration from ordinary conversational practice and classical rhetoric. According to him, the man who curses the late bus is perfectly aware of the impossibility of reaching out to an inanimate object. Yet, this does not mean that his utterance is uncommunicative: he *is* communicating but with the bystanders rather than the bus. The same applies to classical formulations of apostrophe, according to which the speaker addresses – or *pretends* to address – some person other than the judge but does so in order to convey something to the latter. Conceiving apostrophe as a triangular communicative relation allows Richardson to solve the problem of its embarrassing nature and reclaim a pragmatic function for it. Apostrophe ceases to seem such a 'nonsensical' utterance if we consider that it does

²⁸⁸ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 213; Richardson, 'Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art', p. 366.

²⁸⁹ Richardson, 'Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art', p. 367.

²⁹⁰ Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 156.

²⁹¹ Richardson, 'Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art', p. 367.

²⁹² Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 156.

not actually aim to communicate with its unreachable addressee and is instead truly meant for the side-participant: in this case, the overhearing reader.²⁹³ Richardson argues that ‘to turn aside from one listener to another does not mean to turn one’s back on the former’, who remains the main – and arguably the only true – interlocutor.²⁹⁴ The ‘communicative failure’ that is commonly associated with apostrophe is ultimately turned into a success by redirecting its communicative aim.²⁹⁵

Richardson raises some very interesting points. He boldly challenges the established Cullerian view of apostrophe as a gratuitous, self-referential linguistic gesture by ascribing an actual communicative purpose to this excessive, most blatantly ‘poetical’ figure, and he does so through the use of ‘cognitive theories of language and communication’, a method that is aligned with the present study, minus the specifically cognitive focus.²⁹⁶ In the previous chapter on Shelley, the notion of phatic function has been similarly borrowed from theories of ordinary communication in order to postulate the existence of some degree of earnest communicative tension in lyric apostrophes. Richardson’s account sets an important precedent for attempts at investigating the poetic use of apostrophe through the tools of linguistics, but it also showcases the possible limitations of such approach. While aiming to undermine the idea of apostrophe’s intrinsic embarrassment, Richardson actually falls prey to Culler’s same trap and ends up upholding his assumptions. His claim that a pragmatic function can be assigned to apostrophe if the nominal addressee is disregarded as interlocutor in favour of the implied side-participant seems motivated – and haunted – by the same feeling that apostrophe, in its most unabashed form, cannot but be fundamentally embarrassing. Rather than questioning the presumptions underlying such embarrassment, Richardson tries to circumvent it by domesticating the excess of apostrophe into a perfectly reasonable communicative act. He has recourse to communication theory in order to reduce the paradox of apostrophic calling and solve its impossibility rather than embracing it, as it is instead my intention to do. The earlier discussion of ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ has already started to show how the phatic can sustain – and deepen the understanding of – the communicative and poetic complexities of apostrophes.

Despite the domesticating and, as it were, reductionist shortcomings of his conclusions, Richardson’s emphasis on the triadic communicative relation underlying apostrophe remains extremely valuable. Apostrophes do call indirectly to readers, whose overhearing is expected and intended, and who remain present at the invisible margins of the utterance even when it turns most blatantly away from them, almost as if they were lingering, all-hearing ghosts. Still, this triangulation does not necessarily result in the obliteration of the direct component of the address. As a matter of

²⁹³ Richardson, ‘Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art’, p. 366. Richardson borrows the adjective from Richard Gerrig.

²⁹⁴ Richardson, ‘Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art’, p. 368.

²⁹⁵ Richardson, ‘Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art’, p. 366.

²⁹⁶ Richardson, ‘Apostrophe in Life and in Romantic Art’, p. 366.

fact, it adds to – rather than resolve – the ambiguities and intricacies of apostrophic invocation. As Hopps points out, '[t]he sideways comportment of the act of calling need not [...] annul or occur at the expense of its avowed orientation'.²⁹⁷ Hopps relies on liturgical practice for an example of a similar communicative situation and remarks that 'whilst the liturgical utterance is implicitly orientated back towards its speaker and sideways towards its third-party auditors, this does not mean that it may not also be orientated towards its ostensible addressee, and that the call cannot be heard as well as overheard'.²⁹⁸ The different context and attitude that liturgy entails compared to poetry, especially with regards to its relation to faith and communal performance, do not conflict with but actually serve Hopps's interest in the metaphysical implications of Romantic apostrophe and their interplay with Romantic 'belief in the transcendent', questions that have been repeatedly said to lay beyond the scope of the present analysis.²⁹⁹

Liturgical calling, however, does not constitute the only instance of triadic address which, contrary to what Richardson suggests, is supposed to be heard and overheard at the same time. Another is provided precisely by necromancy. Necromantic conjuration already resembles apostrophe according to its typically Romantic – and especially Byronic – articulation because both the necromancer and the poet ritually, and ritualistically, call to make something happen. Just as invocation plays an important part in necromantic rituals by evoking the presence of the otherworldly interlocutor, so 'triangulated address' is considered by Culler to be 'a crucial aspect of the ritualistic dimension of lyric', in that it contributes to 'mak[ing] the poem an event in the lyric present rather than the representation of a past event'.³⁰⁰ Triangulation draws further parallels. In most necromantic interactions, the necromancer, the otherworldly interlocutor, and the human beneficiary are all involved, albeit in different ways and to different extents, so that communication occurs both sideways and directly without one component cancelling out the other. To use Byron's own necromantic scene as an example, the fact that establishing contact between Astarte and the side-participant Manfred may be considered the main purpose of Nemesis's necromantic mediation does not mean that her invocation to Astarte is devoid of any communicative value in itself. I am not suggesting that there is an exact correspondence between the communicative situations and dynamics of necromancy and poetic apostrophe, but that the former offers a model of triangulated communication along multiple channels which provides a fruitful analogy for how the latter is orientated sideways towards the reader while at the same time turning to its avowed addressee with some degree of phatic tension, however performatively self-fulfilling and irremediably precarious.

²⁹⁷ Hopps, 'Romantic Invocation', p. 51.

²⁹⁸ Hopps, 'Romantic Invocation', p. 51.

²⁹⁹ Hopps, 'Romantic Invocation', p. 40.

³⁰⁰ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 186, 8.

As part of the very mechanism of their turning, apostrophes can be deemed to be haunted by the phantasmatic presence of the readers as overhearing side-participants in all the poems under scrutiny. However, it seems particularly fitting to introduce the triadic nature of apostrophic calling when dealing with Byron – and specifically with these poems – not only because of the considerable attention they devote to forms of triangulation, but also because reception is here explicitly envisaged. The apostrophe to Nemesis in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* has been said to lack textual evidence of its lyric and phatic performative effect, but it relies on a slightly different kind of performativity, which is closer to its original Austinian formulation. According to Austin, performative speech is characterised by the fact that 'to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to *do* it'.³⁰¹ The invocation to Nemesis is followed by the canonically performative speech act of a 'curse' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV. 1206, 1207), which the poet casts against the people who wronged him.³⁰² Vengeance seems to be secured not so much by the ability of the speaker to '[a]wake' (1188) Nemesis through his calling as by the fact that his revenge is already being performatively effected through his curse. To utter a curse is, indeed, to *do* the cursing. In this case, the appropriate circumstances are provided by the inclusion of the curse in – and its dependence on – the poem itself.

The written words of poetry are identified as the specific means through which language exerts its performative powers. 'But in this page a record will I seek' (1202), the poet proclaims, and the deictic foregrounds less the here and now of the poetic utterance (as it does in the necromantic summoning of the gladiator) than the here and now of the (re)performable written word. As Tuite points out, '[t]he revenge stanzas spectacularize this performative function of writing', according to which 'language is magical not because it represents witches invoking spirits (as in *Manfred*), but because it performs powerful symbolic acts: it can curse, bring fame, and wreak revenge'.³⁰³ The performative efficacy of the curse rests on the permanence of writing, which the following lines emphasise in contrast with the ephemerality of voice: 'Not in the air shall these my words disperse, | Though I be ashes; a far hour shall wreak | The deep prophetic fulness of this verse, | And pile on human heads the mountain of my curse!' (1203-06). The poem in its enduring written form becomes a vehicle for a curse whose realisation seems inevitable and is prophetically inscribed in the text itself, or more precisely in its future reception.

³⁰¹ John Langshaw Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. by J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 6.

³⁰² Curses are generally accepted as performative utterances. For instance, Richard Schechner mentions them among his typical examples of Austinian performativity: 'promises, bets, curses, contracts, and judgements' (Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, ed. by Sara Brady, 3rd edn [London: Routledge, 2013], p. 123).

³⁰³ Tuite, p. 163.

This constellation of topics recurs multiple times in Byron's poetry and finds its most famous expression in the claim in canto III of *Don Juan* that 'words are things' (793) and can produce '[t]hat which makes thousands, perhaps millions, think' (795).³⁰⁴ The claim that words are things was a particularly poignant one at the time, and critics like William Keach have extensively shown 'what is theoretically at stake in Romantic assertions' of this kind.³⁰⁵ Suffice it here to note that Byron's reiterated belief that words are things testifies to his deep-rooted interest not only in the performative powers – or, in Linda Marshall's words, the 'prophetic efficacy' – of language but also in the materiality of writing.³⁰⁶ Byron lays emphasis on the 'small drop of ink' (*Don Juan*, III. 793), the 'paper' (799) of which the 'page' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV. 1202) is made, the materials which constitute the book as a physical object. Thanks to his 'complexly practical grasp, at once ambitious and anxious, of printing and publishing', as Keach puts it, Byron understands how written (and printed) words circulate 'on material terms over which he has no control', reaching far beyond the death of their author.³⁰⁷ Once again, the material ensures – and acts as a mediator of – an ultimately otherworldly exchange. Just as the preserved wall of the Coliseum outlines the perimeter of a necromantic circle, so the book itself, in its lasting materiality, becomes a magical object which makes some sort of contact with the dead happen within the physical boundaries of its covers.

Whereas in *Don Juan* Byron reflects on the ability of what is written to outlive '[f]rail man' (*Don Juan*, III. 800) from a general perspective, in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* his focus becomes more personal. It is his own death that the poet envisions and that his 'words' (1203) are supposed to survive: '[t]hough I be ashes' (1204), they will not 'disperse' (1203). The awakening of Nemesis seems bound to happen only after his demise (1197: 'I sleep, but thou shalt yet awake'), in the same 'far hour' (1204) that 'the mountain of [his] curse' will be finally piled 'on human heads' (1206). The fulfilment of both the invocation and the curse is delayed until after the death of the poet, a posthumous consummation which rests on the afterlife of 'this verse' and the future 'wreak[ing]' of its 'deep prophetic fulness' (1205). The lines, which imply the participation of an audience who will read these written words and enact the prophecy they contain, ultimately describe a scene of reception. The overhearing presence of readers, which is evoked and presupposed but usually remains tacit in apostrophes, haunting the text even – or especially – as it turns away from them, is made manifest by Byron, who accompanies the apostrophic invocation to Nemesis with an express reference to its being

³⁰⁴ From George Gordon Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), v.

³⁰⁵ William Keach, *Arbitrary Power: Romanticism, Language, Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 26. See his chapter 'Words Are Things': Keach, pp. 23–45.

³⁰⁶ Linda E. Marshall, "'Words Are Things": Byron and the Prophetic Efficacy of Language', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 25.4 (1985), 801–22.

³⁰⁷ Keach, pp. 24, 43.

written and, more importantly, read. Readers from a 'far hour' (1204) are summoned and imagined within the poem, like spectres of the future. The phantasmatic quality of this encounter across the gaps of time is embodied even more fully by the poet himself, who is supposed to be literally dead when it happens. Reception is envisioned as not simply ghostly but specifically otherworldly, in that it takes place across the abyss separating this world and the Other, between the deceased author and the living future audience.

Reading resembles a moment of haunting. By having their words read, the dead are still able to reach and affect the living, perhaps even to 'rule' their 'spirits' (*Manfred*, III. 4. 40), as Byron had imagined in *Manfred*. This power, however, is not here attributed to 'sceptred sovereigns' (40) but to the dead poet. Byron describes the influence he will exert upon the readers after his own death in lines which, according to Tuite, make use of 'subliminal vampiric' imagery: 'But there is that within me which shall tire | Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire; | Something unearthly, which they deem not of, | Like the remembered tone of a mute lyre, | Shall on their softened spirits sink, and move | In hearts all rocky now the late remorse of love' (1228-33).³⁰⁸ The passage actually evokes less vampirism than some sort of spirit possession, as the poet communicates (in the sense of transmitting) something of himself to the readers, something that will 'sink' on their 'spirits' and 'move' them (1232). The 'unearthly' nature of this 'something' (1230) reinforces the otherworldly quality of the communication, which also depends upon the fact that the poet has always had an element of unearthliness 'within' (1228) him. As Hopps points out, Byron 'repeatedly insists' that 'we have within us, as part of our nature, that which is infinitely other than us'.³⁰⁹ Whereas similar statements usually indicate the presence of a 'faculty divine' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV. 1139) in all human beings, Byron is here referring to something that actually distinguishes him from others, for he is made 'not altogether of such clay | As rots into the souls of those whom I survey' (1214-15). Being instrumental to his ability to haunt the readers from the grave, his different, 'unearthly' (1230) nature seems deeply connected to his identity as a poet, an idea which will be reprised and developed by Felicia Hemans.

These stanzas from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* ultimately present us with another way in which the notion of otherworldly communication is relevant – and, one might argue, even structural – to Byron's work, in particular to this poem. They show that poetry was conceived as an act of communication not only *to* the Other World, as is the case with apostrophes, but also *from* the Other World. As Townshend remarks in his analysis of Byron's 'A Fragment' (1806), '[d]eath [...] marks not the termination of poetic dialogue so much as its spectral commencement'.³¹⁰ This poem, which

³⁰⁸ Tuite, p. 164.

³⁰⁹ Hopps, 'Shades of Being', p. 70.

³¹⁰ Townshend, 'Conjuration and Exorcism', p. 101.

is one of Byron's earliest compositions and thus testifies to his longstanding interest in post-mortem figurations of poetry, revolves around the idea of the 'name' as 'epitaph' (8) and guarantor of 'fame' (10).³¹¹ Although the curse in canto IV has been interpreted by Tuite as 'a complex vision of revenge predicated on posthumous poetic fame', Byron here imagines his haunting from the grave in terms that are strikingly different from 'A Fragment' and have to do less with the power of fame to preserve his name after his death than with the ability of poetry to exert an influence upon future readers and have its potentialities fulfilled by them.³¹² These lines seem to be more concerned with the communicative, relational dimension of posthumous reception than with the self-immortalisation and self-projection that are characteristic of the discourse of fame.

The latter played a very important role in the life and poetry of the 'proverbially notorious' Byron.³¹³ His relationship to fame and celebrity is incredibly complex, often contradictory, and cannot be properly addressed here.³¹⁴ For the purposes of the present study, it is worth pointing out that, because of the unprecedented success he experienced during his lifetime, Byron is usually associated with the 'deconstruction' of the compensatory logic of Romantic posterity as famously formulated by Andrew Bennett, so his preoccupation with futurity in canto IV may come as a surprise.³¹⁵ Even if the poem was written after his prodigious celebrity in British society turned into an infamous and scandalous notoriety which forced him away from it, however, Byron is not here envisioning the consolation of posthumous fame. As a matter of fact, his literary popularity was as high as ever while he was writing the last canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* in exile. In this period, Byron is most pressingly confronted with different issues that arise from the new position of distance affecting his communications, including poetry. As Tuite maintains, '[e]xile intensifies the interplay between presence and absence, intimacy and remoteness, enabling a particular power of distance', which pervades canto IV.³¹⁶ Byron is writing across a divide that is deeper than physical separation. His more-than-geographical exile from an audience that turned against him is such that it is transfigured into the greatest distance of all: the metaphysical distance of death. The impossible communication with his estranged readers becomes conceivable only if Byron himself occupies a condition of impossibility, in other words, only if he imagines himself to be dead. It is only through

³¹¹ From George Gordon Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), I.

³¹² Tuite, p. 164.

³¹³ Tuite, p. xiv.

³¹⁴ This topic has been extensively and profitably discussed by many critics. In addition to Tuite, see Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Claire Knowles, 'Poetry, Fame and Scandal: The Cases of Byron and Landon', *Literature Compass*, 4.4 (2007), 1109–21; Ghislaine McDayter, *Byromania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009).

³¹⁵ Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity*, p. 199.

³¹⁶ Tuite, p. 141.

poetry's haunting power to communicate from the Other World that the poet will be able to bridge the widening gap between him and his public.

2.4 Communicating/communing across gaps

The previous section has taken a detour away from the gladiator episode into different territories, tackling issues like apostrophic calling, triadic communicative relations, and posthumous figurations of poetic dialogue and reception, and calling attention to the multifaceted, pervasive ways in which otherworldly communication is present in Byron's poems. In order to finally grasp what kind of communication is taking place in the encounter with the dead gladiator, we should continue where the seeming detour let off and take into consideration the third and last apostrophe preceding the necromantic apparition. The invocation is addressed to a rather unspecified 'dread power' (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, IV. 1234), which appears to be far more available than the previous interlocutors. Whereas both Time and Nemesis entertain a special relationship with the Coliseum without *being* on the spot, the power is the only addressee who is actually there, or rather *here*: 'thou dread power | Nameless, yet thus omnipotent, which here | Walk'st in the shadow of the midnight hour | With a deep awe, yet all distinct from fear' (1234-37). The somewhat ghostly personification of this mysterious presence and the reference to the midnight hour, which some folkloric traditions identify with the witching hour, reinforce the impression that Byron is mobilising conventional supernatural imagery in a deliberate way that should not be simply dismissed as a trite commonplace. Together with his use of conventional necromantic imagery, all these elements contribute to giving prominence to otherworldly contact as a recurring, dominant motif in the Coliseum stanzas.

Another significant difference between the third apostrophe and the other two lies in how and to what end they address their interlocutors. No longer concerned with revenge, the speaker asks nothing *to* or *of* the dread power. He only 'welcome[s]' (1234) it, an invitation that may sound odd, as it is usually reserved for someone who has just arrived, whereas the power is already 'here' (1235). *Welcome* is an 'assurance to a visitor or stranger that he or she is welcome; a pleasant or hearty greeting or reception given to a person on arrival at a house or other place' (*OED*). The idea of visitation calls to mind Shelley's hymn, but Byron's power is not a fleeting, unpredictable visitor of the human world and human heart, and the speaker's attitude towards it is equally different. 'Now welcome, thou dread power' (1234) sounds less like the response to an ecstatic manifestation descending on the speaker's soul beyond his control than like the triumphant invocation, once again, of a powerful summoner. The seemingly counterintuitive act of welcoming someone who is already present makes sense if interpreted as a ritual utterance through which the speaker-magician

acknowledges the presence of the otherworldly entity not so much within the *here* of the Coliseum as within the *here* of the magic circle he has drawn. The suspended position of the deictic at the end of line 1235 before the enjambment with line 1236 foregrounds its several potential meanings. It should also be pointed out that *welcome* is a greeting, that is to say, the ‘classic form’ of phatic speech.³¹⁷ It signals not simply the presence of the other (or copresence *with* the other) but that contact has been or is being established with them. The speaker does not convey anything to the dread power, poses no question, makes no request, but merely creates and acknowledges phatic contact with it.

Lack of informational content, however, does not necessarily translate into lack of communication, as shown by another important moment of otherworldly contact in Byron’s poetry: the already mentioned evocation of the phantom of Astarte in act II, scene 4 of *Manfred*, which constitutes the ‘climax’ of the whole drama.³¹⁸ When Manfred first contemplates necromancy two scenes earlier, he conceives it in canonical informative terms: ‘I can call the dead, | And ask them what it is we dread to be’ (*Manfred*, II. 2. 178-79). He professedly intends to conjure the dead so that they might reveal to him the mystery of death itself, but it soon becomes clear that Manfred’s interest in the *plural* dead actually conceals a concern for a *singular* dead. ‘What is she? | What is she now?’ (196-97), he asks somewhat abruptly a few moments later and then asserts: ‘Within few hours I shall not call in vain’ (199), thus revealing that it is Astarte specifically whom he truly wants to summon. At the Hall of Arimanes, when his dead beloved does rise before him, Manfred’s avowed ‘quest | Of such, to answer unto what I seek’ (II. 4. 76-77) seems to remain unfulfilled, for Astarte does not reply to him. The ghost’s unresponsiveness has usually led critics to interpret the scene as a complete communicative failure. Deborah Forbes, for example, highlights that ‘Astarte refuses to engage in dialogue’ and ‘represents the failure of dramatic interaction’.³¹⁹ The encounter between Manfred and Astarte, however, is far more nuanced than it may at first seem. The ‘futility of dialogue’ exemplified by the scene may be equally ascribed to Manfred’s desire for self-referential repetitions of his own utterances: ‘Say that thou loath’st me not – that I do bear | This punishment for both – that thou wilt be | One of the blessed – and that I shall die’ (125-27); ‘Say, thou lovest me’ (155).³²⁰ Again, the ghost refuses to oblige him.

³¹⁷ John Hartley, *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 174. See also Laver, p. 218.

³¹⁸ Deborah Forbes, *Sincerity’s Shadow: Self-Consciousness in British Romantic and Mid-Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 137.

³¹⁹ Forbes, p. 137.

³²⁰ Forbes, p. 136. Manfred’s self-referentiality and solipsism has been highlighted by many critics: see, for instance, Alan Richardson, *A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), pp. 48, 51; Forbes, p. 137; Emily A. Bernhard Jackson, *The Development of Byron’s Philosophy of Knowledge: Certain in Uncertainty* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 145–46.

Manfred and Astarte are unable – perhaps unwilling – to engage in a dialogic and informative exchange, but something else takes place between them, and Byron is interested in exploring precisely what happens when communication as we ordinarily understand it seems to fail so dismally. Contrary to what Manfred repeatedly proclaims, getting answers does not appear to be his actual primary goal. He only asks Astarte two questions at the very end, almost as an afterthought, after she has already expressed her intention to take leave: ‘am I forgiven?’ (153) and ‘shall we meet again?’ (154). His long speech is instead studded with imperatives like ‘hear me’ (117) and ‘speak to me’ (118, 135, 142, 144, 145, 148), which grow progressively more insistent, almost obsessive. By the end it becomes clear that Manfred does not really want her to say anything in particular, not even repeat his words: ‘Speak to me! though it be in wrath; – but say – | I reckon not what – but let me hear thee once – | This once – once more!’ (148-50). The content of Astarte’s utterances is ultimately irrelevant in line with the main parameter of Malinowski’s definition of the phatic: in pre-eminently phatic communications, ‘ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words’, which are not ‘used primarily to convey meaning’.³²¹ This is the kind of communication that Manfred seems to be most urgently pursuing. He ‘reck[s] not what’ (149) Astarte should say and admits that he does not even know what he should ask, for he only wants to hear her voice, regardless of her words: ‘I know not what I ask, nor what I seek | [...] And I would hear yet once before I perish | The voice which was my music – Speak to me!’ (132-35).

This request is surprisingly met. If it is true that, by shunning the principle of reciprocity that usually defines successful communication, Astarte remains, in Townshend’s words, a ‘reminder of radical otherness’, it is not true that she is ‘incommunicative’, let alone ‘utterly mute’.³²² Astarte does speak during her encounter with Manfred, first of all by uttering his name (150, 152, 156). Calling someone’s name is a meaningless utterance from the standpoint of informational or semantic content, but, as already pointed out in the chapter on Shelley, it is fraught with another kind of meaning and purpose. It is a pivotal phatic gesture (this time in a sense closer to Jakobson’s definition) which signals to the interlocutor that contact has been established with them specifically. Rather than ‘mirroring Manfred by repeating his name’, as Forbes argues, Astarte acknowledges that the gap between them has been to some extent bridged, while preserving, even enhancing her otherness.³²³ In doing so, she fulfils the real, though less manifest, aspiration of Manfred’s necromantic endeavour, which is not gaining information from and about the plural dead but re-establishing phatic contact with the singular dead Astarte. This is also proven by the fact that questions, when finally asked, are of a personal nature, concerning his relation with her instead of the more universally relevant mystery

³²¹ Malinowski, pp. 314, 315.

³²² Townshend, ‘Conjuration and Exorcism’, pp. 125, 127.

³²³ Forbes, p. 137.

of ‘what it is we dread to be’ (II. 2. 179). The encounter can then be deemed a total failure only by subscribing to a narrow view of communicative success as mutual informative exchange, which is not upheld in the text. This scene from *Manfred* rather foregrounds the phatic potentialities of communication, according to which interlocutors can enter into contact just to *be in* contact.

Still, in a way similar to ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’, questioning the idea of this supernatural encounter as a communicative failure – and the limiting assumptions about communication that this view entails – does not equate to considering it an absolute success. The line between the two is actually blurred, and these categories prove once again unsatisfactory to account for what happens when coming into contact with the Other World. Not only does Astarte’s refusal to reciprocate Manfred’s words remain a disruptive element in their communication which cannot be simply discarded, but also, though she does make contact with him, she seems to do so only to simultaneously break it: she calls his name while at the same time saying ‘Farewell!’ (153, 154). *Farewell*, like *welcome*, is a greeting, hence a typically phatic utterance, but one performing the opposite phatic function of ‘discontinu[ing] communication’.³²⁴ The creation of a communicative channel remains suspended between success and failure, and whatever happens between Manfred and Astarte takes place in this impossible space when phatic contact is simultaneously established and disrupted. Such perplexing (im)possibility is starting to seem the ‘natural’ condition of communication across abysmal metaphysical divides.

Byron’s exploration of alternative, non-informative possibilities of communication is continued in canto IV of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and constitutes another overlooked element of continuity between the two texts. The fact that it is related to otherworldly interactions in both instances should come as no surprise, given that, as highlighted in the introduction, relationships are most uncertain – hence phatic contact most valuable in itself – when the interlocutors are separated by the gulfs of death or time and by supernatural distances. The act of invoking and welcoming the ‘dread power’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, IV. 1234) without asking or commanding anything follows a similar phatic logic, as emerges more clearly from the closing lines of the stanza: ‘the solemn scene | Derives from thee a sense so deep and clear | That we become a part of what has been, | And grow unto the spot, all-seeing but unseen’ (1239-42). The mysterious power is here revealed to be responsible for the spiritual and magical transformation of the place which had been observed at the beginning of the Coliseum episode, but its transformative influence is not limited to the ‘solemn scene’ (1239): it also allows us to ‘become a part of what has been’ (1241). Contact with this nameless, omnipotent, haunting presence entails gaining access to the distant and dead past. What Cheeke calls an ‘unmediated connection with the spirit-of-place’ and a ‘direct communion with the

³²⁴ Jakobson, p. 115.

heroes/martyrs of the past' turns out to be neither unmediated nor direct.³²⁵ It is made possible by the mediation of the invoked power, which creates yet another triangulation.

Cheeke interprets this 'communion with the ghosts of history' as a 'particular historical method' according to which 'the reality of one's own physical presence in a particular place of historical significance makes it more possible to imagine exchanging places' with the buried subjectivities of the past.³²⁶ In the gladiator scene, this 'exchange of places' does not simply work as a 'broader symbolic interchange' but is featured as an actual 'imaginative or empathetic act' which allows the speaker to 'enter the consciousness of the dying barbarian'.³²⁷ The apostrophe to the dread power prepares the ground for the necromantic encounter of the dead gladiator and illustrates what happens in this scene. By 'becom[ing] a part of what has been' (1241), which includes the dead, the speaker is able to enter into contact with the gladiator and partake of his interiority, collapsing the distance between present and past as well as between self and other. Being here *now*, he can 'see before' (1252) him what happened *then* and (re)experience it both through his and the gladiator's eyes. It is not just a feeling or an *as if*: he undergoes an actual transformation which allows him to commune with the conjured dead and truly 'grow unto the spot, all-seeing' (1242). Even when the gladiator's 'eyes' (1261) are 'with his heart', 'far away' from the Coliseum (1262), the speaker can see what he sees: 'his rude hut by the Danube' (1264), where 'his young barbarians' are 'all at play' (1265) and 'their Dacian mother' (1266) waits for him.

Instead of as a method to recover history, this 'ecstatic or even mystical communion with the dead' can be understood as an instance of communication.³²⁸ The word *communion*, which Cheeke consistently uses, perfectly captures the speaker's experience within the magic circle of the Coliseum. The idea of 'becom[ing] a part' (1241) of what – and who – is no more, in fact, evokes the most literal meaning of the term as the 'action or fact of sharing or holding something in common with others; mutual participation' (*OED*). As hinted by their formal similarity and explained by John Durham Peters, the word *communion* is intimately related to *communication*, which comes 'from the Latin *communicare*, meaning to impart, share, or make common'.³²⁹ Ever since it 'entered the English language in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries', the term has maintained 'one dominant branch of meaning' that has to do with 'partaking' and being in communion.³³⁰ The encounter between the speaker and the dead gladiator may therefore be considered an instance of communicating in the etymological sense of communing. The relationship between the notions of communication and

³²⁵ Cheeke, pp. 48, 107.

³²⁶ Cheeke, pp. 108, 104, 105–6.

³²⁷ Cheeke, p. 105.

³²⁸ Cheeke, p. 94.

³²⁹ Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, p. 7.

³³⁰ Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, p. 7.

communion is complex and multifaceted and will be further explored in the following chapter. For now, it should just be pointed out that the necromantic scene in canto IV provides another illustration of a communicative act that does not necessarily entail dialogue or informational exchange but can primarily, even exclusively, fulfil the phatic function of bridging the gap between the interlocutors. In this case, however, it is less aimed at keeping a communicative channel open than at creating communion, a distinction reflecting that between the two variants of the phatic.

Such communion is not limited to the speaker and the gladiator, but it also involves the reader, as signalled by the presence of the first-person plural pronoun: ‘we become a part of what has been’ (1241, italics mine). As Costello highlights, ‘criticism about the lyric has mostly overlooked poets’ uses of the first-person plural’, for ‘[l]yric has been defined primarily as the genre of the individual, and hence of the first-person singular’.³³¹ In the last few years, however, the poetic *we* has begun to receive the critical attention it deserves, as attested by Costello’s *The Plural of Us* (2017), the first book-length study of the first-person plural in lyric, and by ‘Poetry’s “We”: A Symposium’ in the 2019 third issue of *The Cambridge Quarterly*. Costello argues that, like all poetic deictics, *we* is ‘[r]eferentially ambiguous’, as it can be ‘internal to the story (diegetic) or to the poet’s commentary reaching outside the bounds of the story and its interlocutors (nondiegetic)’, but these ‘levels of reference are never very tightly distinguishable in poetry as compared with prose’.³³² In its nondiegetic value, the first-person plural must account for the (usually implicit) ‘open-invitational’ nature of the communicative act of lyric poetry, which is ‘not only overheard but also indirectly addressed to many if not all’.³³³ This ‘makes the “we” of poetry peculiarly layered’, insofar as it always potentially includes the reader.³³⁴

Byron’s use of the first-person plural relies on its open-ended potentiality and is part of the lyrically and necromantically ritualistic apparatus of the poem, insofar as it creates a performative effect similar to that of the gladiator’s apparition happening in and through the unfolding of the poem. By saying *we*, the speaker summons the readers within the magic circle of the poem and makes them participants in communing with ‘what has been’ (1241). The latter, in turn, assumes the quality of an ongoing process, taking place in the time and place of reading. The readers, whose phantasmatic presence has been indirectly evoked through apostrophic triangulation, become here actual ghostly figures, ‘all-seeing but unseen’ (1242), who explicitly take part in this transformative otherworldly communion. In line with the overall thematic and geographical journey of canto IV through the warm ruins of the past and the lingering remnants of the dead, ‘in which observation goes beyond geography

³³¹ Costello, p. 5.

³³² Costello, p. 66.

³³³ Costello, p. 6.

³³⁴ Costello, p. 6.

per se to explore the past and the present, self and otherness', the poem itself turns out to be a medium through which we temporarily share in the speaker's experience of contact with this Other World as he retells and re-enacts it.³³⁵ Once again, interaction takes a triadic form: as the 'gaps of centuries' (*Manfred*, III. 4, 35) are bridged by virtue of the partaking of the present *we* in the past, so the first-person plural collapses the distance between *I* and *you*, creating what Sperry calls 'a multivalent identity that is both removed and present, self and other simultaneously'.³³⁶

The notion of communion, which entails a breaching of boundaries with a view to sharedness, brings us back to the dominant theme of bridging the gaps between the present and the past, the living and the dead, self and otherness. Communication itself may be understood in similar terms when the phatic function of speech is given prominence and the creation of contact across the (spatial, temporal, psychological, metaphysical) distance between the interlocutors constitutes its primary purpose. Peters foregrounds the importance that the existence of a chasm to be crossed has had in the conceptual history of communication both in *Speaking into the Air* and in an earlier article evocatively titled 'The Gaps of Which Communication Is Made' (1994). In the latter, he points out that for centuries 'the enigma of address, the gap between utterance and reception, has been the core of communication theory' and the reason why 'the face-to-face setting has been taken to house the most authentic and primordial kind of communication'.³³⁷ The lesser the distance, the narrower the gap, the smoother the communication. Or so it is generally thought. In his article, Peters challenges this view, arguing that '[t]he physical presence of another is no guarantee that "communication" will happen' and that '[t]he abyss dwells in all communication'.³³⁸ While ordinary people in ordinary circumstances tend to do a good job at keeping it hidden, the abyss usually becomes 'visible at the margins of social life, in interactions with the mad and the aged, with children and strangers' – and, one might add, with the Other World.³³⁹ This point supports the idea advanced in the introduction that otherworldly communication can act as a magnifying glass for issues typical of communication in general. On an even more fundamental level, Peters questions the view of gaps as a communicative hindrance, something to be necessarily remedied and resolved. 'The gaps at the heart of communication are not its ruin', he claims, 'but its distinctive feature'.³⁴⁰ He develops this insight in his book, where he remarks that 'the gaps between sender and receiver' are not 'always chasms to be bridged; they are sometimes vistas to be appreciated or distances to be respected'.³⁴¹

³³⁵ Mauro Pala, 'The Garden of the World: Byron and the Geography of Italy', in *Byron and Italy*, ed. by Alan Rawes and Diego Saglia (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 77–93 (p. 80).

³³⁶ Sperry, p. 204.

³³⁷ Peters, 'The Gaps of Which Communication Is Made', p. 118.

³³⁸ Peters, 'The Gaps of Which Communication Is Made', p. 131.

³³⁹ Peters, 'The Gaps of Which Communication Is Made', p. 131.

³⁴⁰ Peters, 'The Gaps of Which Communication Is Made', p. 130.

³⁴¹ Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, p. 59.

Communication exists in the opening, crossing, appreciating, and inhabiting of these gaps and distances. Even when the gaps are bridged, this does not mean that the chasm is effaced. To quote Peters once again, ‘communication as bridge always means an abyss is somewhere near’.³⁴² A similar view emerges from Byron’s poems, which emphasise, envision, and perform the phatic act of filling up the gaps with the o/Other at the core of communication, while at the same time displaying awareness that the abyss remains and cannot – perhaps should not – be closed. Just as the enjambments and dashes in *Manfred* cross over the gulfs that they themselves create and keep open, so in canto IV the necromantic evocation and communion with the dead are accompanied by reminders of the chasm still gaping between this world and the Other. Attention has been paid to how the use of the present tense and deictics conveys the impression that the gap of time is being bridged, as the lost past turns into unfurling present. However, other verbal tenses and spatial deictics disrupt this effect. Stanza 140 has been said to depict the actions of the dying gladiator as if taking place in the present of the speaker and the poem, but its last two lines contain a sudden return to the past: ‘he is gone | Ere ceased the inhuman shout which hail’d the wretch who won’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, IV. 1259-60). In the rest of the scene, the actions of the gladiator are described through past-tense verbs: he ‘heard’, ‘heeded not’ (1261), ‘reck’d not’ (1263). The shift in verb tense at line 1259 occurs after the visual and rhythmical gap created by a dash, which signals an opposite movement compared to *Manfred*’s soliloquy: not from the past to the present but the other way round.

The gulf between what is and what once was seems to widen again after being filled up, or perhaps at the same time as it is being filled up. The dead gladiator is simultaneously present ‘now’ (1258) and ‘gone’ (1259), an in-between state reinforced by the corresponding positions of the words at the end of two consecutive lines. A similar sense of suspension is conveyed by the opposition between the deictics *here* and *there*. The anaphoric repetition of the latter at the beginning of lines 1265 and 1266 destabilises the gladiator’s presence within the ruin. The deictic technically refers to his home by the Danube, to which his thoughts (not his body) go in his last moments of life, and therefore it does not technically undermine the *here* of the Coliseum. Still, Cheeke is right when he notices that *there* ‘acquires both a temporal and spatial charge’ and conveys the idea of the gladiator being both in the here and now of the arena and in ‘the furthest place’.³⁴³ Like his heart, he is ‘far away’ (1262), in the remotest place – and time – of the past, of what is no more, of the dead. Contrary to what Tuite argues, there is no actual, definitive ‘closing’ of ‘the gap between present and past’.³⁴⁴ The dead can return *here*, but they also remain elsewhere.

³⁴² Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, p. 16.

³⁴³ Cheeke, p. 105.

³⁴⁴ Tuite, p. 165.

The shifting of the verb tenses and deictics jeopardises the efficacy of the necromantic evocation, or rather complicates it. The temporary spatiotemporal copresence granted by the ‘magic circle’ (1295) turns out to be more precarious than initially assumed and more prone to ambiguities and contradictions. A bridge is erected between the present and the past, this world and the Other, but the bridge crosses the abyss without closing it. The encounter with the dead gladiator takes place not only *across* but also *within* the gap, which is no longer something to be merely ‘fill’d up’ (*Manfred*, III. 4, 34) but a fecund space where contact and communion with ‘another world’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, IV. 414) are made possible – in phatic tension rather than phatic resolution. This is a space navigated through poetry, whose uncheckable communicative acts can sustain a strain towards (im)possibilities without the need to resolve them. The ‘abyss’ (1495) remains open throughout the canto, and towards its end Byron makes it clear that it is a dimension of communicative potentialities. In one of the few (and most striking) representations of vocal communication from the Other World in the whole poem, he writes: ‘forth from the abyss a voice proceeds, | A long low distant murmur of dread sound’ (1495-96). The ‘gulf’ from which this abysmal voice resounds is not empty but ‘thick with phantoms’ (1500), not a void to fill but a chasm to inhabit and listen to.

In the Coliseum scene, however, no other (or Other) voice is heard, only that of the speaker: ‘Here, where the Roman million’s blame or praise | Was death or life, the playthings of a crowd, | My voice sounds much’ (1274-76). The seemingly dominating presence of the speaker in ‘the arena void’ (1277) may cast a doubt on the actuality of his encounter and communion with the dead gladiator. Many critics have read this episode less as an authentic experience of contact with the Other than as a mere act of self-projection. Vincent Newey maintains that Byron ‘re-creates the historical event in his own image, or rather in the image of his characteristic conception of his destiny as that of the stoical but feeling exile’ and considers the gladiator not as a revenant from another world but as ‘a miniature double of the poet’.³⁴⁵ Tuite makes a similar point when she argues that ‘[t]he poem uses the Coliseum to stage this identification between poet and gladiator, who endure attack as a form of public entertainment’.³⁴⁶ Suspicions of self-referentiality and even solipsism are not uncommon in criticism on Byron, who deliberately manipulated his persona and incorporated self-images in many of his poems. At the beginning of this chapter, I have mentioned psychologising interpretations that tend to read everything as emblems or projections of the poet’s mind and often have a more or less declaredly Wordsworthian flavour. Not dissimilarly, Howe sees *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* as a ‘Byronic psychodrama’ with a ‘sublime egotistical ground’, while Townshend highlights how most

³⁴⁵ 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 University Press, 1988), pp. 148–90 (p. 173).

³⁴⁶ Tuite, p. 154.

of the ghosts conjured by Byron are not manifestations of alterity and ‘seem to achieve’ nothing but ‘the ventriloquizing of the poet’s own’ voice and ideas.³⁴⁷

The perceived similarity and shared fate that links the autobiographical speaker to the dead gladiator, insofar as they are both exiled victims of spectacularised violence (whether physical or symbolic) at the hands of a hostile audience, should not be dismissed. It definitely plays a role in the Coliseum episode, not only because the whole canto is a carefully crafted operation of self-representation, but also because Byron’s biographical condition as an exiled author who has been wronged and slandered is explicitly evoked in the revenge stanzas immediately preceding this scene.³⁴⁸ Still, this does not mean that the claimed ‘becom[ing] a part of what has been’ (1241) should be reduced to nothing more than a solipsistic and ultimately illusory projection of the self which leaves no room for otherness. Cheeke is once again insightful in acknowledging that ‘Byron is obviously dramatising himself and his perceived condition of suffering-in-exile’ but that such ‘psychobiographical readings’ do not exhaust interpretation.³⁴⁹ Self-dramatisation does not automatically exclude the possibility of ‘[g]oing out of oneself’ and ‘exchanging places’ with the other which he sees at work in the encounter with the gladiator.³⁵⁰ Though it is ‘easy to mistake this principle of interchangeability for another version of narcissism’, Cheeke warns readers that they should ‘engage seriously’ with the ‘visionary or enthusiastic’ – or, I add, otherworldly – ‘mode’ of these stanzas.³⁵¹

When discussing whether the return of the dead within the magic circle of the Coliseum is a moment of real communion with the Other or merely of egotistic self-projection, three points should be considered. First of all, the speaker’s self is so much amplified and mirrored as diminished and almost emptied out in these stanzas. Partaking ‘of what has been’ (1241) involves becoming ‘all-seeing but unseen’ (1242), a transformation that preternaturally expands the subject’s faculties but rarefies their substance (and perhaps identity) to the point of making them dissolve into pervasive invisibility. Otherworldly communion is a two-way process entailing not only the revivification of the dead but also a corresponding ghostification of the living, and indeed the speaker is then described as a sort of spectral presence, lingering in the ‘galleries, where [his] steps seem echoes strangely loud’ (1278). The consequences and dangers of mutual approximation in otherworldly contact will be a central theme of the next chapter on Keats’s *Isabella*. The second point, which will also be developed in the following chapter, undermines the false dichotomy presupposed by these readings by claiming

³⁴⁷ Howe, p. 120; Townshend, ‘Conjuration and Exorcism’, p. 124.

³⁴⁸ Byron, II, p. 122.

³⁴⁹ Cheeke, p. 104.

³⁵⁰ Cheeke, p. 105.

³⁵¹ Cheeke, p. 105.

that the existence of a certain degree of commonality does not invalidate a person's ability to communicate and commune with the other but rather makes it possible. Common ground will be seen to be a crucial phatic precondition both in coeval and more recent theories of communication. Lastly, it does not matter if neither of these valid arguments can ever fully dispel the suspicion of solipsism, for the latter is integral to the experience of communicating with the Other World. Byron is aware that there are 'spectres whom no exorcism can bind' (214). As I have started and will continue to show, the ghost of solipsism is one of them. Regardless of the poets' keenness to explore possibilities of opening and reaching out to otherness beyond the perceived egotism of the previous generation, solipsism haunts supernatural communication, just as it ultimately haunts any communication, whose irresolvable dualism always makes it, in Peters's words, 'at once bridge and chasm'.³⁵²

³⁵² Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, p. 5.

3. Communion: Keats's *Isabella*

3.1 'To speak as when on earth'

A retelling of the fifth story of the fourth day in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1349-53), *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil*, which Keats composed in the early months of 1818 and published in 1820, features the most patent instance of communication with the Other World that has been encountered so far. Whereas the engagement of 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' and canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* with otherworldliness required some degree of conceptualisation and interpretation, *Isabella* finally brings us face to face with a fully-fledged ghost. Its central section is, in fact, occupied by Isabella's vision of the spirit of her lover Lorenzo. The supernatural encounter constitutes the turning point that triggers the rest of the action, but, despite its prominent position and narrative importance, the otherworldly elements of the poem have not attracted particular attention, if one excludes some acknowledgement of its Gothic flavour.³⁵³ Sonia Hofkosh is the critic who looks most closely at the representation of 'contact' between 'the living and the dead' in the poem, yet ultimately sees it as a means by which 'Keats dramatizes the intimacy between persons and things'.³⁵⁴ This chapter will argue instead that *Isabella* is deeply concerned with the question of contact (understood in its technical communicative sense, unlike by Hofkosh) between this world and the Other not as a pretext to illuminate other forms of relationality across different boundaries but as a way to interrogate the possibilities and limitations of communication itself in the face of death and distance.

Andrew Bennett insightfully notices that the poem's 'narrative is constructed around the problematics of communication', but the full extent to which the latter pervade and inform *Isabella* has not yet been appreciated.³⁵⁵ By portraying a strenuous yet successful endeavour to come into contact across the gulf of death and capturing the strangeness of communicating under such conditions of otherness, Keats's poem will be seen to test and trouble well-established assumptions about communication, variously flouting its demands, envisioning alternative modes, and, in doing so, giving voice to his anxieties and desires about both personal and literary communication. That the

³⁵³ See Beth Lau, 'Madeline at Northanger Abbey: Keats's Antiromances and Gothic Satire', *The Journal of English and German Philology*, 84.1 (1985), 30–50; Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Decapitating Romance: Class, Fetish, and Ideology in Keats's *Isabella*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 49.3 (1994), 321–38; Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative, and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 89; Robert S. White, *Keats's Anatomy of Melancholy: Lamia, Isabella, the Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems (1820)* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 158.

³⁵⁴ Sonia Hofkosh, 'Dancing with Ghosts in "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil"', in *Material Transgressions: Beyond Romantic Bodies, Genders, Things*, ed. by Kate Singer, Ashley Cross, and Suzanne L. Barnett (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 191–212 (pp. 205, 191).

³⁵⁵ Bennett, *Keats, Narrative, and Audience*, p. 86.

communication between living Isabella and dead Lorenzo is ostensibly successful sets this text apart from those considered in the previous chapters. The question of success and failure, however, is once again more complex than may initially appear and has also played a central role in the reception history of the poem, which has been haunted by its reputation as a failure ever since its publication. Critics have long debated whether Keats considered *Isabella* a failed attempt and still often frame the discussion in these terms, even when it is to disagree with this assessment.³⁵⁶ Though the poem itself foregrounds the dilemma by wondering about whether ‘the verse’ ‘succeed[s] [...] or fail[s]’ (157), this dichotomy and its implications are actually challenged both by the tale and by its telling.³⁵⁷ Keats’s poem will be seen to call into question the very notion of success and expose its ambivalence by seeming to actively pursue its own failure as an act of poetic communication, while at the same time depicting the deathly consequences of effectively bridging the most extreme divide. The dream of perfect contact with the o/Other will turn out to hide a nightmare of interchangeability and usurpation that will throw a new light on Keats’s celebration of a porous and self-annihilating self.

Isabella provides a uniquely detailed account of the challenges faced when reaching out to (and from) the Other World and of the conditions that need to be met in order for such communicative endeavour to succeed. This uniqueness makes it stand out not only from the other poems under scrutiny but also from the rest of Keats’s poetry, thus testifying to its centrality to Romantic envisionings of otherworldly communication and to its role as a sort of catalyst of Keats’s thinking about communicative strategies. His presentation of what it takes to establish contact across unfathomable distance is remarkably scrupulous and encompasses the fulfilment of all the main phatic requirements that have been previously discussed, starting from the institution of a ‘physical channel’.³⁵⁸ The apparition of Lorenzo’s ‘spirit’ (321) is accurately located in space and time so as to ensure his spatiotemporal copresence with Isabella: he stands ‘at her couch’s foot’ (274) in ‘the drowsy gloom, | The dull of midnight’ (273-74). Not only does he enter her same space by appearing before her in her own room, but he also occupies it with a tangible and perceivable body. While it is true that his ‘pale shadow’ (281) spectrally ‘dissolve[s]’ (321) into the air at the end, it is also true that its disappearance palpably affects the surrounding matter by provoking ‘a slow turmoil’ in the very ‘atom[s]’ (322) of the atmosphere. His ghostly immateriality is undermined – or at least

³⁵⁶ Among the many critics who touch upon the question, see for example Kelvin Everest, ‘Isabella in the Market Place: Keats and Feminism’, in *Keats and History*, ed. by Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 107–26 (p. 110); Jack Stillinger, ‘Keats and Romance’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 8.4 (1968), 593–605 (p. 593); Kurt Heinzelman, ‘Self-Interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats’s *Isabella*’, *ELH*, 55.1 (1988), 159–93 (pp. 160, 168, 171); Hoeveler, p. 326; Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence*, p. 285.

³⁵⁷ All quotes from *Isabella* are from John Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. by Miriam Farris Allott (London: Longman, 1972).

³⁵⁸ Jakobson, p. 113.

complicated – by a heavy emphasis on physicality that is not found in the original source.³⁵⁹ In Boccaccio's tale, which Keats read in the 1620 translation by John Florio, death only vaguely affects the 'looks' of Lorenzo's ghost, who appears 'pale, meager, and staring' and 'in torne and unbefitting garments'.³⁶⁰ In Keats's version, instead, the spirit is endowed with remarkable and disturbingly accurate corporality and bears all the marks of a corpse rotting in the ground. 'The forest tomb' (275) has 'marred his glossy hair' (276) and 'put cold doom | Upon his lips' (277-78). His 'ears' are 'loamèd' (279), and his face is smeared with mud but for 'a miry channel for his tears' (280).

The channel carved by tears on Lorenzo's face is 'miry' (280), meaning full of or covered with mire, a kind of earth that is wet, sticky, and makes passing through it particularly arduous. This thick boggy mud in which his body is buried presumably occludes all his orifices, including his throat. It comes as no surprise then that Lorenzo struggles to articulate discernible words, another condition of contact, as already seen. 'Strange sound it was, when the pale shadow spake' (281), the narrator remarks at the beginning of the following stanza, and the impression of the 'physical (dis-)articulation of Lorenzo's voice' is also created at a metrical and phonosymbolic level.³⁶¹ As Simona Beccone points out, the slow spondaic rhythm of the first half of line 281 clashes with the anapaestic and iambic pattern of the second half, conveying the contrast between the obstacles hindering the flow of the ghost's speech and his eagerness to communicate.³⁶² She identifies the same tension in the concentration of voiceless fricatives whose continuous sound is often impeded by voiceless plosives: 'Strange sound', 'shadow', 'spake' (281, italics mine) 'striving', 'piteous tongue' (282, italics mine), 'speak', 'earth' (283, italics mine).³⁶³ These clusters create a blocking effect which phonetically re-enacts the toilsome passage through the clogged 'miry channel' (280). The presence of numerous voiceless sibilants, among whose qualities Reuven Tsur identifies the 'lack of sonority, richness, or smoothness' and 'the imitation of whispering', also suggests that Lorenzo's 'lorn voice' (279), from which death has 'taken the soft lute' (278), is an unpleasant, strident, stifled sound.³⁶⁴ According to Hofkosh, 'Lorenzo returns with a catch in his voice, perhaps a kind of stutter'.³⁶⁵

The strangeness of the ghost's speech also affects the syntax of the stanza, which Bennett defines as 'irregular and awkward, especially in the strangely inept and powerful last line': 'Like

³⁵⁹ Keats's focus on the materiality of Lorenzo's apparition has been noticed by several critics: see Stillinger, p. 600; Everest, p. 121; Hofkosh, p. 206.

³⁶⁰ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron Containing an Hundred Pleasant Novels*, trans. by John Florio (London: Isaac Iaggard, 1620), p. 160.

³⁶¹ Bennett, *Keats, Narrative, and Audience*, p. 88.

³⁶² See Simona Beccone, *Le Figure Femminili Nella Scrittura Di Keats: Un'indagine Jungiana* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2016), p. 162.

³⁶³ See Beccone, p. 162.

³⁶⁴ Reuven Tsur, *What Makes Sound Patterns Expressive? The Poetic Mode of Speech Perception* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 45.

³⁶⁵ Hofkosh, p. 196.

hoarse night-gusts sepulchral briars among' (288).³⁶⁶ The 'four apparently incompatible' adjectives and nouns accrue 'at the expense of grammar' and maintain 'their apparent incoherence' until the postponed preposition at the end retroactively reveals the syntactic structure of the phrase.³⁶⁷ As a result, the line features 'tongue-contortions [...] that repeat, in the reading mouth, Lorenzo's difficulties in speaking'.³⁶⁸ It also compares the spirit's voice to a sound passing through thorny branches, thereby providing another image of a hindered passage. This emphasis on somewhat obstructed channels in the most phatic moment of the interaction, when contact is being negotiated, has a metacommunicative meaning. It refers not just to Lorenzo's materially clogged vocal channel but also, figuratively, to the more abstract Jakobsonian channel of communication, which is equally impeded by the metaphysical gulf interposed between the lovers. The phatic act of establishing a channel over the abyss of death and sending words through it is a task as arduous as speaking through mud. Communicatively crossing the divide between this world and the Other requires a strenuous effort at various levels, and indeed whatever 'music' (284) Isabella still perceives in her beloved's voice is characterised by '[l]anguor' (285) and a 'tremulous shake' (285), clear signs of fatigue.

Lorenzo's struggle to articulate speech depends not only on the physical blockage of his throat but also on the linguistic challenges posed by his being dead. In order for his message to be understandable to the living Isabella, it is not enough that he appears before her and speaks in a voice perceivable to her ears, however strange and strained. He also has to express himself in a way that is close enough to how he did when he was alive, that is, in a human way: 'there was striving, in its piteous tongue, | To speak as when on earth it was awake' (282-83). Human language, however, does not come natural to him anymore, and the syntactic strangeness of these lines also mirrors this unnaturalness. 'To speak as when on earth' (283) entails considerable 'striving' (282) on his part because death divorced him from life and humanity. His painful separation from earthly existence and the ways in which death has made him *other* are highly emphasised in these stanzas. Just as Isabella perceives the revenant Lorenzo to be altered and strange, so he sees her and the world of the living to which she belongs as increasingly unfamiliar. The 'little sounds of life' (308) that surround him in his grave 'grow strange' (311) to him, and Isabella is 'distant in humanity' (312). Lorenzo's growing remoteness from human life even causes him to lose the pronominal attributes of a person: he turns from a 'he' into an 'it', a somewhat alien thing whose otherness is rendered through the use of this 'supernatural and neuter form', as Mark Sandy calls it.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁶ Bennett, *Keats, Narrative, and Audience*, p. 88.

³⁶⁷ Bennett, *Keats, Narrative, and Audience*, p. 88.

³⁶⁸ Bennett, *Keats, Narrative, and Audience*, p. 88.

³⁶⁹ Mark Sandy, 'Dream Lovers and Tragic Romance: Negative Fictions in Keats's *Lamia*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and *Isabella*', *Romanticism on the Net*, 20, 2000 <<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/005955ar>> [accessed 19 April 2022]. See 'its piteous tongue' (282), 'its eyes' (line 289), and 'it did unthread the horrid woof' (292).

Lorenzo's estrangement from humanity in consequence of his death makes it exceedingly difficult for him to communicate with the human Isabella, for people 'cannot talk to each other successfully without appealing to their common ground', as the psycholinguist Herbert H. Clark argues.³⁷⁰ In his pioneering work on the pragmatics of language *Arenas of Language Use* (1992), Clark provides 'an in-depth analysis of the contact conditions' that allow communication to take place, laying particular importance on the notion of *common ground*, i.e. 'a type of shared information' on which the interlocutors rely in order to formulate their utterances and understand each other.³⁷¹ One of its main sources is identified in community membership, something that the lovers no longer share because death has eroded their communal humanity.³⁷² Dead Lorenzo does not belong to humankind: he is 'a shadow now' (305). Spatial proximity is not enough to compensate for the metaphysical distance that he feels from Isabella on the ground of her 'humanity' (312).

In spite of everything, however, Lorenzo ultimately manages to overcome these impediments and speak in a sufficiently satisfying human way: he addresses Isabella in human language and is understood by her. His success is due to the fact that his condition is actually more ambiguous than has been granted so far. As is typical of ghosts, Lorenzo's ties to humanity have been loosed but not entirely severed. Immediately after acknowledging that Isabella's humanity distances her from him, he yet admits that he 'know[s] what was' (313) and can still 'feel full well what is' (313). In other words, he still knows and remembers what being human was like. His separation from this world has not been brought to a conclusion yet. Lorenzo is 'upon the skirts of human nature dwelling' (306), that is, in a peripheral position in relation to humanity but still sharing in it, even if to a limited, decreasing extent. In line with Clark's ideas, this remaining degree of common ground is instrumental in allowing dead Lorenzo to communicate with living Isabella. A further amount of commonality – and 'psychological connection' – is provided by the fact that, during their supernatural encounter, the lovers are both in states comparable to non-awakeness.³⁷³ In saying that Lorenzo 'was awake' 'on earth' (283), the narrator draws an analogy between being alive and being awake, and consequently between being dead and being *not* awake. At the same time, Isabella 'start[s] up awake' (328) as soon as her 'vision' (273) ends, indicating that she was somewhat not awake before, in line with the fact that visionary experiences typically occur in an altered state of consciousness between sleeping and waking.³⁷⁴

³⁷⁰ Herbert H. Clark, *Arenas of Language Use* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press & Center for the Study of Language and Information, 1992), p. 3.

³⁷¹ Bara, p. 67.

³⁷² Clark, p. 3. The other two are physical copresence and linguistic copresence: see Clark, pp. 36–41.

³⁷³ Jakobson, p. 113.

³⁷⁴ A reading of *Isabella* that pays particular attention to the role of altered states of consciousness can be found in Marcello Giovanelli, *Text World Theory and Keats' Poetry: The Cognitive Poetics of Desire, Dreams and Nightmares* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 141–61.

Alongside these sources of dwindling and temporary common ground, the poem provides a more specific reason why Lorenzo is successful in his communicative endeavour by pinpointing the means whereby he manages to speak in a human fashion: ‘its piteous tongue’ (282). This detail has not received much attention from critics, but the choice of the adjective is highly significant. According to the *OED*, *piteous* has three main meanings, all of which are pertinent to this passage. First of all, *piteous* can mean ‘evoking pitying contempt; mean, paltry, inadequate’ (*OED*) and therefore point to the inadequacy of dead Lorenzo to express himself in the manner of the living as well as to the poor outcome of his effort.³⁷⁵ The signifier itself conveys the idea of something that is said in a lessened way or not uttered to its full potential, as the reader is compelled to pronounce *piteous* as if it had two syllables instead of three due to metrical demands. The term has two other – opposite but complementary – meanings: ‘full of pity; affected with or feeling pity’ and ‘arousing or apt to arouse pity; deserving pity’ (*OED*). The former suggests that Lorenzo might still feel pity for Isabella by virtue of his enduring love for her, which could provide him with a persisting tie to humanity. Though he implies that he has lost the ability to experience human emotions (314: ‘I should rage, if spirits could go mad’), his eyes are ‘still all dewy bright | With love’ (289-90). The latter, instead, refers to Lorenzo’s ability and desire to elicit Isabella’s compassion. The aim of his visitation is, in fact, to ask her to ‘shed one tear upon [his] heather-bloom’ (303), a tear that would ‘comfort [him] within the tomb’ (304) by being the tangible token that Isabella feels sorry for him.

At its core, pity consists in sharing in the suffering of another person. In Adam Smith’s words, it is a ‘fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others’, a definition that perfectly captures the meaning of Lorenzo’s request: he wants Isabella to feel his pain, to cry like he cries when he appears before her (275: ‘Lorenzo stood, and wept’), and to this end he speaks to her through a ‘piteous tongue’ (282).³⁷⁶ The pity that still binds Lorenzo to Isabella may be regarded as a source of common ground that counterbalances their mutual otherness and allows them to communicate with each other. Whereas Clark understands *common ground* mostly in terms of shared information and mutual knowledge, the term is here being used more broadly to encompass different forms of commonality, including the more literal partaking of someone else’s feelings. This wider application is supported by eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century views of conversation as most effective when it takes place between pre-selected like-minded interlocutors.

This idea is most famously voiced in Joseph Addison’s claim that ‘the Mind never unbends it self so agreeably as in the Conversation of a well chosen Friend’.³⁷⁷ In his insightful study of

³⁷⁵ This is the only meaning contemplated by Hofkosh: see Hofkosh, p. 196.

³⁷⁶ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by David D. Raphael and Alec L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), p. 10.

³⁷⁷ *The Spectator*, ed. by Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), I, p. 397.

conversation, Mee interprets similar statements as symptomatic of a commonly held belief that ‘preselecting interlocutors with whom one shared values and a verbal code’ was necessary to ‘facilitate the smooth flow’ of conversation and includes ‘sympathy between participants’, with its potential to engender commonality, as ‘a pre-condition’ for it.³⁷⁸ In *Isabella*, the very duplicity of *piteous* in indicating both feeling and arousing pity foregrounds the fact that the lovers manage to communicate because they can sympathetically experience what the other experiences. At the same time, however, it creates ambiguity about who is the subject and who the object of the act of pitying. This confusion between agency and passivity implies a certain interchangeability between self and other that gives a disquieting quality to Lorenzo and Isabella’s intersubjective connection and foreshadows the ultimately ruinous result of their sharing, which will be the focus of the next section.

3.2 The dream of rapport, the nightmare of communion

The chapter so far has shown how *Isabella* details the various problematics of establishing contact across the abyss of death and, at the same time, devises strategies to fulfil phatic conditions under such extreme conditions of distance and otherness. The remarkable attention devoted to the prerequisites for otherworldly communication, however, should not overshadow the importance given to the opposite end of the interaction, that is, its purpose and outcome. That Lorenzo’s aim in getting into contact with Isabella bears a special significance for the overall understanding of the poem is suggested by Keats’s radical alteration to Boccaccio’s tale. Although critics have amply dealt with the differences between the two texts, they have so far failed to notice how *Isabella* overturns its source material as to the reason for Lorenzo’s temporary return to the land of the living. In Florio’s translation of the original story, the ghost conveys the following message: ‘My deare love Isabella, thou doest nothing but torment thy selfe, with calling on me, accusing me for overlong tarrying from thee: I am come therefore to let thee know, that thou canst not enjoy my company any more, because the very same day when last thou sawest me, thy brethren most bloodily murdered me’.³⁷⁹ Lorenzo’s spirit appears to Isabella in order to let her know that his death, of which she is unaware, has divorced them forever. He wants to make it clear that her attempts at reaching out to him are pointless and she must desist from them: ‘hee strictly charged her, not to call him at any time afterward’.³⁸⁰ In *Isabella*, the ghost’s intention is exactly the opposite. Instead of accepting that death has put a definitive end to his relationship with Isabella, he strives to overcome the metaphysical distance between them

³⁷⁸ Mee, pp. 3, 30, 67.

³⁷⁹ Boccaccio, p. 160.

³⁸⁰ Boccaccio, p. 160.

precisely to re-establish it. He informs her of his death not in order to make her stop calling him but to let her know where his grave is, so that she can go visit him and undo their separation.

The solitude caused by death appears to be Lorenzo's main source of sorrow and is repeatedly underscored in these stanzas: he tells Isabella that he is 'dwelling | Alone' (306-07) and 'chant[ing] alone the holy mass' (307), and his voice is described as 'lorn' (279). His painful sense of isolation had already been highlighted in relation to the very manner of his death: 'when a soul doth thus its freedom win, | It aches in loneliness' (219-20). The remark might seem rather unusual. One would expect that Lorenzo's treacherous murder would engender above all longing for revenge or rage, but what causes him most distress is the fact that he lies utterly forlorn in his grave, for his death is unknown to Isabella. His apparition to her and the request he makes are a way of remedying this situation. As mentioned, Lorenzo visits Isabella to ask her for a demonstration of her fellow feeling towards him, which would bring him comfort by testifying to the permanence of a bond between them and, as a result, allowing him to escape his loneliness. Pity turns out to be not only the precondition of their communication but also its avowed purpose, similarly to the twofold application of the phatic in linguistics.

According to the notions of communication theory that have been applied in the previous chapters, one could argue that the main purpose of Lorenzo in speaking to Isabella is technically to convey information. He crosses the gulf of death so as to 'unthread the horrid woof | Of the late darkened time' (292-93), that is, reveal to her that he has been murdered by her own brothers. Yet, at a closer look, the informative function of communication once again coexists with – and is actually subordinate to – the phatic one. Lorenzo undoubtedly wants to inform Isabella of his fate and of the exact spot in the forest where he has been secretly buried (he provides her with all the relevant details to identify it at lines 296-302), but this is not his ultimate goal. It is only instrumental to allow Isabella to grant his most pressing wish, which has a relational and phatic nature: he makes contact with her to restore their relationship and, as a matter of fact, *stay* in contact. Isabella herself understands the fulfilment of his request in specifically phatic terms: 'Sweet Spirit, thou hast schooled my infancy. | I'll visit thee for this and kiss thine eyes, | And greet thee morn and even in the skies' (334-36). In exchange for the precious information that he gave her, she agrees to find his grave and 'greet' (334) him, a gesture that will be repeated thereafter as a regular occurrence (in the morning and evening). Greetings have been said to be among the most typical phatic utterances in Jakobson's sense of the term. Isabella satisfies Lorenzo's desire by keeping open the communicative channel that he re-established without conveying any content, just signalling that their communication and with it their relationship have been reprised.

Keats was aware that communication can have two different primary purposes and experienced first-hand the challenges of mediating between them in his letter-writing activity. In a letter to his brother George and his sister-in-law Georgiana in America, dated 16 October 1818, he explicitly acknowledges the tension between his ‘wish to go on writing ad infinitum, to you’ and his ‘wish for interesting matter’ – in other words, between communication whose aim is to speak (or write) for the mere sake of staying in contact with the interlocutor and communication that is contingent on having some relevant content to convey.³⁸¹ At first, Keats feels particularly pressured by this informational demand: ‘now I have such a dearth [of ‘something new to tell you’] that when I get to the end of this sentence and to the bottom of this page I [must] wait till I can find something interesting to you before I begin another’.³⁸² The lack of interesting things to say seems to prevail over his desire to write ‘without any stop’.³⁸³ Immediately afterwards, however, Keats realises, with a sudden insight, that these concerns are ultimately misguided: ‘After all it is not much matter what it may be about; for the very words from such a distance penned by this hand will be grateful to you – even though I were to copy out the tale of Mother Hubbard or Little Red Riding Hood’.³⁸⁴ The vast distance from which his letters come makes their content irrelevant, for their chief goal is to create a feeling of virtual togetherness with George and Georgiana across the Atlantic. Under these circumstances, ‘pens’ are the only means through which Keats and his loved ones can ‘sustain their relationship’, as Heidi Thomson puts it, and therefore they are mainly used to this end.³⁸⁵ Keats reiterates this point in another letter, dated 12 March 1819, where he claims that he ‘require[s] nothing so much’ of them but ‘trifles’, for ‘such thing[s] become interesting from distance of time or place’.³⁸⁶

Keats’s emphasis on the role of distance in subverting what he perceives to be the ordinary hierarchy of communicative functions is significant for *Isabella*, as the poem envisions the supernatural encounter between the lovers as an instance of communication at a distance: living Isabella has been said to be ‘distant’ (312) in the eyes of dead Lorenzo. In one of his last letters to Charles Brown, Keats interestingly states that ‘[I]and and sea, weakness and decline, are great separators, but death is the great divorcer for ever’.³⁸⁷ Geographical and metaphysical distance are here conceived not as incommensurable measures but as two ends of the same continuum. This view further confirms the idea that otherworldliness acts as a catalyst that magnifies the challenges,

³⁸¹ John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), I, p. 400.

³⁸² Keats, I, p. 400.

³⁸³ Keats, I, p. 400.

³⁸⁴ Keats, I, pp. 400–401.

³⁸⁵ Heidi Thomson, ‘Keats’s Letters: “A Wilful and Dramatic Exercise of Our Minds Towards Each Other”’, *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 25.2 (2011), 160–74 (p. 162).

³⁸⁶ John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), II, p. 73.

³⁸⁷ Keats, II, p. 345.

rewards, and dangers of communication at a distance of any kind as well as the relevance of Keats's private musings on communication across the Atlantic to his poetic treatment of communication with the Other World. Among the Romantic poets, Keats is arguably the most overtly invested in the question of how to negotiate distance from a specifically communicative standpoint. Rosie Whitcombe claims that he 'had a genius for long-distance communication', and Thomson maintains that his 'letters express Keats's sensitivity to the physical separation between himself and his correspondents, the desire to bridge that separation by various rhetorical figurations of closeness and ongoing connections between himself and his correspondents'.³⁸⁸

The theoretical value and richness of Keats's thinking – and writing – on communication, especially at a distance, has finally started to receive some (albeit limited) critical attention. As Igarashi rightly points out, '[c]ommunication and communications media remain a significant, although still largely unremarked, concern of Keats's poetry and letters', and these themes constitute 'a paradigmatic rather than a momentary preoccupation' for him.³⁸⁹ Nonetheless, notable elements of originality in Keats's views on communication have not yet been duly appreciated, partly because they have not been considered through the specific lens of communication theory. From this standpoint, his remarks on the tension between the need to convey 'interesting matter' and the opposing desire to write 'ad infinitum' just for the sake of staying in contact correspond remarkably closely to recent formulations of the informative and phatic functions of communication.³⁹⁰ Even more strikingly, Keats's acknowledgement that communication can dispense with informational content when its primary aim is to overcome distance is perfectly aligned with the principle of pragmatics according to which the phatic component of the interaction is more likely to become predominant when the institution of a channel is uncertain and 'the communication process is threatened' by some obstacle, such as physical (or metaphysical) separation.³⁹¹ Thomson seems to intuit something of this non-informative model of communication when she states that Keats's letter-writing is characterised by 'the need for maintaining an ongoing conversation in writing'.³⁹² The full implications of Keats's insight, however, can only be grasped by taking into account the technical notion of phatic communion.

Keats's idea of a kind of communication where 'what it may be about' is unimportant (it can even be 'trifles'), for what truly matters is the fact itself that 'words', whatever they are, put the interlocutors in connection is incredibly reminiscent not just of phatic speech in general but

³⁸⁸ Rosie Whitcombe, 'Connection, Consolation, and the Power of Distance in the Letters of John Keats', *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 35.1 (2021), 86–92 (p. 86); Thomson, p. 161.

³⁸⁹ Igarashi, p. 143.

³⁹⁰ Keats, I, p. 400.

³⁹¹ Žegarac, 'Phatic Communication', p. 316.

³⁹² Thomson, p. 161.

specifically of Malinowski's phatic communion.³⁹³ According to Malinowski, *phatic communion* is a type of speech that 'serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas', hence its 'purposeless' and 'irrelevant' contents.³⁹⁴ In these instances, 'there need not or perhaps even there must not be anything to communicate', for people exchange words for the mere sake of creating a situation in which they can exchange words and be together.³⁹⁵ This mode of communication is, first and foremost, intended to establish some sort of communion between the participants, as the name itself of the concept suggests. Though subsequent linguists have often underplayed Malinowski's 'motivation for using the term *communion* rather than *communication* or *speech*', his word choice is, of course, deliberate and meaningful.³⁹⁶ Its specific connotations should not be overlooked, for, as Gunter Senft highlights, 'it is precisely the achievement of "rapport" through the use of speech – a kind of communion, indeed – that Malinowski emphasized, and this is different from what is often thought to be the meaning of "communication"'.³⁹⁷

The longstanding and complex relationship between communication and communion has been touched upon in the previous chapter with regards to the common etymological root of the two terms. The conceptualisation of phatic communion is another significant moment in this history. In Malinowski's essay, phatic communion is said to fulfil 'a social function' and, at a certain point, is equated with bringing about a 'pleasant atmosphere of polite, social intercourse'.³⁹⁸ The vaguer references to 'ties of union' or the above-quoted 'bonds of personal union', however, allow for a less distinctly social interpretation of the phenomenon, which favours the more generally interpersonal nature of the communion established and sees it as an intersubjective connection or, as Senft puts it, *rapport*.³⁹⁹ This version is more directly applicable to *Isabella*, as the demands of society and sociability have no hold when communicating with the Other World. To use Malinowski's own words, Lorenzo's ghost makes contact with Isabella out of a 'need of companionship', in the hope of soothing his loneliness and re-establishing their bond of 'personal communion' that death has severed.⁴⁰⁰ At the same time, the immense metaphysical distance separating the lovers makes any word uttered by Isabella 'grateful' to Lorenzo, including – or perhaps especially – her semantically

³⁹³ Keats, I, p. 400; Keats, II, p. 73; Keats, I, p. 400.

³⁹⁴ Malinowski, pp. 316, 314.

³⁹⁵ Malinowski, p. 316.

³⁹⁶ Justine Coupland, Nikolas Coupland, and Jeffrey D. Robinson, "'How Are You?': Negotiating Phatic Communion", *Language in Society*, 21.2 (1992), 207–30 (p. 210).

³⁹⁷ Senft, p. 227.

³⁹⁸ Malinowski, pp. 315, 316.

³⁹⁹ Malinowski, pp. 316, 314. Aranye Fradenburg offers a similar interpretation of phatic communion as aimed 'to create intersubjectivity' (Aranye Fradenburg, 'The Sonnets: Momma's Boys', in *Shakespeareer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. by Madhavi Menon [Durham: Duke University Press, 2011], pp. 319–27 [p. 325]).

⁴⁰⁰ Malinowski, p. 315.

empty but relationally meaningful greetings.⁴⁰¹ The main purpose of both their communicative endeavours turns out to be fundamentally in line with Malinowski's definition of phatic communion (minus its specifically social dimension) and with its protoformulation in Keats's letters.

The (re)creation of communion as a result of communication, however, also takes another, more literal form in the poem, which is closer to the speaker's actual partaking of the past in canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. That the institution of contact across the gulf of death results in a far more tangible experience of communing than Malinowski's ties of union is already made clear during the supernatural encounter. Towards the end of his speech, Lorenzo's spirit says to Isabella: 'Though I forget the taste of earthly bliss, | That paleness warms my grave' (315-16). At first, *paleness* seems to refer to Lorenzo's dim recollection of his life on earth, given that it immediately follows his claim that he still 'know[s] what was' (313). Lorenzo is saying that retaining memory of being alive allows him to approximate this condition again, as signalled by the fact that this paleness 'warms' (316) his grave and that warmth is archetypically associated with life whereas coldness with death. Yet, a few lines later, another interpretation is made possible by a shift in the referent of *paleness*. 'Thy paleness makes me glad', Lorenzo states, and here it is obviously Isabella's pallor that pleases him. As with the comfort provided by her tears, Lorenzo's gladness derives from the renewed similarity between their conditions that Isabella's paleness betrays.⁴⁰² Besides indicating a deathly quality per se, in fact, pallor explicitly characterises Lorenzo's 'pale shadow' (281). The second meaning of *paleness* may even reflect on the first occurrence of the term and convey the idea that Isabella's approximation to a death-like state allows for Lorenzo's approximation to life. The convergence between the two referents (Lorenzo's faded memory of being alive and Isabella's pallor) is reinforced by the fact that 'that paleness warms my grave' (316) is followed by 'as though I had | A Seraph chosen from the bright abyss | To be my spouse' (316-18). What makes Lorenzo feel warm – that is, closer to life – turns out to be the prospect of having a spouse that would remedy his loneliness in death, a spouse who cannot be anyone but Isabella herself.

In addition to further confirming that the rekindling of his relationship with Isabella is the intended – and, as it seems, achieved – outcome of Lorenzo's reaching out to her, these lines suggest that their communion consists not only in a relational bond or sense of togetherness but also in actual physical sharing. While Isabella's living body starts changing and displaying features of dead Lorenzo's appearance as soon as contact is established between them, her transformation becomes even more pronounced when she fulfils his request by visiting his grave in the forest and exhuming

⁴⁰¹ Keats, I, p. 400.

⁴⁰² William Crisman links Isabella's paleness to Lorenzo's but does not go as far as to argue that she has acquired his pallor, claiming that Lorenzo's ghost is merely 'admiring in her his own pallor' (William Crisman, 'Industrialism and the Fate of Personal Distance in Keats's "Isabella" and "Lamia"', *European Romantic Review*, 4.2 [1994], 113–32 [p. 125]).

his body to take his head and keep it with her always. During the disinterment of Lorenzo's corpse, Isabella becomes more and more akin to his ghost. Just as he had appeared to her with 'cold doom | Upon his lips' (277-78), so she kisses his unearthed glove 'with a lip more chill than stone' (371). She is then called '[p]ale Isabella' (399), showing that her paleness was not a momentary reaction to the spectral visitation but the sign of a more enduring alteration. The changes undergone by Isabella's body make it acquire traits that are typically considered to be marks of death and end up truly consuming her life.

After planting Lorenzo's head in the pot of basil, she spends all her days weeping over the plant, pining away, oblivious of everything else. She meets the spirit's request not by shedding a single tear upon his grave but by keeping the basil into which he is 'effectively transubstantiated', as Stacey McDowell phrases it, 'ever wet' with an endless flow of 'tears' (415-16).⁴⁰³ The disparity between the 'niggardly one-tear memorial' that Lorenzo asked for and the prodigality with which Isabella expends 'the whole treasury of her tears' has been noticed by Heinzelman, who ascribes it to her desire to comfort herself rather than her lover.⁴⁰⁴ I argue, instead, that it is the natural, though extreme, consequence of the communion that has been re-established between the lovers. Tears will not cease to flow until Isabella fully shares in Lorenzo's state, in other words, until she actually dies. The eyes with which she cries are already called 'dead' (453) at this point, an important but generally neglected detail confirming that her death is the inexorable result of this process, not of the brothers' subsequent theft of the basil, as most critics maintain.⁴⁰⁵

Isabella's partaking of the bodily condition of dead Lorenzo is the culminating manifestation of the 'piteous' (282) fellow feeling that joins them across – and despite – death: their ability to emotionally feel what the other feels leads them to also feel what the other feels at a strictly physical level. Both these forms of sharing are encompassed in early nineteenth-century multifaceted understandings of sympathy, but the latter carries darker connotations.⁴⁰⁶ As Ildiko Csengei argues, '[m]echanical notions of sympathy' – where *mechanical* means '[r]elating to [...] physical forces, properties, or agents' (*OED*) – 'signal an anxiety about a potentially disruptive excess built into the earliest conceptualisations of fellow-feeling'.⁴⁰⁷ *Isabella* appears to expose a similar disruptive excess by portraying the threatening potentialities of intersubjectivity, when communing with the other

⁴⁰³ Stacey McDowell, 'Grotesque Organicism in Keats's *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil*', *Keats-Shelley Review*, 24.1 (2010), 22–28 (p. 26).

⁴⁰⁴ Heinzelman, p. 183.

⁴⁰⁵ See, for instance, Heinzelman, p. 185; Hoeveler, p. 336; White, p. 153; Sandy, 'Dream Lovers and Tragic Romance'.

⁴⁰⁶ I have analysed the role of sympathy and the interplay between its different early nineteenth-century definitions in *Isabella* in Greta Colombani, "'Thy Paleness Makes Me Glad": Death, Sympathy, and the Body in Keats's *Isabella*', in *Life, Death, and Consciousness in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Lucy Cogan and Michelle O'Connell (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp. 139–63.

⁴⁰⁷ Ildiko Csengei, *Sympathy, Sensibility and the Literature of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 40.

results in being consumed and ultimately annihilated. Hermione de Almeida highlights that ‘Lorenzo’s deathliness feeds upon life’.⁴⁰⁸ More precisely, it feeds upon Isabella’s life, almost like ‘an incubus’, to use Rachel Schulkins’s effective analogy.⁴⁰⁹ The closer she comes to death, the more ‘thick and green and beautiful’ (426) – in short, alive – the plant grows by parasitically sapping her life force together with her ‘thin tears’ (425).

Just as Lorenzo’s ghost was made warm by her paleness, so the basil flourishes while Isabella ‘withers, like a palm | Cut by an Indian for its juicy balm’ (447-48). By comparing her to a plant, the simile reinforces the impression that the communion between her and the basil (and therefore Lorenzo) is so complete as to make their identities indistinguishable. The interchangeability of Isabella and Lorenzo that was implied by the bidirectionality of the adjective *piteous* eventually becomes factual and factually destructive. Diane Hoeveler remarks that “‘Sweet Isabel” and her “sweet basil” [...] have become interchangeable anagrams for each other; the boundaries between same and other have been obliterated’.⁴¹⁰ Such obliteration takes an even more extreme and troubling turn, as living Isabella and dead Lorenzo share in each other’s being and body to the point of making porous the divide not only between self and other but also between self and Other, between a rotting corpse and a living organism, turning life into death and death into life.

The ruinous consequences of the lovers’ otherworldly communion seem to primarily rest on the fact that it involves their bodies, a point that puts the earlier emphasis on the ghost’s corporeality and physical copresence in a different, more sinister light. These communicative prerequisites are also given special importance in Keats’s letters. When writing to George and Georgiana in America, he expresses his desire to be ‘as near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room’, thus identifying bodily closeness with the utmost and most desirable form of proximity as well as with the most favourable condition for communication to take place.⁴¹¹ The creation of virtual simulations of physical copresence is the central tenet of all the various strategies that he envisions in his letters to compensate for his distance from the interlocutors, be it by asking for a ‘description of yourselves, however it may be when you are writing to me’, by making arrangements that they will all ‘read a passage of Shakespeare every Sunday at ten o’Clock’, or by relying on his knowledge of ‘the manner of you walking, standing, sauntering, sitting down, laugh{ing,} punning, and every action so truly that you seem near to me’.⁴¹² On the surface, *Isabella* appears to fulfil this fantasy of virtually – one might say, ghostily – recreated copresence in the face of seemingly unbridgeable distance by

⁴⁰⁸ Hermione de Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 86.

⁴⁰⁹ Rachel Schulkins, *Keats, Modesty and Masturbation* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 83.

⁴¹⁰ Hoeveler, p. 334. See also Heinzelman, p. 166; McDowell, p. 25.

⁴¹¹ Keats, II, p. 5.

⁴¹² Keats, II, pp. 73, 5.

portraying a closeness of bodies that even overcomes the gulf of death. However, the dream that Keats repeatedly chases in his letters turns into a nightmare when it is actually realised in the poem. As the disastrous ending shows, utmost proximity can lead to the collapse of distinctions and to fatally symbiotic communion. The disquieting permeability of Lorenzo's and Isabella's bodies is the other – darker – side of the copresence that is supposed to constitute the ideal condition for communication. How Keats's poem challenges and undermines notions of what makes a communicative success, while at the same time representing a seeming instance of perfectly successful communication, will be precisely the focus of the next section.

3.3 The pitfalls and ambivalence of success

Compared to the other poems that have been discussed so far, *Isabella* envisions a far less precarious and frustrated instance of communication with the Other World, where metaphysical distance is undoubtedly bridged and contact between the living and the dead effectively established. The phatic prerequisites of physical channel, psychological connection, sensory perceptibility, linguistic understandability, and common ground are all satisfied. Lorenzo provides valuable information to Isabella who, in return, complies with his request, and their communication ultimately accomplishes its intended aims of phatically rekindling their relationship and creating communion. However, even in this case, success cannot be safely disentangled from failure: the overcoming of the divide between life and death results in their dangerous blurring and reversal, and communicatively established ties of union give rise to an excessively tangible sharing in the condition of the o/Other. In a way, Keats's poem may be seen as an exploration of what happens when the conditions for communication are successfully met under the most extreme circumstances. 'What happens when the conditions are met' is a phrase whose underpinnings are worthy of consideration. On the one hand, the expression evokes the somewhat necessarily rigid understanding of communication that is typical of linguistics and that Keats's poem resists and troubles by amplifying ambivalence: the fulfilment of the necessary requirements does not inevitably translate into communicative success or, alternatively, success does not always equate to the attainment of a felicitous outcome. On the other hand, it has a transactional flavour that is neither accidental nor misplaced when dealing with *Isabella*.

The poem's concern with trade and economic dynamics has long been one of the main points of interest for critics, who have tended to focus on the worldliest aspects of *Isabella*, most notably its famous attack on capitalist exploitation and unscrupulous money-making.⁴¹³ Keats's use of

⁴¹³ Some notable examples of this kind of readings are Daniel P. Watkins, 'Personal Life and Social Authority in Keats's *Isabella*', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 11.1 (1987), 33–49; Heinzelman; Crisman; Michael Sider, '*Isabella* and the Dialogism of Romance', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 22.3 (2000), 329–56.

commercial vocabulary and images is not limited to the stanzas that overtly detail the brothers' mercantile endeavours and denounce their 'hungry pride and gainful cowardice' (130) but pervades the whole text, thus accounting for the special attention that has been devoted to the topic. Rather surprisingly, it even extends to the relationship between the lovers, who would be expected to be in opposition to the evil brothers. Lorenzo himself presents their love in terms of profit and debt: 'we'll *gain* | Out of the amorous dark what day doth *borrow*' (205-06, italics mine). In the second section of the poem, his severed head, through which Isabella grants his request for tears and ongoing contact, is repeatedly described through 'metaphors of monetary value' like 'the clay, so dearly prized' (339), 'the prize' (402), and 'the jewel, safely casketed' (431), as remarked by Michael Lagory.⁴¹⁴ Earlier, stanza XII mentioned the 'general *award* of love' (97, italics mine) and also contained the term *fee*, whose distinct 'mercantile resonance' is reinforced by the following reference to 'bright gold' (94).⁴¹⁵

Wondering whether Isabella and Lorenzo were 'unhappy' (89) at the beginning of their story, the narrator concludes that '[i]t cannot be' (89) and remarks that '[t]oo many tears for lovers have been shed, | Too many sighs give we to them in fee, | Too much of pity after they are dead, | Too many doleful stories do we see' (90-93). *Fee* has here the 'premodern meaning of a relationship subject to feudal obligation', as Heinzelman points out, but also the more general economic sense of a tribute paid in exchange for some sort of service.⁴¹⁶ These lines, which criticise our habitual emotional response to this kind of tales, have clear metapoetic overtones.⁴¹⁷ The 'we' (91) stands for the readers, who feel 'pity' (92) and shed 'tears' (90) for lovers but only give these things as a 'fee' (91). What the readers earn out of their engagement with the text (hence their need to give something in return) is made clear in the previous stanza, which ends with the following couplet: 'Ah! better had it been for ever so, | Than idle ears should pleasure in their woe' (87-88). The narrator is saying that Isabella and Lorenzo would have fared better if they had remained '[u]nknown of any, free from whispering tale' (86), in other words, outside the circuit of communication, more precisely, of literary communication. Metapoetic connotations are again easily detectable: the lovers cannot be free from 'tale' (86) because they are the object of the narrative that is the poem itself, and the overhearing 'idle ears' (88) cannot but belong to readers, who enjoy reading about the misfortunes of others.⁴¹⁸ The pleasure that they take in the characters' misery constitutes their gain and places them in a similar position to the ghost, who derives gladness from the early sign of Isabella's wasting condition.

⁴¹⁴ Michael Lagory, 'Wormy Circumstance: Symbolism in Keats's "Isabella"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 34.3 (1995), 321–42 (p. 339).

⁴¹⁵ Susan J. Wolfson, 'Keats's "Isabella" and the "Digressions" of "Romance"', *Criticism*, 27.3 (1985), 247–61 (p. 256).

⁴¹⁶ Heinzelman, p. 180.

⁴¹⁷ Beth Lau, among others, interprets these lines as 'a criticism of all the sentimental lovers in distressed circumstances – and of all the sentimental readers who wept over their plights – in the popular fiction of the day' (Lau, p. 42).

⁴¹⁸ See Bennett, *Keats, Narrative, and Audience*, p. 83; Susan J. Wolfson, *Reading John Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 258.

Readers are involved in a dynamic that mirrors that between Isabella and Lorenzo. The tears that the former give in exchange for the amusement derived from the characters' 'woe' (88) are reminiscent of Lorenzo's earlier desire to 'drink' – that is, gain – Isabella's 'tears' (39) and bring her comfort in return. What would appear to be an innocent, even naïve impulse to 'startle off her cares' (40), however, foreshadows the poem's tragic ending and will be ultimately satisfied through the all-consuming hunger with which the basil will literally drink all her tears. The giving and receiving – one might say, the trading – of tears is a unifying image throughout the poem. The tears that the readers pay as a 'fee' (91) may be also related to the single tear that Lorenzo asks of Isabella in exchange for the precious information that he imparts to her. Not coincidentally, in a variant of line 304, he claims that Isabella's tear 'shall turn a diamond in the tomb', thus clearly indicating that he sees it as equivalent to a precious and economically valuable good.⁴¹⁹ The exactitude and full extent of these parallelisms has eluded critics but points to the presence of an elaborate system of correspondences between the lovers' otherworldly communication and, on a metatextual level, poetic communication, a point to which I will return in the next section. At the same time, it establishes some sort of equivalence between these communicative acts and a trade transaction.

The fact that 'literary and commercial riches', but also romantic and commercial riches, 'wind up on the same axis of imagery' has been noticed by several critics and has been mostly interpreted as a strategy through which Keats criticises the commodification of poetry or the intersections between lovemaking and economics.⁴²⁰ Whereas the thematic and lexical emphasis on trade and money has been traditionally given pre-eminence as a key indicator of the poem's overarching concern with socio-economic realities, I suggest to do the opposite and consider it to be a piece of a different mosaic that has communication as its main subject. Rather than communicative exchanges being a mirror for commercial dynamics, the extensive use of mercantile vocabulary and images can be deemed to bring further to the fore the theme of communication, especially if the way in which conversation was conceptualised in the previous decades is taken into account.

Mee points out that during the eighteenth century "conversation" and "commerce" were coming to be used interchangeably'.⁴²¹ As an example of their close association, Stephen Copley

⁴¹⁹ Charles J. Rzepka, "'Jack a Lantern' Verse: Of Pots and Precursors and Poetic Value in *Isabella*", in *Keats's Reading/Reading Keats: Essays in Memory of Jack Stillinger*, ed. by Beth Lau, Greg Kucich, and Daniel Johnson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 103–28 (p. 339).

⁴²⁰ Wolfson, 'Keats's "Isabella" and the "Digressions" of "Romance"', p. 257. See also Wolfson, *Reading John Keats*, pp. 52–53; Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence*, p. 284; Heinzelman, p. 165; Rzepka, pp. 116–17.

⁴²¹ Mee, p. 17. The relationship between the two terms in this period has been amply discussed: see, for instance, Timothy Dykstal, 'Commerce, Conversation, and Contradiction in Mandeville's *Fable*', *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, 23.1 (1994), 93–110; Stephen Miller, *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 60–65; Ros Ballaster, 'The Economics of Ethical Conversation: The Commerce of the Letter in Eliza Haywood and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu', *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 35.1 (2011), 119–32; and the critics that will be quoted in the next few paragraphs.

mentions that ‘[i]n the 1737 *New General English Dictionary* of Thomas Dyche and William Pardon the meanings of “commerce” extend beyond the modern restricted sphere of “the commercial” to embrace other forms of social or sexual congress’, comprising ‘trade, dealing, traffick; conversation by word or letter; correspondence of any kind’.⁴²² An overlapping between the definitions of ‘[t]o CONVERSE’ and ‘[t]o COMMERCE’ is also found in Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1755), where they are both synonymous with ‘to hold intercourse with’ and both encompass the idea of exchange.⁴²³ The former can, in fact, mean ‘[t]o convey the thoughts reciprocally in talk’, and the noun form of the latter is defined as ‘exchange of one thing for another; interchange of any thing; trade; traffick’.⁴²⁴ Conversation is presented in terms of commerce and exchange in many important writings on the topic. In his ‘Essay on Conversation’ (1775), Britannicus describes it as ‘reciprocal commerce’ and ‘a mutual interchange of thoughts’, an expression which is almost identical to Fielding’s ‘reciprocal Interchange of Ideas’.⁴²⁵ Several authors also draw explicit analogies between conversing and commercing in its more specific economic sense. In his 1740 essay ‘Rules of Conversation’, George Drummonds states that ‘[c]onversation is a sort of commerce, towards which every one should furnish his Quota, that is should hear & speak in his turn’.⁴²⁶ A similar point is made in James Boswell’s *London Journal*, where he quotes his friend’s opinion that ‘[c]onversation [...] is the traffic of the mind; for by exchanging ideas, we enrich one another’, and in Hannah More’s 1786 poem ‘The Bas Bleu, or Conversation’: ‘But ’tis thy commerce, Conversation | Must give it use by circulation; | That noblest commerce of mankind, | Whose precious merchandize is mind!’ (248-51).⁴²⁷

All these connections between conversation and commerce, whether on a strictly lexical level or through more elaborate imagery, appear to revolve around the concept of exchange, which plays a major part in *Isabella* both in terms of the plot and of the recurrence of economic language. Expressions like *fee*, *gaining*, *borrowing*, *award* or *prize* all imply that something is given or received in exchange for something else. A similar dynamic has been seen to be at work in the interactions between the lovers, most compellingly when they take place across the gap between this world and the Other: living Isabella gives greetings, tears, and life force to dead Lorenzo, who takes it all and,

⁴²² Stephen Copley, ‘Commerce, Conversation and Politeness in the Early Eighteenth-Century Periodical’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 18.1 (1995), 63–77 (p. 66); Thomas Dyche and William Pardon, *A New General English Dictionary*, 3rd edn (London: Richard Ware, 1740).

⁴²³ Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 9th edn, 2 vols (London, 1806), I.

⁴²⁴ Johnson, I.

⁴²⁵ Britannicus, ‘Essay on Conversation’, *Sentimental Magazine, or, General Assemblage of Science, Taste, and Entertainment*, 1775, 149–51 (p. 149); Fielding, I, p. 120.

⁴²⁶ Quoted in Mee, pp. 17–18.

⁴²⁷ James Boswell, *Boswell’s London Journal, 1762-1763*, ed. by Frederick A. Pottle (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 76; *Romantic Women Poets: An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 41.

in return, gives death. If the pervasive economic imagery and the prominent isotopy of exchange that run through the poem are considered in connection with its attention to the theme of communication, then they can be interpreted in a new light: as a way in which *Isabella* engages with the understanding of conversation as an interchange comparable to commerce that had become common in the previous century. Though Keats lived in a period where conversation as a somewhat regulated social practice had already declined, it is unlikely that such popular and widespread ideas simply vanished.

As a matter of fact, Mee claims that the Cockney school, with which Keats was affiliated, albeit in a shifting and complicated way, was one of the places ‘where a conversable paradigm remained alive in the first decades of the nineteenth century’.⁴²⁸ William Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt, who were both intellectual points of reference for Keats, were interested in the practice and theory of conversation. Unlike his eighteenth-century predecessors, however, Hunt overtly ‘distinguished his principle of sociality from the regulated flow of commerce’.⁴²⁹ When viewed in this context, Keats’s direct attack on commercialism and recurring use of its vocabulary to describe Lorenzo and Isabella’s relationship may be read in a similar fashion, as a criticism of a way of socially and, more specifically, communicatively interacting that resembles too closely the principles of economics. The difference between the lovers and the greedy brothers fades if communicating and commercing become comparable. The disastrous outcome of the former’s renewed contact across the abyss of death acts as a warning against the established practice of equating verbal and commercial exchange. At the same time, by virtue of the analogies drawn between different communicative acts, the poem also exposes the intersections between the circulation of goods, words, and poetry. Just as Lorenzo and Isabella would have been happier if they had not entered the communicative circuit of the tale and had their misfortunes reduced to paid entertainment, so Keats is aware that entering the circuit of literary communication by publishing the poem means entering ‘a modern market economy’ and exposing his work to the risk of being reduced to its mere ‘exchange-value’, as Charles Rzepka points out.⁴³⁰

Keats’s criticism, however, goes deeper and is directed to the very foundations of coeval conceptions of communication, bringing us back to the question of its success. As already hinted, during the eighteenth century, *conversation* did not just indicate the typical sociable practice of coffee-houses, clubs, and parlours, but also had a broader meaning that overlapped with what we now call *communication*, as it does in contemporary ordinary use and communication theory.⁴³¹ According

⁴²⁸ Mee, p. 239.

⁴²⁹ Mee, p. 251.

⁴³⁰ Rzepka, pp. 103, 104.

⁴³¹ Bara, for example, defines ‘conversation’ as the ‘most common form of communication’ and synonymous with ‘[d]ialogical exchange’ (Bara, p. 63).

to David Hancock, the term more generally comprised the idea of ‘dealing with others or things’ in a way that ‘only had to exhibit two characteristics: (1) collaboration, that is, an exchange of information between at least two persons, and (2) reciprocity, that is, an opportunity for all participants to reveal their knowledge and articulate their positions’.⁴³² These two requirements actually share the same premise, as an exchange is but an ‘action [...] of reciprocal giving and receiving’ (*OED*), thus further confirming the centrality of this concept to understandings of conversation of the time. They also closely correspond to two features that have been seen to be commonly attributed to communication: an informative purpose and mutuality. Both of these assumptions about what communicating (and conversing) should entail are questioned in *Isabella*.

How the poem challenges the former by envisioning alternative forms of communication as ongoing contact and communion has already been discussed, but its lexical and thematic emphasis on dynamics of interchange performs a similar function. Formulations of conversation as exchange tend to have an informational underpinning. They imply the existence of something to be exchanged which is usually identified with ideas or thoughts, i.e. informational content, as exemplified by the above-quoted passages from authors of the period. Keats undermines this equation by portraying a communicative intercourse that moves beyond exchanging information (such as Lorenzo’s fate or the position of his burial) and evolves into a far more encompassing exchange where phatic tokens, tears, pity, bodily sensations, and even life energy are traded. Rather than simply discarding this commercially infused way of defining conversation, in a way he carries it to its extreme. In doing so, not only does he mobilise the language and imagery of a typically informational model of conversation in reference to a primarily non-informational communication, thus troubling the assumption that thoughts are what must necessarily be conveyed in talk, but he also calls into question the very conceptualisation of communication as exchange.

As previously shown, exchanging words, tears, and sensations across the gulf of death results in death itself. Isabella and Lorenzo give to each other everything they have to the extent that they become themselves interchangeable. The fact that they are involved in a dynamic of exchange that appears to be so fully realised, yet simultaneously so ruinous casts a shadow over the whole idea that communication should involve some sort of trading in order to be deemed efficacious. A frustration towards this view can also be found in the quoted passages from the letters, where Keats laments ‘a dearth’ of significant things to say to his interlocutors and claims that he requires nothing more than ‘trifles’ from them.⁴³³ The two words evoke notions of scarcity and lack of value, which contrast with the recurring imagery of riches and prizes in *Isabella* and express Keats’s longing for a

⁴³² David Hancock, ‘Commerce and Conversation in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic: The Invention of Madeira Wine’, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 29.2 (1998), 197–219 (p. 203).

⁴³³ Keats, I, p. 400; Keats, II, p. 73.

communication in which nothing of what is normally supposed to be interesting – that is, valuable – needs to be given or gained.

A similar operation of subversion by enhancement applies to the poem's treatment of mutuality. Adjectives like *reciprocal* and *mutual* have been seen to occur very frequently in eighteenth-century definitions of conversation to the point of constituting one of its main properties.⁴³⁴ The otherworldly interactions between Isabella and Lorenzo seemingly abide by this accepted principle and display an exceptional level of reciprocity. Isabella's prayers to discover '[w]here? O where' (240) Lorenzo has gone are answered and satisfied by his spectral apparition. The ghost's request is fulfilled by her visit to his grave. Her paleness corresponds to his pallor. The tears carving channels on his face, unhindered by mud, are matched by her incessant weeping. His voracious thirst for life is equalled by her languorous surrender to death. Once again, by illustrating the dire outcome of such a perfect mutuality, *Isabella* confounds the expectation that a reciprocal communication is necessarily a successful one, and vice versa.

The way in which the otherworldly communication represented in Keats's poem meets and, at the same time, undermines conventional parameters of success sets it apart from the other Romantic works previously considered. Shelley and Byron resist similar imperatives to equate effective communication with mutual exchange of information, but they do so by concentrating on cases where reciprocity is flawed or entirely lacking and requests for information are left unmet or denied. Their poems envision ways of communicating that can easily pass – and have often been interpreted – as utter failures, showing how more is at play and at stake in instances of communication that, according to normal standards, would seem to irremediably fail. Keats contributes to blurring the dichotomy of success and failure and to questioning their suitability as criteria to account for what truly occurs when we communicate by adopting the opposite approach. He represents a successful – one might say, too successful – instance of seemingly impossible communication, whose result proves disastrous and hardly distinguishable from failure. In this manner, *Isabella* jeopardises coeval and more recent assumptions about what makes communication successful, raising the suspicion that what happens when the conditions are met may be less desirable than Keats was (and we are) led to believe.

This same overarching strategy can also be seen at work in the case of the other communicative (pre)requisites that were the focus of the previous sections. Physical copresence between a living and a dead body is so fully established that their very boundaries become dangerously blurred. The common ground that was presented as a socially beneficial and necessary

⁴³⁴ According to Peter de Bolla, 'the concept of conversation' is distinguished precisely by the fact that it is 'reliant upon, or grounded in, a prior concept, namely the notion that the addressee is able to talk back' (Peter de Bolla, 'Portraiture as Conversation', in *The Concept and Practice of Conversation in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1688-1848*, ed. by Katie Halsey and Jane Slinn [Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008], pp. 170–82 [p. 171]).

source of equality or ‘harmony of minds’ in coeval theories of conversation gives rise to a bondless communion that threatens the integrity and survival of the self.⁴³⁵ While it is true that *Isabella* subverts from within the informational model of communication as exchange, it is also true that it does not provide a truly viable alternative. The dream of perfect commonality, of communication for the mere sake of staying in contact and communing, turns all too easily into a nightmare of indistinctness and annihilation. The poem’s destabilising force is directed not only towards widespread expectations about what communication should be but also towards what communication is at its very core: namely, a form of ‘intersubjectivity’ and ‘transcendence of individuality’.⁴³⁶

Critics have long speculated as to why the lovers must die and their story have such a bleak ending. Popular but ultimately simplistic interpretations ascribe the latter to the triumph of the brothers’ commercialism over Lorenzo and Isabella’s love, which is overcome by a world where ‘a love of money-getting and excessive individualism exists at the expense of real social interaction and human sympathy’, as Porscha Fermanis puts it.⁴³⁷ As previously mentioned, however, sympathy is far from being an entirely positive faculty, and many critics have highlighted the analogies between the lovers and the brothers, claiming, like Kelvin Everest does, that they expose ‘conventions for expressing love and sexual feeling’ as being ‘unwittingly complicit with the economic and social realities to which they appear to be opposed’.⁴³⁸ Such readings usually tend to identify specific aspects of the poem’s construction of romantic love as responsible for its tragic unfolding and as targets of its criticism: among those are ‘melodramatic self indulgence’, ‘obsessive privacy’, ‘willed and culpably vulnerable exclusion of the real’, and ‘private indulgence in dreams and fancy’.⁴³⁹

Still, *Isabella* is a weirder and more deeply unsettling tale. The protagonists’ aversion to the ‘physicality of sexual love’ and their ‘suppressed sexual needs’ are, for example, often regarded among the self-destructive factors in their relationship, but the poem upsets this easy narrative.⁴⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, it denounces the potentially deleterious effects of physical contact – rather than of its negation – from its very first stanza, where the lovers’ closeness is puzzlingly associated with illness: ‘They could not in the self-same mansion dwell | Without some stir of heart, some malady’ (3-4). Instead of exemplifying the ‘clichéd sentimentality of [...] “love-sickness”’, these lines point to the existence of a pathological threat in bodily nearness and foreshadow the more seriously pathological

⁴³⁵ Adam Smith, p. 337.

⁴³⁶ Lawrence Grossberg, ‘Does Communication Theory Need Intersubjectivity? Toward an Immanent Philosophy of Interpersonal Relations’, in *Communication Yearbook 6*, ed. by Michael Burgoon, 6th edn (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 188.

⁴³⁷ Porscha Fermanis, *John Keats and the Ideas of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 110.

⁴³⁸ Everest, p. 125.

⁴³⁹ Katey Kuhns Castellano, “‘Why Linger at the Yawning Tomb So Long?’: The Ethics of Negative Capability in Keats’s *Isabella* and *Hyperion*”, *Partial Answers*, 8.1 (2010), 23–38 (p. 29); Sider, p. 341; Everest, p. 119; Schulkins, p. 73.

⁴⁴⁰ Everest, p. 119; Schulkins, p. 89.

consequences of the intimacy between living Isabella's and dead Lorenzo's bodies.⁴⁴¹ One might be tempted to agree with Kang-Po Chen that *Isabella* is an exploration of 'the innate danger of [...] erotic love' in itself, yet the poem goes beyond love and sex.⁴⁴² Its focus on communication suggests that what truly interests – and disquiets – Keats has to do with interpersonal connection more broadly and more fundamentally.

To return to the question that opened this chapter, what happens when the conditions for communication are successfully met is quite simply that contact is made. It is the very experience of coming in touch with the other, not only at a physical but also at a communicative and intersubjective level, that the poem ultimately presents as distressing, even life-threatening. Despite having been read as a condemnation of self-absorption and solipsism, *Isabella* actually insinuates that the true hazard lies in their opposite.⁴⁴³ Like Byron and Shelley, Keats endeavours to dispel the spectre of solipsistic projection from his representation of a supernatural encounter by contrasting the vividness of Lorenzo's apparition with Isabella's previous reveries, during which she only 'seem'd to see' his 'image in the dusk' (237), but he does so only to confront the reader with a far more troubling scenario. Actual contact with the o/Other is established, and yet, once that happens, it triggers a deadly process of complete merging and collapsing of individualities. The poem may be ultimately seen as a warning against opening one's self to the other, for this always entails the risk of it being usurped and consumed.

This anxiety towards the threat of obliteration inherent in intersubjective relations may come as a surprise in an author who was so prone to 'take part in' others' 'existence' and placed self-annihilation at the very heart of his poetics.⁴⁴⁴ In his letters, Keats famously took a stance against 'the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime' and claimed that 'the poetical Character' has 'no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body'.⁴⁴⁵ This propensity to relinquish one's self and inhabit the other is usually celebrated as a desirable quality both by critics and by Keats himself, even if it is at times presented in more ambivalent terms. 'When I am in a room with People', Keats writes, 'the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated'.⁴⁴⁶ On a different occasion, he relates that his ill brother's 'identity presses upon [him] so all day that [he is] obliged to go out'.⁴⁴⁷ As Susan Wolfson acknowledges, 'the frequency with which Keats resorts to the verb *press* to describe his susceptible sympathies' betrays a certain

⁴⁴¹ Castellano, p. 26.

⁴⁴² Kang-Po Chen, "'Sick within the Rose's Just Domain': The 'Material Sublime' and Pathological Poetics in Keats's *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil*", *Romantik*, 8.1 (2019), 35–58 (p. 37).

⁴⁴³ See, for example, Heinzelman, pp. 182–85; Schulkins, pp. 78–79.

⁴⁴⁴ Keats, I, p. 186.

⁴⁴⁵ Keats, I, pp. 386, 387.

⁴⁴⁶ Keats, I, p. 387.

⁴⁴⁷ Keats, I, p. 369.

awareness of ‘his own vulnerability to the tyranny of the other’, casting the whole experience in a more unpleasant light.⁴⁴⁸ This destructive potential is fully unleashed and explored in *Isabella*. The permeability of bodies and identities in the poem acts as an ominous counterpart to the exalted porousness of the Keatsian self, which gives voice to unspoken fears about the perils of entering into any kind of contact with the other and, possibly, into the state of poetic creation itself. *Isabella* urges us to reconsider the widespread view that, unlike ‘Wordsworth’, ‘Keats is happy to risk his own dissolution’, as Anahid Nersessian puts it. Though he is definitely more prone – and even willing – to risk his dissolution, he may not always be *happy* about it, for he knows very well the terrible cost and dangers of self-abdication.⁴⁴⁹

3.4 Digressing, lingering, turning

The weirdness of *Isabella* arises not only from its disconcerting story of exceptionally successful and equally unfortunate contact but also from the way in which such story is told, starting from its curious incipit and its striking difference from the source material. Whereas Boccaccio starts his tale with a rather canonical contextualisation of its setting, its characters, and their circumstances, Keats’s poem begins *in medias res* with a lengthy exploration of the ‘inability of Isabella and Lorenzo to avow their love to each other’, as remarked by Evan Radcliffe.⁴⁵⁰ The two lovers struggle to communicate and pine for each other from a small yet insurmountable distance. Isabella can hear Lorenzo’s ‘continual voice’ (13) while she embroiders, and he can catch glimpses of ‘[h]er beauty’ (20) ‘from her chamber-window’ (19), but both of them spend their days ‘[h]oneyless’ (32), only managing to speak ‘to their pillows’ (31). Lorenzo does ‘pray | For power to speak’ (43-44), but ‘his voice’ (45) is invariably ‘[s]tified’ (45). When they finally overcome their reticence and confess their mutual feelings, Isabella and Lorenzo communicate in a tentative, broken, and convoluted way. He swears to himself that he will ‘tell [his] love all plain’ (38), yet his speech is anything but. His profession of love is somewhat indirect, in that it depends syntactically on a conditional clause and semantically on Isabella’s own propensity to believe: ‘If thou didst ever anything believe, | Believe how I love thee’ (59-60). It is also followed by another hypothetical statement that remains suspended (61-62: ‘I would not grieve | Thy hand by unwelcome pressing’), as the condition, which should consist in a negative reaffirmation of his love (something along the lines of ‘if I did not love thee’), is left implicit. Isabella’s speech is similarly faltering, albeit phonetically: she ‘lisp[s]’ (54) the only word she utters.

⁴⁴⁸ Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence*, pp. 38–39.

⁴⁴⁹ Nersessian, p. 60.

⁴⁵⁰ Evan Radcliffe, ‘Keats, Ideals, and *Isabella*’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 47.3 (1986), 253–71 (p. 262).

The initial and protracted focus on Isabella and Lorenzo's relationship dynamics makes 'Keats's rendering' of the original story 'oddly proportioned' and has 'consistently presented the poem's biggest difficulty for twentieth-century readers', as Everest points out.⁴⁵¹ According to Heinzelman, 'this expansive "love idyll"' is functional to thematise the poem's main concerns by showing 'how vulnerable such love is, how easily the economic forces to come and their social effects can be sprung on it'.⁴⁵² I agree with Heinzelman that the peculiar and deviating way in which Keats chooses to begin his retelling contributes to foregrounding some of its major themes, but I identify such themes differently. By reading the incipit of *Isabella* in terms of its anti-capitalist stance or, more often, its deconstruction of romantic love, most critics (Heinzelman included) overlook or downplay the specific emphasis on communication that more conspicuously informs these stanzas and that, unlike the themes of romantic love and commerce, is entirely absent from Boccaccio's tale.⁴⁵³ The fact that the in-depth account of the lovers' communicative struggles is Keats's original invention and is given the most prominent position at the beginning of the poem is another key indicator of how centrally and consistently concerned with issues of communication *Isabella* is.

The implications of the poem's beginning in medias res, however, are not exclusively thematic. Louise Smith interestingly describes Keats's initial departure from his source material in the following terms: 'Boccaccio begins his tale with information about Isabella's family, but Keats postpones these mundane details until stanza XIV and begins directly with the idyll of courtly love'.⁴⁵⁴ Schulkins raises a similar point when she states that 'Keats deliberately withholds this information about Isabella and Lorenzo's social status to focus on the disabling powers of a privatised romantic devotion'.⁴⁵⁵ Though both their readings ultimately prioritise Keats's depiction of love, their mention of *information* is highly pertinent and worthy of closer consideration. What the abrupt and immersive incipit of *Isabella* does is precisely delaying the moment in which the narrator imparts the necessary introductory information to make sense of the story. The readers only learn about the family, geographical origin, and social status of Isabella and Lorenzo – that she lives with her 'two brothers' (105) who are '[e]nriched from ancestral merchandize' (106) and 'Florentines' (129) and that he is 'the servant of their trade designs' (165) – after more than a hundred lines, even if these details help clarify some of what is told in the preceding stanzas, such as the reason why the lovers are often in close proximity but cannot openly avow their love.

⁴⁵¹ Everest, p. 109.

⁴⁵² Heinzelman, p. 177.

⁴⁵³ In Boccaccio's version, Isabella and Lorenzo disclose their love to each other in an effortless way: see Boccaccio, p. 159.

⁴⁵⁴ Louise Z. Smith, 'The Material Sublime: Keats and "Isabella"', *Studies in Romanticism*, 13.4 (1974), 299–311 (p. 306).

⁴⁵⁵ Schulkins, p. 74.

Keats's reluctance to provide the reader with the relevant narrative information is reminiscent of his desire to circumvent the need for 'interesting matter' in letter-writing.⁴⁵⁶ In his letters, this informational requirement is contrasted with the possibility of writing 'ad infinitum' regardless of the content, a mode of communication that has been equated with phatic communion in that they both have 'low interest value, low information value, low relevance'.⁴⁵⁷ A similar opposition may be identified not only in the communications represented in the poem, but also in the way in which the poem itself communicates. As Bennett brilliantly argues, 'difficulties in communication', including 'the giving and withholding of information', are 'both a theme and a structuring device in the poem' and operate 'both on the level of the story and on the level of narration'.⁴⁵⁸ I aim to pursue Bennett's insight even further by continuing to read the poem in dialogue with theories of communication and Keats's own thinking on the subject. If the informational imperative of communication that he acknowledges in his letters can be compared to the narrative pull to tell the facts and events of the tale, then an equivalent for the wish to write incessantly without anything interesting to convey can be found in the several digressions that pause and dilate the flow of narration: the opening divagation about the lovers' amorous and communicative difficulties (I-XIII), the description of the brothers' trading ventures (XIV-XVIII), the invocation and apology to Boccaccio (XIX-XX), the dwelling on the morbidity of the digging scene (XLV, XLIX), and lastly the apostrophes to Melancholy, Music, and Echo (LV-LVI, LXI).

The digressions that oddly punctuate *Isabella* have often baffled and intrigued critics. Smith claims that they are 'the most striking modification of Boccaccio's story', and Wolfson has devoted an entire article to the topic.⁴⁵⁹ Whereas Wolfson considers these digressing sections as "'violations" of form' that 'yield critical vantage points on the codes of the "romance" genre', I am more interested in their narratological function and how it affects the poem as a communicative act.⁴⁶⁰ From a strictly narrative perspective, digressions may be deemed akin to non-informational communication insofar as they momentarily stop and postpone the imparting of necessary information. By creating a *pause* in Genette's sense of the term, i.e. 'a suspension of [...] the "action"' or, more technically, 'a section of discourse' that 'corresponds to no duration in the story', they undermine the narrative progression of the tale and dilate the time of narration.⁴⁶¹ In doing so, they poetically fulfil – albeit only

⁴⁵⁶ Keats, I, p. 400.

⁴⁵⁷ Keats, I, p. 400; Coupland, Coupland, and Robinson, p. 210.

⁴⁵⁸ Bennett, *Keats, Narrative, and Audience*, p. 86.

⁴⁵⁹ Louise Z. Smith, p. 305. See Wolfson, 'Keats's "Isabella" and the "Digressions" of "Romance"'.

⁴⁶⁰ Wolfson, 'Keats's "Isabella" and the "Digressions" of "Romance"', p. 249. The complex and ambivalent relationship of the poem to the genre of romance has been analysed by many critics, including, most notably, Stilling, Hoeveler, Lau, and Sider.

⁴⁶¹ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 100, 94 (note 12).

temporarily – Keats’s aspiration to write ‘ad infinitum’ without saying anything relevant, for they suspend the telling and, at the same time, prolong it.⁴⁶²

The narrator himself appears to conceive digressions in the same way when he refers to the pause during the unearthing scene as ‘linger[ing] at the yawning tomb so long’ (386). The verb *to linger* means ‘to stay on or hang about in a place beyond the proper or usual time, esp. from reluctance to leave it’ (*OED*). It conveys the idea that the narrator is deliberately delaying the story-telling because he is reluctant to carry it forward, potentially to its end, similarly to how Keats would like to keep writing to his brother and sister-in-law for the sake of keeping the communication going. Aimless loitering (narratively speaking) resembles ‘purposeless’ phatic communication.⁴⁶³ That this lingering is to a certain extent aimless is confirmed by the narrator’s questions about ‘wherefore all this wormy circumstance’ (387) and his seeming inability to provide an answer. At the same time, the very fact that he asks ‘[w]hy’ (386) as if looking for a justification, as well as the meaning itself of *to linger*, suggests that he is aware that he is exceeding the ‘proper’ (*OED*) amount of time and space that should be devoted to a digression. In other words, the narrator feels bound by the narrative demand to tell the facts that will advance the plot, just as Keats feels the pressure to fill his letters’ pages with interesting things. In both cases, however, these expectations are somewhat defied.

Isabella refuses to follow ‘a linear narrative’, thus markedly deviating from ‘Boccaccio’s more concise exposition’, not only by means of digressions.⁴⁶⁴ The poem also features instances of *prolepsis*, which Genette defines as a ‘narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later’, as when Lorenzo is called a ‘murder’d man’ (209) before he is actually killed, or when *Isabella*’s death is foretold not only by the brothers’ dream of her in a ‘snowy shroud’ (264) but also by the narrator’s remark that she ‘is soon to be | Among the dead’ (446-47).⁴⁶⁵ These anticipations contribute to disrupting the flow of the narrative and compromising its information value by disclosing major plot twists prematurely, that is, by providing too much information too early, a strategy that is opposite but complementary to the digressions’ lack of information. More in general, they contribute to the impression that *Isabella* fails to tell its story straightforwardly, an impression that is reinforced by its repeated use of apostrophes, most of which have been, not coincidentally, mentioned when listing digressions.

A connection between apostrophes and digressions in Keats’s poem has been first noticed by Wolfson, who remarks that ‘the etymology—*apostrophein*, “to turn away”’ reminds us that

⁴⁶² Keats, I, p. 400.

⁴⁶³ Malinowski, p. 314.

⁴⁶⁴ Wolfson, ‘Keats’s “*Isabella*” and the “Digressions” of “Romance”’, p. 254.

⁴⁶⁵ Genette, p. 40.

‘apostrophe is a version of “digression”’.⁴⁶⁶ This insight has been developed by Brian McGrath, according to whom ‘[t]he apostrophes within “Isabella” [...] do not forward the plot but instead interrupt its momentum’ and, therefore, make it ‘a “digressive” text’.⁴⁶⁷ Similarly to what happens with digressive lingering, the narrator draws self-conscious attention to the very mechanism of apostrophic calling. He directly addresses the ‘[f]air reader’ (389), inviting them to ‘take a glance’ ‘at the old tale’ (389) and ‘turn’ to it (391) as an antidote to the ‘wormy circumstance’ (385) upon which the poem is dwelling. By explicitly urging the reader to turn from the poem towards Boccaccio’s original story, the narrator foregrounds that the apostrophe itself is an act of turning away from the narrative: in other words, a diversion. Like digressions and prolepses, apostrophes derail the linear progression of the tale and thwart the pragmatic dictates of story-telling. The embarrassment that accompanies apostrophic calling according to Culler’s famous definition may be here particularly pertinent if interpreted in a way that is closer to the original sense of the term: ‘That causes obstruction or presents an obstacle; that hinders, hampers, or impedes; troublesome’ (*OED*).

Words like *narrative* and *narration* have been abundantly used in the last few paragraphs without paying attention to the specific genre implications that they entail, but the mention of apostrophe brings the question of genre to the forefront, as the figure has been said to have become ‘almost synonymous with lyric poetry’.⁴⁶⁸ This association is shared by McGrath, who interprets Keats’s recourse to apostrophe in *Isabella* as demonstrating ‘his interest’ in the very tropes that ‘define the lyric’ and ultimately argues that the poem is intended ‘as a lyric yawn’.⁴⁶⁹ Rather curiously, however, McGrath disregards the fact that *Isabella* is a narrative poem at both a superficial and fundamental level: it has characters, a plot, a narrator, and a prose tale as its direct source. It belongs to the genre even more unequivocally than canto IV of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Yet, it is closer to Byron’s poem than one would expect, as both texts challenge monolithic categorization, albeit to different degrees and through different strategies. *Isabella*’s affiliation with the narrative genre is complicated and called into question by its use not only of apostrophes but also of digressions.

In *Narrative Means, Lyric Ends* (2009), Monique Morgan argues that ‘getting rid of plot’ or ‘derail[ing]’ it, as digressions do, ‘can potentially clear the way for lyricism’, since ‘the temporal progression required in narrative is usually antithetical to lyric’.⁴⁷⁰ Morgan distinguishes narrative and lyric poetry in a primarily formalist way that is indebted to Culler and consistent with the approach adopted in the present study. Moving beyond conceptions of the lyric/narrative dichotomy

⁴⁶⁶ Wolfson, ‘Keats’s “Isabella” and the “Digressions” of “Romance”’, p. 258.

⁴⁶⁷ Brian McGrath, *The Poetics of Unremembered Acts: Reading, Lyric, Pedagogy* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2013), p. 94.

⁴⁶⁸ Johnson, *Persons and Things*, p. 7.

⁴⁶⁹ McGrath, *The Poetics of Unremembered Acts*, pp. 98, 105.

⁴⁷⁰ Morgan, p. 63.

as a tension between subjectivity and objectivity, she lays special emphasis on their different temporality, juxtaposing the ‘sequentiality’ of narrative to the impression of ‘a suspended moment’ created by lyric’s characteristic focus on ‘the “now”’.⁴⁷¹ In light of this, the instances of digressive lingering in Keats’s poem can be considered ‘lyric pause[s]’, a narrative means that produces the lyric effect of a suspension of the progressive time of the story and an expansion of the timeless present of the poetic utterance.⁴⁷²

Like Culler, Morgan believes that narrativity and lyricality ‘are rarely, perhaps never, present in a pure and absolute form’ and are instead two modes that coexist in most poems.⁴⁷³ While this is true in general, her book identifies a particularly prominent ‘trend of generic experimentation with lyric and narrative in nineteenth-century poetry’, especially in the long poems of the period.⁴⁷⁴ Despite presenting a similar interplay of narrative and lyric devices, *Isabella* is not taken into account, and the reason may be guessed from Morgan’s remark in the postscript that ‘[n]ot all experiments in mixing lyric and narrative are unqualified successes’.⁴⁷⁵ As examples of failure, she mentions cases in which prolepsis ‘minimizes the narrative interest of suspense’ or ‘the opening *in medias res* fails to create narrative suspense or dramatic irony’ in a way that ‘overpowers the narrative drive’ or does not fill these gaps with ‘sufficient lyrical interest’.⁴⁷⁶ One gets the impression that, if she were to consider *Isabella*, she would likely include it in this category, for the poem’s use of lyric effects does not seem to be in felicitous synergy with its narrative means but rather in mutually undermining tension. Whereas Byron has recourse to lyricism to create impressions of immediacy and presentness, Keats’s lyric interferences are more functional to disrupt, delay, and divert. They enhance – instead of compensating for – the poem’s resistance to flowing smoothly in contrast with common associations of lyricism and ease.

Isabella strays and falters in telling its story and, in doing so, mirrors the communicative behaviour of its protagonists. Like Lorenzo’s, the narrator’s speech is anything but ‘all plain’ (38). Like his spirit’s, it is often strange and hampered. Keats’s poem represents and performs acts of hindered communication through a somewhat clogged channel at various levels, including the stylistic one. Morgan contends that ‘a narrative must make clear what is happening in the story’ and therefore requires ‘a more straightforward use of language’, whereas lyric poetry can ‘make use of this freedom from temporal progression’ to ‘dwell indefinitely on the formal beauties of its

⁴⁷¹ Morgan, pp. 3–4.

⁴⁷² Morgan, p. 19.

⁴⁷³ Morgan, p. 10.

⁴⁷⁴ Morgan, p. 2.

⁴⁷⁵ Morgan, p. 203.

⁴⁷⁶ Morgan, pp. 203, 204, 208.

language'.⁴⁷⁷ Keats's poem extends its defiance of straightforwardness to its style, but it does so not by lingering on formal beauties, rather on intricacies, excesses, and obstacles. I have already shown how the difficult passage of air and words through the ghost's obstructed throat is echoed in the language of the lines through phonosymbolic effects and syntactic contortions. A similar lack of smoothness has been traditionally identified as a formal quality of the poem overall. Everest highlights that '[c]ritics throughout the nineteenth century often pointed to an apparent clumsiness, especially in the handling of rhyme' and he himself describes Keats's style with terms that foreground a certain difficulty or infelicity such as 'awkward' and 'outlandishness'.⁴⁷⁸

Since the publication of the poem, this awkwardness has been related to Keats's social status and, in more recent times, his self-consciousness about it. In her seminal book *Keats's Life of Allegory* (1988), Marjorie Levinson includes 'ease' among the 'elementary and, in the period, normative literary effects' that Keats found 'problematic' and opens up the previously discounted possibility that he sometimes quite simply 'tries too hard'.⁴⁷⁹ She concentrates on the 'pronounced badness' and 'unnaturalness' of his style as symptoms of his illegitimate quest for social and literary legitimacy that can paradoxically turn into rhetorical 'goodness' when they signify his inevitable 'alienation' from it.⁴⁸⁰ From this perspective, Lorenzo's 'striving' (282) tongue, which tries hard – even too hard – to speak in the fashion of the living, may be deemed to resemble Keats's own strenuous effort to write in the language of a tradition that he feels does not entirely belong to him, an effort that is reflected in the very linguistic texture of the poem. This tradition is embodied by Boccaccio, who is called not only 'famed' (145), an epithet referring to his established position in the canon, but also 'eloquent' (145). The adjective *eloquent* describes a person '[p]ossessing or exercising the power of fluent, forcible, and appropriate expression' (*OED*) and has attracted little attention. It meaningfully suggests that what dead Boccaccio possesses and the living poet lacks is not only legitimate access to the literary tradition but also the ability to communicate in an appropriate and effective way, something that *Isabella* has been seen to consistently fail to do.

Despite her decision to mainly focus on romances, Levinson does not devote extended attention to *Isabella*, perhaps because she believes that 'Keats's critique' of the poem 'gives us no trouble': in short, because she too considers it a failure.⁴⁸¹ I argue that *Isabella* is more than a failed

⁴⁷⁷ Morgan, p. 4.

⁴⁷⁸ Everest, p. 114. Betsy Winakur Tontiplaphol uses the same adjective when she notices the recurring presence of 'awkward, anaphoric series' throughout the poem (Betsy Winakur Tontiplaphol, *Poetics of Luxury in the Nineteenth Century: Keats, Tennyson, and Hopkins* [Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011], p. 51).

⁴⁷⁹ Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp. 8, 3. Nersessian also mentions that a 'vogue for spontaneity and ease of expression is apparent across Romantic culture' (Nersessian, p. 150).

⁴⁸⁰ Levinson, p. 11.

⁴⁸¹ Levinson, p. 144.

attempt – or, more precisely, that it fails intentionally and knowingly. I agree to a certain extent with Everest that ‘Keats’s rejection of a tradition of smooth facility in English versification was meditated and purposeful’, not just as a means for him to deliberately convey his inadequacy – and possibly unwillingness – to articulate a certain poetic style, but as a piece of the wider strategy that has been traced in this section and that is deeply interconnected with his treatment of communication.⁴⁸² The poem’s reticence to communicate straightforwardly reflects and amplifies its thematic concerns with communicative difficulties and alternative modes of communicating, but it also directly tests and resists the demands and limitations of poetry itself as a communicative act. From a communicative standpoint, *Isabella* variously and consistently frustrates the pragmatic aims of communicating efficiently. It deviates, lingers, says too little or too much. It flouts the parameters of a felicitous and economic – in the sense of ‘expedient’, ‘efficient, not wasteful’ (*OED*) – (re)telling. It defies the logic of commercial and communicative exchange in the way in which the narration falters and (mis)manages information, giving more or less or something other than the reader expects.

While the tale of *Isabella* showcases the pitfalls of communicative success, its telling probes the potentialities of communicative failure. The question of whether ‘succeed the verse or fail’ (157) in ‘mak[ing] old prose in modern rhyme more sweet’ (156) turns out to be as empty as the preceding promise to Boccaccio that ‘the tale | Shall move on soberly, as it is meet’ (153-54), for Keats’s poem does not seem to actively pursue neither success nor sobriety. Its outlandishness and awkwardness, its pervasive aversion to straightforwardness and ease are all ways in which *Isabella* jeopardises assumptions about what it should be doing in order to be a successful poem and tentatively, never triumphantly, embraces modes of poetic communication that are as strange and strained as a ghost’s speech. This wariness of communicative success betrays Keats’s discomfort at the prospect of having the poem published – that is, of seeing it enter its own circuit of communication. Eighteen months after finishing it, Keats was still ‘persist[ing] in not publishing The Pot of Basil’ because he thought it to be ‘too smokeable’ and to have ‘too much inexperience of live [sic], and simplicity of knowledge in it’, as he famously explained to Richard Woodhouse in a letter dated 22 September 1819.⁴⁸³ Simplicity is also mentioned in another letter written on the same day and directed to Charles Dilke, in which Keats discusses his resolution to ‘traffic [sic]’ by ‘temporary writing in periodical works’ and contrasts it with his past naivety: ‘I should a year or two ago have spoken my mind on every subject with the utmost simplicity’.⁴⁸⁴ Besides clearly indicating a ‘[I]ack of knowledge, education, or intellectual sophistication’ (*OED*), *simplicity* also means ‘[a]bsence of deceitfulness or duplicity; sincerity, openness’ (*OED*). What most pressingly worries Keats is the idea less of subjecting his

⁴⁸² Everest, p. 114.

⁴⁸³ Keats, II, p. 174.

⁴⁸⁴ Keats, II, pp. 178, 179.

words to the logic of market economy, as mentioned earlier, than of them being too open to the scrutiny of others and, as a result, easily made fun of.

In both letters, Keats claims that he intends to use more ‘tact’ and ‘finesse with the Public’, terms that evoke similar notions of subtlety and concealment, the skill of only saying what is ‘fitting and proper’ (*OED*).⁴⁸⁵ With all its weirdness and worminess, *Isabella* clearly does not fit these parameters. The ‘ill beseem[ing]’ quality of its ‘syllables’ (151) is repeatedly and self-consciously foregrounded. Whereas the poem ‘is enough for me’, Keats concludes, it ‘will not do to be public’.⁴⁸⁶ The dread of the self being too permeable and easily invaded by the other that underlies the unravelling of Isabella’s and Lorenzo’s tragic fates is matched and mirrored by Keats’s reluctance to ‘open’ the poem to an audience for fear that they will see right through it. As the lovers’ story illustrates, openness entails a potentially destructive vulnerability. The nightmare of too close contact and too full communion with the Other to which the poem gives voice has a metapoetic counterpart in Keats’s anxiety that he will be read too clearly. *Isabella*’s perversion of the means and aims of efficacious poetic communication echoes the perversion at the heart of intersubjectivity exposed by its tale, but it is also an attempt to avoid falling prey to it by thwarting readers’ expectations and eroding common ground with them. Perhaps it is this formal and stylistic resistance to simplicity – in the further sense of the ‘quality of being straightforward’, ‘easiness’ (*OED*) – that eventually gave Keats enough confidence to publish the poem and let it circulate. How representing otherworldly communication provided Romantic poets with an occasion to explore and express their troubled attitude towards the readers not only when they were feared to be too close but also when they appeared too distant will be further explored in the next chapter on Felicia Hemans.

⁴⁸⁵ Keats, II, pp. 179, 174.

⁴⁸⁶ Keats, II, p. 174.

4. Evocation: Hemans's 'A Spirit's Return'

4.1 Full and high communion

Soft, solemn, clear,
Breathed the mysterious accents on mine ear,
[...] as they murmur'd on, the mortal chill
Pass'd from me, like a mist before the morn,
And, to that glorious intercourse upborne,
By slow degrees, a calm, divinely still,
Possess'd my frame [...]
I ask'd, and I was answer'd: – Full and high
Was that communion with eternity,
Too rich for aught so fleeting! (193-94, 199-204, 213-15)⁴⁸⁷

When the speaker of Felicia Hemans's 'A Spirit's Return' finds herself face to face with her dead beloved on a still starlit night, she is not overcome by horror and fear. In the presence of the ghost, she rather feels herself pervaded by a sense of elation. His '[s]oft, solemn, clear' (193) voice dissipates the 'mist' (198) of mortality from her soul, replacing it with a celestial 'calm' (203) that brings her closer to him and to his own awful serenity. Lifted from her earthly life, 'upborne' to the 'intercourse' (201) with a radiant revenant from another world, she is elevated to his same higher plane of existence to the point that when it is her turn to speak, he readily speaks back. She asks and she is answered. Unlike the questions of Shelley's speaker in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' and Byron's Manfred, hers are not met with unresponsive or ambiguous silence. Unlike for Keats's Isabella, her partaking of the dead's otherness is not an experience of destructive self-annihilation but of rapturous 'communion with eternity' (214).

Such smooth reciprocity and transformative bliss make the encounter between the speaker and the returned spirit at the heart of Hemans's poem a unique and unprecedentedly triumphant instance of communication with the Other World, the most fully and successfully realised out of the poems discussed so far. Considering a poem by Hemans as the culmination of the Romantic engagement with supernatural communication may come as a surprise, given that she has been long regarded as an 'icon of female domesticity'.⁴⁸⁸ Her reputation as the poetess of the domestic affections, which was first established by her contemporaries and then consolidated during the Victorian period, still endures, to a certain extent, today. As Seth Reno points out, '[d]espite the recovery of Hemans from scholarly obscurity in the 1980s and 90s, it is hard to shake her portrayal as the representative poet of

⁴⁸⁷ All quotes from 'A Spirit's Return' are taken from Felicia Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁴⁸⁸ Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 123.

Victorian domesticity and feminine ideals'.⁴⁸⁹ This portrayal rests on a partial consideration of her poetry, which has consistently privileged only a limited selection of works: namely, her early production, epitomised by a poem whose title is indeed 'The Domestic Affections' (1812), and her most popular and sentimental collection *Records of Woman* (1828).

With its supernatural theme and its focus on transcendent contact with an unearthly being, 'A Spirit's Return' hardly fits this type of poetry centred on womanhood, the home, the hearth, and the human heart. Unsurprisingly, the poem, which opens Hemans's later volume *Songs of the Affections* (1830), has received little attention amidst the surge of scholarly interest of the last few decades. Of the two modern editions of her works, only Susan Wolfson's *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials* (2000) includes the poem, which is instead absent from Gary Kelly's 2002 edition. At the same time, 'A Spirit's Return' has seldom been the object of critical inquiry: it is briefly discussed by Michael Williamson and David Stewart and extensively considered only by Reno, David Sigler, and Alan Richardson.⁴⁹⁰ This chapter aims to do justice to the rich complexities of this poem and re-evaluate its importance as a bold, albeit somewhat isolated, experiment through which Hemans appropriates, rewrites, and subverts a typically masculine mode of supernatural poetry in order to claim a poetic voice and identity that could not be more distant from that of the poetess of domestic and feminine virtues. 'A Spirit's Return' will be seen to make deft use of existing analogies between otherworldly communication and Romantic conceptions of genius, providing an image of poetic creation as itself fundamentally akin to contact with an Other, while at the same time reprising and reinventing most of the motifs and themes found in the other poems under study.

The encounter between the speaker of the poem and the spirit of her dead beloved in the second half of Hemans's poem has, in fact, several elements in common with the other Romantic representations of supernatural communication investigated so far. First of all, the ghost manifests himself in a perceivable physical form close to the human interlocutor: he 'stood' (175) '[b]efore [her] there' (174) with a 'pale brow' (179), a 'gleam' (182) 'o'er the hair' (181), and a 'grave sweetness' in the 'illuminated eye' (184). As usual, the phatic conditions of spatiotemporal copresence and sensory perceptibility are preliminarily met, but physical closeness, though necessary, cannot compensate for metaphysical separation. The paradoxical co-existence of proximity and distance that

⁴⁸⁹ Seth Reno, 'Felicia Hemans and the Affections', *CEA Critic*, 77.1 (2015), 4–24 (p. 6).

⁴⁹⁰ See Michael T. Williamson, 'Impure Affections: Felicia Hemans's Elegiac Poetry and Contaminated Grief', in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 19–35 (pp. 30–32); David Stewart, *The Form of Poetry in the 1820s and 1830s: A Period of Doubt* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 140–42; Reno, 'Felicia Hemans and the Affections'; Seth Reno, *Amorous Aesthetics: Intellectual Love in Romantic Poetry and Poetics, 1788–1853* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp. 166–91; David Sigler, *Fracture Feminism: The Politics of Impossible Time in British Romanticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2021), pp. 193–202; Alan Richardson, 'Spiritual Converse: Hemans's *A Spirit's Return* in Dialogue with Byron and Shelley', in *Fellow Romantics: Male and Female British Writers, 1790–1835*, ed. by Beth Lau (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 123–36.

was foregrounded in *Isabella* also characterises the spirit, who is ‘face to face – | So near, and yet how far’ (175-76). Once again, face-to-face conversation is assumed to be the default and ideal model of communication even when it involves a being from another world, whose otherness is equated with spatial remoteness: the ghost’s altered appearance tells the speaker of ‘the gulfs between [their] being set’ (184). His utterances present the same concurrence of contradictory spatial indicators. Though the spirit is close enough for his ‘low voice’ (191) to be perfectly ‘clear’ (193), his words ‘strangely’ (195) seem to come as if ‘[f]rom depths of distance, o’er the wide repose | Of slumbering waters wafted, or the dells | Of mountains’ (196-98), for they do come from an even more unfathomably ‘far sphere’ (188). Similarly to their function in Byron’s poems, the enjambments at the end of lines 196 and 197 convey the existence of a gap separating the two interlocutors which is crossed by the ghost’s words but not closed. There remains a gaping chasm between their beings as well as at the heart of their communication.

Nevertheless, the dead and the living communicate in a surprisingly smooth way. Although the spirit’s voice has a ‘mysterious’ (194) quality and a ‘startling thrill’ (190) that betray its otherworldly origin, he speaks in a way that is wholly understandable to the human interlocutor and seems to be doing so effortlessly. There is no trace of Lorenzo’s strenuous struggle in the ‘breezy tones’ (191) of Hemans’s ghost, and this unprecedented impression of easefulness extends to the way in which both interlocutors take part in the conversation. ‘I question’d [...] | And I was answer’d’ (205, 207), the speaker recounts, insisting on the perfectly reciprocal and informative nature of their exchange, during which all the questions she poses receive satisfactory replies. As mentioned in the opening paragraph, such an exceptional level of mutuality makes this otherworldly communication stand out from all the poems considered so far, including *Isabella*, where reciprocity is concomitant with one-sidedness (it should always be remembered that *Isabella* remains silent during her encounter with dead Lorenzo) and exposed as dangerously fallacious. The two texts, however, have in common an attention to the integral relationship between mutuality and communion.

The smooth reciprocity of the informational exchange between Hemans’s speaker and the returned spirit is entangled with the phatic creation of communion between them. The assertion that the speaker’s questions are adequately answered at line 213 is immediately followed by the acknowledgement that ‘[f]ull and high | Was that communion with eternity’ (213-14). The exact nature of the relationship between the two sentences is left uncertain by the fact that they are syntactically connected by an ambiguous colon and dash. On the one hand, the second remark could be interpreted as an explanation of the first statement, implying that the flawless mutuality of the conversation is ensured by the fullness of the communion between the two participants. On the other hand, the opposite may also be true and the latter be seen as a result of the former. This possibility is

confirmed by the fact that the speaker ‘woke | *Then* first to heavenly life’ (192-93), only after the spirit ‘spoke’ (189). By being ‘to that glorious intercourse upborne’ (201), she is made to share in the higher spiritual existence of her interlocutor to the point that she becomes ‘possess’d’ (203) with ‘a calm, divinely still’ (202). The verb evokes traditional associations with coming under supernatural influence, which are confirmed by the explicitly divine nature of the attribute that she acquires and shares with the ghost, who has ‘stillness on the lip’ (181) and ‘still and shining eye’ (219). The speaker’s assimilation to the spirit appears to be the consequence of their ‘intercourse’ (201), that is, of their conversation. Communion with the Other World is yet again attained by means of communication.

As in canto IV of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* and *Isabella*, the notion of communion is here featured in its literal sense of sharing, of being made akin to the Other. The speaker comes into contact with a ‘radiant guest’ (221) from the Other World and temporarily partakes of his otherworldliness: for the duration of their exchange, she can enjoy ‘one full-fraught hour of Heaven’ (221). The importance of communion in ‘A Spirit’s Return’ can hardly be overstated, as it is expressly indicated to be the speaker’s main goal even before her supernatural experience. ‘Communion with the dead’ (137) is precisely ‘what [she] sought’ (135), a crucial point to which I will return later. For the moment, it is worth noting that Hemans has the same interest as the other Romantic authors in the multifaceted relationship between communication and communion and that their two-way connection in ‘A Spirit’s Return’ is consistent with what has been so far observed. It closely corresponds to the twofold phatic function of communion as both the prerequisite of communication, which best flourishes when there is common ground between the participants (hence newly established commonality fostering communicative mutuality), and its outcome (hence intercourse resulting in sharing in the being and world of the Other).

Although the otherworldly communion experienced by the speaker of ‘A Spirit’s Return’ is portrayed in more positive and less nightmarish terms compared to *Isabella*, Hemans is similarly concerned with its consequences and comes to a not dissimilar conclusion. In Keats’s tale, communing with the dead entails a process of assimilation that, once set in motion, will not stop until the two parts achieve perfect sameness in death. In Hemans’s poem, the effects are less physically annihilating but still disruptive. Having listened to the ‘music of another land’ (233), the speaker finds that a ‘power is gone from all earth’s melodies’ (231) and that she is unable to return to her previous life: ‘A fix’d, immortal shadow stands between | My spirit and life’s fast-receding scene’ (228-29). The prominent position of the preposition *between* at the end of a rhyming line lays additional emphasis on the sense of separateness that it entails. The speaker’s communion with someone made alien to this world by death has ‘sever’d [her] from human ties’ (230), and she now ‘dwell[s], ’midst

throngs, apart' (226), equally estranged from the rest of humanity. Everlasting separation from the living appears to be the inescapable side-effect of her 'fleeting' (215) partaking of the dead's Otherness. She is so detached from this 'faded world' (226), which appears to her 'of glory's hues bereft' (226), that even the arrival of spring, the rebirth of nature, the triumph of new life, 'woos [her] to the Dead' (244). The only thing she wishes for is, in fact, to be 'upborne to dwell with' her 'spirit-love' (256), this time 'for ever' (262), and be for ever granted the 'joy divine' (261) that she could only 'glimpse' (261) while still living. Unlike Isabella, Hemans's speaker does not die after communing with her dead beloved but, similarly enough, she is left impatiently waiting and longing for death.

Establishing communion and communication with the dead is a recurring dream in Hemans's poetry. Death haunts her verses as an ever-present shadow, and one can think of almost none of her major or most popular poems where death is not somehow present: be it the mute dead father and the child, bound to certain death, of 'Casabianca' (1826), the *auto da fè* and the death at sea of the protagonist's wife in *The Forest Sanctuary* (1825), or all the various prospects of death and painful bereavements that her heroines must face in *Records of Woman*. The centrality of death in Hemans's works, which has been acknowledged by critics like Gary Kelly and Myra Cottingham, can be generally inscribed within the poetics of domesticity, femininity, and the affections that has long been synonymous with her name.⁴⁹¹ Death usually acts as, in Keats's words, 'the great divorcer': it causes a separation between the poem's protagonists and their loved ones, thus acting within the sphere of the domestic affections even if disrupting them.⁴⁹² In these poems, as in *Manfred* and *Isabella*, the attempts of the living to come into contact with the dead are aimed to re-establish the relationship that death has severed. The desire to be reunited with them is often so strong that it translates into a wish for death itself as the only way to fully recover the lost communion.⁴⁹³ In 'Edith, a Tale of the Woods' from *Records of Woman*, for example, after the protagonist's husband dies, her 'spirit' (107) is said to already dwell '[w]ith the departed' (108) while she is still alive, and her wilful surrender unto death is understood as a decision to 'go | To [her] below'd' (168-69).⁴⁹⁴

At first glance, the relationship between love, death, and communion established in these poems seems to be perfectly applicable to the situation depicted in 'A Spirit's Return', but a closer

⁴⁹¹ See Gary Kelly, 'Death and the Matron: Felicia Hemans, Romantic Death, and the Founding of the Modern Liberal State', in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 196–211; Myra Cottingham, 'Felicia Hemans's Dead and Dying Bodies', *Women's Writing: The Elizabethan to Victorian Period*, 8.2 (2001), 275–94.

⁴⁹² Keats, II, p. 345. Just to mention a few examples: *The Forest Sanctuary* (1825), 'Imelda' (1825), 'The Peasant Girl of the Rhone' (1826), 'Edith, a Tale of the Woods' (1827), 'Arabella Stuart' (1828).

⁴⁹³ See, for instance, 'Imelda' (1825), 'The Peasant Girl of the Rhone' (1826), 'Körner and His Sister' (1828).

⁴⁹⁴ Quotes from 'Edith, a Tale of the Woods' are from Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*.

look reveals significant differences. First of all, the protagonist of ‘A Spirit’s Return’ succeeds where those of Hemans’s other poems fail, that is, in opening a functioning communicative channel with the dead. In most other instances, in fact, the attempts to reach out to the dead end up overtly failing or culminating in ambiguous silence. In *The Forest Sanctuary*, the speaker recounts how, after the death of his wife, he vainly ‘call’d – to call what answers not our cries’ (ll. 512).⁴⁹⁵ In ‘To a Departed Spirit’ (1830), the speaker expects her invocations to the ‘sweet spirit’ (3) to receive a reply by virtue of their love, which they said would not ‘perish as a rose’s breath’ (8), but the ‘grave’ remains ‘silent’ (31) and her prayers painfully unanswered.⁴⁹⁶

In addition to being an uncommon tale of successful otherworldly communication, ‘A Spirit’s Return’ differs from these other poems in subtler and more radical ways. Though it may appear on the surface to be the story of two lovers who strive to be reunited after being separated by death, Hemans evokes this conventional narrative only to upend it. In ‘A Spirit’s Return’, unlike in these tales of love and loss, otherworldly contact cannot be a way for the speaker to recover her lost communion with her beloved, for the latter had actually never been established. While it is true that the spirit is that of the man she ‘loved’ (92), it is also true that she loved him ‘[i]n fear, in pain’ (91) and, more importantly, secretly, silently, alone. Loving for her does not consist in opening to and communing with the other but rather in its opposite, in ‘shutting the heart’ (64) and adoring ‘with a buried care’ (67) which day by day ‘folded [her] closer’ (71). Words like *shutting*, *buried*, and *folded* all contribute to creating an image of love as something that secludes and isolates. Terms belonging to the sphere of solitude also abound: the ‘sway’ of her love dream is ‘lonely’ (70), the ‘tears’ she sheds for it are ‘lone’ (113), and ‘lone’ is also her ‘devotedness’ (114). To the loneliness of this love corresponds the impossibility, or unwillingness, to communicate it: she loves ‘silently’ (76), with a ‘voiceless prayer’ (68), and in a ‘still shadow’ (70).

While they are both alive, no contact is established between the speaker and her beloved, no communication, no communion. For some reason their love is never shared on earth. ‘No mingling visions might our fate allow’ (96), the speaker remarks, acknowledging that they are mysteriously prevented from ‘mingling’ – i.e. being joined together – as ‘happy hearts’ (97) do. At first, death may seem to make the fulfilment of their love impossible once and for all, as the dead man is ‘removed, | Borne o’er the abyss no sounding line hath proved, | Joined with the unknown, the viewless’ (121-23) and thereby made ‘another’ (124). The situation, however, soon proves strikingly different. Death cannot entail the loss of the beloved, if the speaker never had him in the first place. On the contrary,

⁴⁹⁵ Quotes from *The Forest Sanctuary* are from Felicia Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, ed. by Gary Kelly (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2002).

⁴⁹⁶ Quotes from ‘To a Departed Spirit’ are from Felicia Hemans, *Songs of the Affections, with Other Poems* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1830).

death provides her with the first chance of possessing him, and possessing him fully: ‘his low grave | Seem’d a bright mournful altar – mine, all mine’ (225-26). It is only after he dies that he can be made hers. In ‘A Spirit’s Return’, the ‘[c]ommunion with the dead’ (137) that the speaker seeks and ultimately accomplishes does not depend on any pre-existing communion. It is unprecedented and, as will be seen in the next section, something that she pursued long before she even met the object of her love.

4.2 Looking for a response and gaining a voice

In order to unveil the reason why during his lifetime her beloved ‘was never available to the speaker in any case’, as Richardson puts it, and fully understand how Hemans subverts from within the topos of the supernatural reunion of the lovers across the gulf of death, the story that the speaker tells needs to be considered in its entirety.⁴⁹⁷ So far, in fact, only a partial version has been taken into account, starting from her encounter with the ghost at the end of the poem and then moving on – more precisely, back – to their previous relationship, or rather lack thereof. Continuing this backwards discussion of the speaker’s tale, attention will now be paid to its beginning, which is occupied by a recollection of her early years. It is immediately apparent that solitude and lack of communion have marked her life long before her experience of love and have nothing to do with it. ‘[E]ven in youth’, she reveals, ‘companionless I stood, | As a lone forest-bird midst ocean’s foam; | For me the silver cords of brotherhood | Were early loosed’ (23-26). The lines abound in internal assonances (between ‘stood’, ‘brotherhood’, and, albeit imperfectly, ‘youth’ as well as between ‘lone’ and ‘foam’) which create an echoing effect as if to amplify the speaker’s sense of loneliness. That her voice could only meet its own echo in this place is made more explicit in the following passage, where her ‘home’ (26) is called a ‘silent hearth’ (28) and an ‘unanswering spot’ (31) from which all other ‘voices’ (26) had ‘[p]ass’d’ (27). Home, which should be the place of communion and domestic affections par excellence, is instead a source of isolation, where no companions can be found and utterances are left unanswered. The ‘human ties’ (230) that the speaker’s supernatural experience definitively severs appear to have had been ‘loosed’ (26) long before.

This characterisation makes the speaker of ‘A Spirit’s Return’ similar to the prototype of the Romantic hero, especially in its Byronic incarnations. She resembles Childe Harold, who ‘soon knew himself the most unfit | Of men to herd with Man; with whom he held | Little in common’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, III. 100-02), and, even more closely, Manfred, who ‘[f]rom [his] youth upwards’ (*Manfred*, II. 2. 50) ‘held but slight communion’ (61) ‘with men, and with the thoughts of

⁴⁹⁷ Richardson, ‘Spiritual Converse’, p. 127.

men' (60) and was made 'a stranger' (56) by his 'passions' and 'powers' (55), all invested in 'the quest of hidden knowledge' (110). Like Manfred, the speaker of Hemans's poem is not only estranged from her fellow human beings but also possessed by a 'mysterious quest | Of secret knowledge' (36-37), which is revealed to be her 'life's lone passion' (36). The existence of strong similarities between the protagonist of 'A Spirit's Return' and Manfred comes as no surprise, as a quote from Byron's drama is the epigraph to the poem: 'This is to be a mortal | And seek the things beyond mortality' (*Manfred*, II. 4. 159-60). The speaker of Hemans's poem also seeks things beyond mortality and, as for Manfred, this quest takes the form of a burning desire for communication with the Other World.

Not content with the unresponsive solitude of her home, the speaker does not leave it to look for human companionship but to pursue her occult aspirations. As a matter of fact, her 'strange inborn fire' (40) is presumably the very cause of her estrangement, for the 'response' (45) she longs for is not that of human beings but of the 'rich world unseen' (45). She strives to find a way to 'rend mortality' (58) and come into contact with the 'curtain'd realm of spirits' (46) long before she falls in love. It becomes clear that the '[c]ommunion with the dead' (137) she then 'sought' (136) with such 'passionate despair' (135) should be understood, first and foremost, as communion with the *plural* dead. Communion with a *singular* dead – that is to say, the reunion, or more precisely union, with the spirit of her beloved – is not her ultimate goal but the means by which she can finally achieve a long-desired contact with the Other World. Communion, once eventually established, is in fact 'with eternity' (214), a partaking of the otherworldly dimension rather than a posthumous fulfilment of romantic love. During their encounter, the speaker does not ask the ghost personal questions but enquires about the mystery of death in general. Both the phatic and informative purpose of the communication – that is, the creation of communion and the exchange of information – are primarily directed towards the Other World overall rather than towards any single one of its inhabitants.

This dynamic is the opposite of what has been seen to occur in *Manfred*. Whereas the blatant analogies between Hemans's and Byron's poems have been acknowledged by critics, little attention has been paid to their differences.⁴⁹⁸ Richardson insists on the most evident one: the fact that Hemans's speaker 'gets to have a long, substantive conversation with the returned Spirit', whereas Byron represents a communication between the living and the dead that remains 'hopelessly, almost absurdly one-sided'.⁴⁹⁹ Still, 'A Spirit's Return' overturns *Manfred* in a subtler and more fundamental way. As previously pointed out, Manfred claims that he wants to 'call the dead' (*Manfred*, II. 2. 178) to 'ask them what it is we dread to be' (179) but ends up only enquiring about his personal relationship with Astarte. His plan to conjure the plural dead is a pretext to try and reach out to a singular dead.

⁴⁹⁸ See Richardson, 'Spiritual Converse'; Reno, 'Felicia Hemans and the Affections', p. 16.

⁴⁹⁹ Richardson, 'Spiritual Converse', pp. 127, 131.

He attempts to communicate with the spirit of dead Astarte so as to re-establish phatic contact with her rather than to gain universally relevant information about what it means to be dead, as he had initially declared. The speaker of Hemans's poem is truer to Manfred's mission than Manfred himself and, unlike him, truly 'question[s] of the dead – | Of the hush'd, starry shores *their* footsteps tread' (205-06, italics mine). She is far more interested in the fate of the dead as a plural entity than in that of her beloved, as also emerges from the things she questions him about, none of which specifically concerns him: 'if remembrance there, | With dreamy whispers fill the immortal air; | If Thought, here piled from many a jewel-heap, | Be treasure in that pensive land to keep; | If Love, o'ersweeping change, and blight, and blast, | Find *there* the music of his home at last' (207-12). The speaker's conversation with the spirit appears to be less an occasion to (re-)establish a relationship that did not even exist before his death than to finally acquire the 'secret knowledge' (37) about the Other World that she had always yearned for. In this way, 'A Spirit's Return' not only significantly rewrites *Manfred* but also subverts the commonplace representation of supernatural communication as a way of recovering lost domestic affections that has been said to characterise many of Hemans's poems on the topic. Romantic love is here a means to achieve the communion with the Other World that is the speaker's actual aspiration, instead of the other way around. This reversal of importance is even more striking considering Hemans's traditional reputation, a point to which I will return in due course.

Coming into contact with the 'rich world unseen' (45) has proved to be the speaker's 'inborn' (40) and most pressing desire, a desire that she eventually manages to satisfy, albeit only temporarily, by conversing with the ghost of her dead beloved and partaking of his otherworldliness. At first, however, the speaker had tried to commune with the otherworldly in a different and typically Romantic way: by turning to nature. After leaving the 'unanswering spot' (31) of her home, she seeks an answering voice 'in all wild scenes with thrilling murmurs fraught' (32) and in every 'flute-note of the wind through cave and bower' (34). As John Anderson argues, in Hemans's poetry, voice is 'the most important indicator of presence'.⁵⁰⁰ The speaker carefully listens to the sounds of nature in the hope that they convey otherworldly voices and therefore reveal supernatural presences. 'The resounding woods, | Do their depths teem with marvels?' (49-50), she wonders, 'and the floods, | And the pure fountains, leading secret veins | Of quenchless melody through rock and hill, | Have they bright dwellers?' (50-53). Diego Saglia opens his study of Hemans's poetics of sound and voice by quoting an 1830 letter in which she recounts a conversation with Wordsworth, during which she had suggested that '[p]erhaps there may be a deeper and richer music pervading all Nature, than we are permitted, in this state, to hear' and Wordsworth had replied by reciting Milton's claim that

⁵⁰⁰ John M. Anderson, 'The Triumph of Voice in Felicia Hemans's *The Forest Sanctuary*', in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 55–73 (p. 57).

‘[m]illions of spiritual creatures walk the earth, | Unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep’.⁵⁰¹ Although Saglia focuses on the ‘situated’ rather than ‘transcendental’ nature of sounds in Hemans’s poetry, the letter interestingly foregrounds her engagement with the widespread Romantic – and typically Wordsworthian – view of nature as mediator between the human world and what lies beyond.⁵⁰² That nature has ‘a symbolic language which conveys spiritual messages’ is a theme that often recurs in Hemans’s poems, as ‘in much Romantic nature poetry’, and it does so in different guises, including the Christian version of her later works, as Julie Melnyk points out.⁵⁰³

In ‘A Spirit’s Return’, the speaker contemplates the possibility that conversing with nature may grant her access to the ‘realm of spirits’ (46) that lies ‘spread all around, yet by some filmy screen, | Shut from us ever’ (48-49), but nature appears far less apt to quench her ‘weary thirst of soul’ (55) than it is in the other Romantic poems with which Hemans’s text has been seen to be in dialogue. Whereas Manfred found his ‘joy [...] in the Wilderness’ (*Manfred*, II. 2. 62) and Childe Harold ‘spake | A mutual language’ (*Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, III. 115) with it, Hemans’s speaker is only faced with nature’s unresponsiveness and insufficiency. ‘Earth’s vain language’ (56), she concludes, is ‘weak and cold’ (55). Contrary to what Richardson argues, Hemans is not here making a conventional complaint about ‘the limitations of human language’ but rather denouncing the inadequacy of the natural to be a medium of communication with the supernatural.⁵⁰⁴ That ‘Earth’ (56) stands for nature rather than humanity is made clear by the context of these lines. The whole passage lays emphasis on the solipsistic, even violent nature of the speaker’s attempts to communicate with and through nature. She ‘[s]hakes out response’ (45) ‘from the leaves’ (44) but without success, for the ‘mountain-dells’ remain wrapped in ‘bright silence’ (42). Later in the poem, she wants again ‘an answer from the winds to wring’ (149), but the natural world surrounding her is equally silent: ‘a hush was on the hills’ (165). Both the verbs *to shake* and *to wring* create the impression that she is trying to single-handedly force a communication with an unwilling or unavailable interlocutor. In any case, a reply, whether spontaneously given or violently extorted, is ultimately denied. The communicative mutuality that the speaker ardently seeks cannot be found in nature.

‘A Spirit’s Return’ evokes the Romantic commonplace of spiritual communication through the medium of nature only to explicitly dismiss it as nothing but ‘high fantasies’ (61). Hemans’s attention to this topic further testifies to what Richardson calls the poem’s ‘extensive engagement

⁵⁰¹ Quoted in Diego Saglia, “‘A Deeper and Richer Music’: The Poetics of Sound and Voice in Felicia Hemans’s 1820s Poetry”, *ELH*, 74.2 (2007), 351–70 (p. 351).

⁵⁰² Saglia, p. 352. Reno also ascribes a specific Wordsworthian quality to this element of ‘A Spirit’s Return’ by calling it ‘a Wordsworthian love of nature’ (Reno, ‘Felicia Hemans and the Affections’, p. 17).

⁵⁰³ Julie Melnyk, ‘Hemans’s Later Poetry: Religion and the Vatican Poet’, in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 74–94 (p. 82).

⁵⁰⁴ Richardson, ‘Spiritual Converse’, p. 126.

with male Romantic poetry', an aspect that has already emerged during the analysis and that he rightly identifies as the probable reason for the 'surprisingly little attention' that the text has received from scholars.⁵⁰⁵ While it is true that the poem's dialogue with a distinctly male Romantic tradition distances it from Hemans's dominant reception as a distinctly female and feminine poetess, it is also true that her engagement with it proves to be more critical than Richardson or other critics have so far acknowledged. 'A Spirit's Return' boldly rejects the widespread Romantic belief that one can open some sort of communicative channel with another dimension by communing with the natural world and exposes such endeavours as mere solipsistic projections. In doing so, the poem also discards the model of mediated communication that this conception of nature entails.⁵⁰⁶

When contact with the Other World is eventually established, it is indeed achieved without any mediation, be it that of nature or of some other supernatural entity. Unlike in 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty' and *Manfred*, where the intermediary action of the shadow and Nemesis is required, the speaker of Hemans's poem manages to reach out to the dead by her own powers, more precisely, by her own vocal powers: 'I sent a cry, | Through the veil'd empires of eternity, | A voice to cleave them' (137-39).⁵⁰⁷ She stops trying to overhear unearthly voices in those of nature, instead sending forth her own voice to pierce the veil between different metaphysical dimensions and call her dead beloved directly 'from o'er the grave' (87). It is by doing so that she finally receives the 'answer' (88) she long yearned for. The scene follows the by now familiar script of a necromantic evocation. 'I summon'd, I adjured!' (147), the speaker recalls, using the technical verbs of a conjuring and the same ritual formula that Nemesis employs in *Manfred* (II. 4. 106-07: 'By the power which hath broken | The grace which enthrall'd thee') to list all the powers on which her invocation relies: 'by the strong chain' (141) of love, 'by the mournful truth, | By the lost promise of my blighted youth' (139-40), 'by tears, which comfort not, but burn' (145), and 'by words, which in themselves are magic high' (143).

In 'A Spirit's Return', one source of power exceeds the others, the power of words and voice, not only because it constitutes the very means through which the summoning (as an act of calling) is performed but also because it is given special prominence in the text. The speaker soon realises that she does not need 'a charm'd rod' (59) or 'a seer's glance' (58) to reach out to the Other World because she can already have recourse to the 'magic high' of 'words' 'in themselves' (143). Her

⁵⁰⁵ Richardson, 'Spiritual Converse', p. 124.

⁵⁰⁶ Kathleen Lundeen similarly claims that 'Hemans' view of spirit as a force independent of the natural world' contrasts with that of Wordsworth, who sees 'spirit' as 'mediated by nature', but her insight is not further developed nor supported with any specific reference to Hemans's poems (Kathleen Lundeen, 'Hemans' Response to the Romantic Uni-Verse', *Working with English*, 4.1 [2008], 57-69 [p. 59]). Moreover, this spirit does not necessarily coincide with the 'realm of spirits' (46), and the complex relationship between the spiritual and the supernatural in Romantic poetry is clearly beyond the scope of the present study.

⁵⁰⁷ This difference between 'A Spirit's Return' and *Manfred* is briefly noticed in Richardson, 'Spiritual Converse', p. 127.

necromantic faculties depend, first and foremost, on the ‘power’ (131) that kindles her ‘lip’ (132) and makes her voice extraordinarily compelling: ‘A fiery shower | My words were made; – a might was given to my prayer’ (132-33). When she calls her beloved across the normally unbridgeable abyss of death, he obeys her ‘cry’ (137). She commands him to ‘[a]wake, appear, reply’ (154), an invocation entailing the fulfilment of three main phatic requirements, and he complies: he awakes to her call, thus paying attention to her words; he appears before her, thus creating spatiotemporal copresence; he replies to her questions, thus ensuring that the communicative channel is functioning in both directions. The following ‘glorious intercourse’ (201) appears to be engendered by the ability of the speaker’s utterance to act as a ‘spell’ (141) and create the conditions that would make communication possible by evoking – not simply invoking – the spirit. He does not come ‘unbidden’, as Richardson claims, but summoned by the powerful calling of her voice.⁵⁰⁸

Richardson’s misinterpretation is probably prompted by the fact that the effect of the speaker’s conjuration is not immediate. At first, her prayer seems to remain once again unanswered. Time passes and nothing happens. The speaker herself has been reduced to silence (163-64: ‘I had wept | My woe to stillness’) when, all of a sudden, the ghost materialises before her in a way that seems spontaneous, almost unexpected. The poem, however, makes it clear that the apparition is a result of the speaker’s invocation, not only because the spirit perfectly meets her threefold request, but also because it had already explicitly stated that she ‘won a voice to shake | Death’s fastnesses’ (85-86) and ‘a magic to control | Worlds far removed’ (86-87). The speaker has acquired the vocal power to overcome the divide between the living and the dead, which is precisely what she does. Still, the delay in the fulfilment of her spell is an interesting detail that should not be overlooked. The spirit manifests himself while she is gazing ‘unconsciously’ (169) at her surroundings, an adverb meaning ‘without conscious action, effort, thought, or awareness’ (*OED*). It may suggest the idea that she is playing no active part in what is happening but also that she is unaware of the external world because caught in a moment of inwardness. In both instances, the possibility that another agency might be at work – be it the ghost acting of its own initiative or the unconscious mind of the speaker – is raised. The dash between ‘unconsciously’ (169) and ‘there came | A low sound’ (169-70) reinforces this feeling by conveying the impression of an abrupt interruption and intrusion beyond the speaker’s control.

In this scene, ‘A Spirit’s Return’ appears to mobilise a similar dichotomy to the one identified in ‘Hymn to Intellectual Beauty’ between reaching out and turning inwards and to present contact with the Other World as resulting from an interplay between these two modes. Though the former is clearly given greater importance, the latter is not absent. References to the existence of some sort of otherness – even Otherness – within the speaker recur throughout the poem, such as those to the ‘thirst

⁵⁰⁸ Richardson, ‘Spiritual Converse’, p. 130.

for something too divine' that is 'deep' (20) inside her or the 'o'er-mastering power' (108) that is 'within us laid' (109) and able to 'rend its mortal frame' (110). After her encounter with her dead beloved, the speaker mentions that there is 'within [her] pent, | That which is barr'd from its own element' (249-50) and '[s]till droops or struggles' (251) to be rejoined to it through death. This fragment of Otherness within her may be understood to be the product of her brief communion with otherworldliness, but it may also be related to the 'strange inborn fire' (40) that has always isolated her from other human beings. In order to fully grasp the implications of Hemans's multifaceted representation of otherworldly contact and otherness, conspicuous parallels between 'A Spirit's Return' and some of her other poems must be taken into consideration.

The scene of the spirit's apparition is strikingly reminiscent of 'The Rock of Cader-Idris' from her 1822 collection *Selection of Welsh Airs*. The poem opens with the speaker 'lay[ing] on [a] rock' (1) in solitude, immersed in the sounds of a storm.⁵⁰⁹ Around them 'the voice of mountain-wind' is 'solemn and loud' (4), 'wild waves and breezes' mingle 'their moan' (6), and yet they feel 'midst a world of dread grandeur, alone' (8). Nature elicits no sense of communion, rather it exacerbates their isolation. The latter is abruptly broken when, the speaker recalls, 'a spirit came o'er me' (9) and 'things glorious, unearthly, pass'd floating before me' (11). As in 'A Spirit's Return', the apparition is immediately preceded by a dash, which registers in the texture of the line the spectral disturbance and the sudden presence of '[t]he dead [...] on the hill' (22). The speaker sees 'the dread beings, around us that hover, | Tho' veil'd by the mists of Mortality's breath' (13-14), sees 'what man looks on, and dies' (25) but eschews such terrible fate and 'triumphantly liv[es] thro' that hour' (26). They, instead, awake 'as from the grave' (27) – only *as* – 'to inherit | A flame all immortal, a voice and a power' (27-28).

What these three things stand for is clarified by the passage from Edward Davies's *Celtic Researches* (1804) that Hemans chose to accompany the poem: 'There is a popular Welsh tradition, that on the summit of Cader-Idris, one of the highest mountains in North Wales, is an excavation in the rock resembling a couch, and that whoever should pass a night in that seat, would be found in the morning either dead, raving mad, or endowed with supernatural genius'.⁵¹⁰ Since the speaker manages to successfully avoid the threat of 'madness and Death' (16), their case cannot but fall into the third scenario. They emerge from the experience invested with supernatural genius, which the poem identifies with an immortal power of voice, an element of otherworldliness that the speaker 'inherit[s]' (27) as a result of their brief communion with the Other World. The inclusion of Davies's quote clearly indicates that 'The Rock of Cader-Idris' was meant as the account of a poetic investiture

⁵⁰⁹ All quotes from 'The Rock of Cader-Idris' are from Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*.

⁵¹⁰ Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, p. 178.

whose officiants are the dead instead of the Muses, thus providing invaluable insights into Hemans's conception of poetic genius.

The notion of genius as supernatural recurs in Hemans's poetry so frequently and consistently that it should not be dismissed as an empty commonplace.⁵¹¹ One of the most significant examples is 'The Requiem of Genius', first published in 1830 and then included in the miscellaneous section of *Songs of the Affections*. As the title suggests, the poem is a requiem for the death of a poet, the term *genius* here referring to the person rather than the faculty. It revolves around the idea that the event should not be deplored as a bereavement, for it actually constitutes a homecoming for the dead poet. 'They that have loved an exile', the speaker maintains, 'must not mourn | To see him parting for his native bourne' (4-5).⁵¹² The genius shares the same exiled state as Byron but for less biographically contingent reasons. He was an exile by his very nature, because he 'breathed but the language of another sphere' (8) and was, therefore, never at home in this world. He belonged to a different, unearthly dimension, to which he returned by dying. It is there, in his remote 'home of beauty and of thought' (41), that the poet has eventually 'found the sought' (40), for only there can he enjoy 'converse with all glorious powers' (47). Otherworldly communication, which the genius pursued even while alive by 'call[ing] | On the departed' (33-34), although 'the lips earth covers, even to [him], | Were silent all' (35-36), is interestingly presented as a poet's natural aspiration and vocation. The general validity of this portrait of poetic genius is confirmed by the epigraph from de Staël's *Corinne* (1807), though wrongly attributed to *De L'Allemagne* (1813): 'Les poètes dont l'imagination tient à la puissance d'aimer et de souffrir, ne son tils pas le bannis d'une autre region?'.⁵¹³

This passage from *Corinne* must have been particularly meaningful to Hemans, who also quotes it in a letter whose date and addressee are uncertain but which was probably written in 1828. In the letter, Hemans muses on her 'suffering' and wonders 'how much of this is occasioned by quenchless aspirations after intellectual and moral beauty, never to be found on earth'.⁵¹⁴ These aspirations, she confesses, 'seem to sever me from others, and make my lot more lonely than life has made it'.⁵¹⁵ At the same time, her suffering is sharpened by her awareness that 'nothing earthly' will assuage the 'void' she feels inside, which 'cannot be filled with the infinite, until infinity shall have opened upon it', that is, until death.⁵¹⁶ She then goes on to expose the inadequacy of the 'human' affections to fulfil her deepest yearnings, for she believes that the 'intense affections' we experience

⁵¹¹ A few examples among many are: 'To the Muse' (1808), 'The Widow of Crescentius' (1819), 'The Breeze from Shore' (1829), 'The Sacred Harp' (1834), 'Design and Performance' (1836).

⁵¹² The quotes from 'The Requiem of Genius' are from Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*.

⁵¹³ Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, p. 364.

⁵¹⁴ Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, p. 432.

⁵¹⁵ Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, p. 433.

⁵¹⁶ Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, p. 433.

on earth ‘were given us to meet and answer human love’ and ‘it is only in the “Better Land” they ever did, or will approximate to what is divine’.⁵¹⁷ The double tense suggests that the Other World is both her place of origin and ultimate destination, a home to which eventually return, just as in ‘The Requiem of Genius’. The condition detailed in the letter bears striking resemblance to that of the speaker in ‘A Spirit’s Return’, which was composed more or less in the same period. The poem’s protagonist suffers from the same ‘weary thirst’ (55) that nothing ‘*here* shall quench’ (236) and that irremediably isolates her from other people. What is ‘within [her] pent’ (249) will be reunited with ‘its own element’ (250) and ‘find its home’ (252) only after – and through – death. In ‘A Spirit’s Return’, Hemans’s unsatisfied (and, while she lives, unsatisfiable) aspirations for intellectual, moral, and spiritual ideals assume a decidedly supernatural connotation and are rendered into an occult quest for communion with the Other World with necromantic overtones. Still, the main coordinates of the speaker’s situation closely mirror Hemans’s personal experience as described in the undated letter.

The analogies between ‘A Spirit’s Return’ and these other writings of Hemans foreground the existence of a recurring thematic cluster around otherworldliness and shed light on a key aspect of it and of the poem under scrutiny. By quoting the passage from *Corinne* in her letter, Hemans implies that the peculiar disposition that makes her aspire for something beyond this world is a specific trait of poets in general. This seemingly minor detail is very meaningful, as a similar poetic conception has been seen to underlie ‘The Requiem of Genius’ and ‘The Rock of Cader-Idris’, where the poet is portrayed as someone who is endowed with supernatural genius and actually belongs – and tends – to the Other World. The constellation of connections that have been traced between these poems, the letter, and ‘A Spirit’s Return’ suggests that a metapoetic discourse can also be found in the latter. In light of these correspondences, the speaker’s unquenchable longings, her alienation from fellow human beings, her exiled condition in this world, and her desire for contact with the Other as a sort of homecoming all lead to interpret her identity as poetic. The emphasis on vocal might and the magic of words could be understood as a metapoetic reference in itself, but the remarkable similarities between ‘A Spirit’s Return’ and ‘The Rock of Cader-Idris’ further encourage the interpretation of the former as another account of a poetic investiture in which supernatural genius is attained in the form of an otherworldly power of voice, a possibility that will be explored in the next section.

4.3 Invocation, evocation, vocation

Considerable importance has been given so far to the commonalties between ‘A Spirit’s Return’ and ‘The Rock of Cader-Idris’ as evidence of their shared engagement with the question of how a poet is

⁵¹⁷ Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, p. 433.

made. The way in which a supernatural power of voice is gained in the two poems, however, is significantly different. In ‘The Rock of Cader-Idris’, the speaker occupies the entirely passive position of mere recipient of this gift, which is simply ‘inherit[ed]’ (27) as the result of an otherworldly encounter that they did not seek nor cause. The initiative lies entirely with the spirit who appears, this time truly unbidden, while the speaker lies ‘in silence’ (9), that is, without any communicative attempt on their part. In ‘A Spirit’s Return’, agency is far more complicated, as the speaker plays both an active and a passive role. While it is true that the ghost approaches her as she is in an unconscious and passive state, it is also true that she is actively responsible for summoning him and claiming a voice to do so. Her mighty voice, in fact, is not the mere outcome of otherworldly contact, as in ‘The Rock of Cader-Idris’, but rather the means through which such contact is achieved. It is itself ‘won’ (85) through a ‘conflict’ (85) with death, that is, through the very endeavour of bridging the gap between this world and the Other. These lines suggest that the speaker’s ‘victory’ (84) can be regarded as such because she has obtained ‘a voice to shake | Death’s fastness’ (85-86). This explicit acknowledgement of success dispels the suspicion that the speaker’s invocations fail, while also indirectly confirming the power of her newly acquired voice to accomplish precisely what it purports to be able to do. Her victory means that her voice has successfully shaken death’s fastness, thus proving to be a necromantic force that can – and does – conjure the dead.

The fact that the speaker acquires a supernatural power of voice not *after* contact with the Other World is established but *by* establishing it through her invocations is another aspect that indicates the poetic nature of this voice. As already pointed out, calling has been often identified with the definitory act of lyric poetry, especially in its apostrophic form. In *Persons and Things* (2008), Barbara Johnson maintains that the foundational utterance of lyric poetry is ‘not “X is Y”, but “I invoke X”’ and that ‘[t]he problem of poetic authority does not depend on what the poets say but on their capacity to call’.⁵¹⁸ According to her, the distinctly phatic act of calling, regardless of the conveyed content, is deeply intertwined with ‘the creation of a poetic voice’.⁵¹⁹ Johnson’s ideas are indebted to Culler’s seminal views on apostrophe, which have been repeatedly discussed in the previous chapters with the exception of this notable point. Both in *The Pursuit of Signs* and in *Theory of the Lyric*, Culler draws an intrinsic connection between apostrophic calling and the institution of a poetic identity. He argues that ‘as a figure endemic to poetry [...], apostrophe works as a mark of poetic vocation’, insofar as it is ‘a device which the poetic subject uses to establish with the object a relationship that helps to constitute the subject itself as poetic, even vatic’.⁵²⁰ Culler has been said to understand apostrophe as a ‘practically gratuitous action’ that is devoid of any actual communicative

⁵¹⁸ Johnson, *Persons and Things*, p. 9.

⁵¹⁹ Johnson, *Persons and Things*, p. 14.

⁵²⁰ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 216.

intent towards its avowed interlocutor.⁵²¹ Now the main function that he ascribes to this figure finally becomes clear: it is not directed towards the addressee nor primarily towards the side-participant, as in Richardson's alternative theory, but rather towards creating a specific self-image of the caller.

By calling an interlocutor that would normally not be able to hear, let alone reply, and by calling them as if they *could* hear and reply, the poet claims an extraordinary, quasi-magical power for their voice, which 'seeks to manifest its calling' and thereby 'establish its identity as poetical voice'.⁵²² What makes such voice poetical appears to be the performative propensity of apostrophes to turn an invocation into an evocation. According to Culler, 'the vatic presuppositions of the figure of apostrophe' rest on its being an 'attempt to bring [a state of affairs] into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire – as if apostrophe, with all its rhetorical fragility, embodied an atavistic casting of spells on the world'.⁵²³ Apostrophe would thus allow the speaker to occupy the position of someone whose utterances can affect a 'universe' that is posited as 'potentially responsive' by the apostrophe itself in line with the 'vatic aspect' of the lyric tradition.⁵²⁴ That is the position of a magician, a prophet, a necromancer, but also a poet. Though Culler is seemingly making a generally valid point about poetic authority, his conception of the poet is actually rather narrow and time-specific. His explicit and implicit associations of *poetical* with adjectives like 'prophetic', 'bardic, visionary' make his statements less broadly applicable to poetry overall and particularly relevant to the Romantic period, when a vatic model of the inspired poet – or, in William Covino's words, a 'conjunction of poet, rhetor, and magus' – had become prominent, a point to which I will return shortly.⁵²⁵ Culler himself actually acknowledges this association by cursorily mentioning the fact that 'the romantic tradition [...] explicitly court prophetic effects'.⁵²⁶

'A Spirit's Return' presents a sort of narrative rendition of Culler's and Johnson's theoretical formulations about the trope of apostrophe. The speaker tells the story of how she called across 'the abyss no sounding line hath proved' (122) and her voice was so powerful that the dead exceptionally heard and answered. Similarly to 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty', Hemans's poem shows what is not usually seen in lyric poetry: in Culler's words, 'what actually happens when an apostrophe succeeds'.⁵²⁷ The speaker's seemingly impossible invocation turns out to be an actual evocation which elicits the apparition and response of the spirit. Because it is a narrative account of a past

⁵²¹ Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 157.

⁵²² Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 216.

⁵²³ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 233, 215–16.

⁵²⁴ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 216, 190.

⁵²⁵ Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 157; Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 223; William A. Covino, *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy: An Eccentric History of the Composing Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 74.

⁵²⁶ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 230.

⁵²⁷ Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 170.

gesture, the ritualistic aspect of apostrophic calling as an event performed by the poem gives way to the representation of the performance of an actual ritual and of its outcome, a twofold dimension of rituality that has also been seen at play in canto IV of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. The success of the summoning and the content of the ensuing otherworldly communication constitute the speaker's voice not just as supernaturally powerful but also, more specifically, as vatic and visionary.

The voice she wins is, in fact, prophetic in the literal sense of the term. During her conversation with the spirit, the speaker has been said to be especially keen to acquire information about the future state of the dead, but the content level of the exchange now takes on a new meaning. It can actually be seen as less significant in itself and more functional to determine the relationship level, which has been said to refer to 'what sort of a message' a communication 'is to be taken as': in this case, a revelation.⁵²⁸ The acquisition of 'secret knowledge' (37) about the Other World makes the speaker comparable to a prophet according to the conventional definition of the prophet as someone who is the recipient and utterer of supernaturally inspired revelations. The type of message that she receives from the spirit establishes the identity that she can claim as vatic and, therefore, poetic. As a matter of fact, the speaker emerges from this otherworldly experience with a voice not only to summon the dead but also to tell of it, as prophets do. She herself remarks that her 'tale should be | Sung like a lay of triumph' (88-89), which is exactly what she does: the lay of triumph is nothing but the poem itself.

The triangular correspondence between invocation, evocation, and vocation that 'A Spirit's Return' draws consistently with theoretical formulations of apostrophe has been said to operate on a narrative rather than rhetorical level, but this is a partial picture. Like most of the poems under scrutiny, 'A Spirit's Return' is not exclusively narrative but actually oscillates between narrative and lyric modes. The speaker does not solely recount past addresses to the Other World but also calls upon it in the present of the unfolding tale. On a closer look, the poem abounds with apostrophes in the technical lyric sense of the term. As Richardson acknowledges, 'in "A Spirit's Return", Hemans makes use of the entire spectrum of the figure of address'.⁵²⁹ The highly apostrophic quality of Hemans's poetry was already noticed by her contemporaries, and Byron even deemed her to be 'too stilted and apostrophic', curiously using the adjective as a criticism despite his own ample use of apostrophes in poems such as *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and perhaps providing an example of the embarrassment theorised by Culler.⁵³⁰ As this and the next section will make clear, however, Hemans's profuse figures of address are far from being an instance of over-stylised affectation.⁵³¹

⁵²⁸ Watzlawick, Bavelas, and Jackson, p. 33.

⁵²⁹ Richardson, 'Spiritual Converse', p. 134.

⁵³⁰ Quoted in Saglia, p. 366.

⁵³¹ Anna Camilleri clarifies that Byron 'regarded stiltedness as a byword for affected performativity' or 'over-stylised performance' (Anna Camilleri, 'Byron's English Verse Inheritance', in *Byron Among the English Poets: Literary*

They are a carefully and skilfully constructed rhetorical texture that works in synergy with the narrative content of the poem.

In the last lines, the speaker suddenly, and for the first time, apostrophises her dead beloved in the lyric now of the poetic utterance: ‘shall not I, too, be, | My spirit-love! upborne to dwell with thee?’ (255-56). ‘Yes! by the power whose conquering anguish stirr’d | The tomb’ (257-58), she herself replies, ‘shall we meet!’ (261). The poem ends with a direct address to the spirit and an actual prophecy, whose fulfilment is ensured not only by the fact that she calls upon the same power that allowed her to communicatively overcome the gulf of death, but also by the tale of visionary investiture that she has just told. At the same time, this final prophecy constitutes the latter’s actualisation and the evidence of the prophetic quality of the speaker’s voice. The same applies to her address to the spirit, whose aptness to get through to him is made far more plausible by the fact that it follows a narrative about the acquisition of ‘a voice to shake | Death’s fastnesses’ (85-86). The account of her successful otherworldly communication in the past ascribes a different, more confident quality to her apostrophes in the present, as can be retrospectively seen when considering the earlier invocations to ‘thou rich world unseen’ (45) and ‘[t]hou curtain’d realm of spirits’ (46).

Richardson argues that these apostrophes are “‘merely” rhetorical”, for ‘the speaker [...] addresses the “world unseen” not in order to communicate with it, but in her efforts to rouse conviction in the “gentle” auditor’, whose role will be discussed in the next section.⁵³² In line with his theoretical views on apostrophe, Richardson understands these addresses to the Other World as an attempt to communicate not with the unreachable ostensible addressee but with a more easily available overhearing side-participant. Yet, in doing so, he overlooks the key detail that these apostrophes are reported speech acts. They are followed by ‘thus my cry | Hath troubled air and silence’ (46-47), which clearly indicates that they are the words uttered by the speaker in her past attempts to reach out to the otherworldly in and through the natural. Contrary to what Richardson maintains, they entail a genuine communicative intent towards the addressee, albeit one that has been seen to remain unfulfilled. Richardson’s misinterpretation, however, is an understandable mistake. The apostrophes do seem to be spoken in the present because they lack the quotation marks with which Hemans indicates reported speech both by the speaker (lines 119, 154) and by the spirit (lines 216-17) in the rest of the poem. The absence of inverted commas creates the impression that the invocations ambiguously belong both to the past of the story and to the present of the poetic utterance and that the speaker is re-performing them while reporting them. This repetition gives them new force, as it happens after she has proven able to evoke the dead. She addresses again the ‘world

Tradition and Poetic Legacy, ed. by Matthew Ward and Clare Bucknell [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021], pp. 114–28 [pp. 124, 123]).

⁵³² Richardson, ‘Spiritual Converse’, p. 135.

unseen' (45) after winning an irresistible vocal power precisely because she can now expect to succeed in what she had then failed to accomplish: establishing communication with it. Even in the lyric now, the apostrophes are not merely rhetorical but real efforts to make contact with their otherworldly addressee and thus showcase her newly acquired ability to do so.

The existence of a communicative purpose does not cancel out the self-fashioning function identified by Culler but redefines it in a less self-referential and more dialogic form. As illustrated in the chapter on Shelley and confirmed by Culler's exclusive reference to 'inanimate objects' in the above-quoted passage, his view of apostrophe revolves around the notion of animation, even when it comes to its metapoetic function.⁵³³ The main example that he provides of the way in which poets gratuitously call to constitute their voice as poetical is, in fact, '[a]sking winds to blow or seasons to stay their coming or mountains to hear one's cries', and the vatic stance is primarily identified with that of '[o]ne who successfully invokes nature'.⁵³⁴ By seeing communicative tension where Culler would only see pretence and by considering supernatural interlocutors endowed with their own voice and subjecthood instead of natural and inanimate addressees, my reading of Hemans's apostrophes suggests a different version of the vatic, which has less to do with how voice 'summon[s] images of its power' over an otherwise inert universe than with the phatic contact it purports to establish with a normally unreachable dimension that is itself a superior source of power.⁵³⁵ The invocations to the 'rich world unseen' (45) and 'curtain'd realm of spirits' (46) contribute to defining the speaker's voice as visionary and poetic by constituting it as a supernaturally gifted voice that can successfully reach out to the Other World and expect to receive a response.

The assured power of voice and visionary poetic authority that the speaker claims in 'A Spirit's Return' may appear unusual for Hemans, especially if one considers the poem's special position as the opening text of *Songs of the Affections*, which gives it an introductory, even paradigmatic function as a sort of poetic manifesto. This idea is confirmed by the similarities that it bears to the epigraph that Hemans wrote for the collection and that serves as declaration of poetic intent. This short prefatory poem explains that the following texts will 'tell [...] a lonely spirit's dreams' (1), giving voice to the 'aimless thought of home' (4) that '[w]anders' (3) through 'their fleeting imagery' (2).⁵³⁶ The image of the poet that these lines portray remarkably resembles that of the protagonist of 'A Spirit's Return'. She is lonely and alike to a 'caged skylark' (5), a comparison recalling the simile between the 'companionless' (23) protagonist and 'a lone forest-bird midst ocean foam' (24) in 'A Spirit's Return'. She is also a visionary that relates her dreams and an exile that does

⁵³³ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 233, 215.

⁵³⁴ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 216; Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 157.

⁵³⁵ Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, p. 157.

⁵³⁶ All quotes from the epigraph are from Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*, p. 444.

not belong to this world. Her affiliation to the otherworldly dimension is indicated by the fact that she is called a *spirit* and that her home is ‘far off’ (7). Since the epigraph frames the entire collection and directs the reader’s expectations about what kind of poetry is included, the description of the poet that it provides has a programmatic relevance. It defines the poetic persona that Hemans aims to fashion for herself in *Songs of the Affections*, a poetic persona that is strikingly akin to the speaker of ‘A Spirit’s Return’ (thus reinforcing the poem’s metadiscursive and metapoetic significance) but furthest from that with which she is typically associated.

As repeatedly mentioned, Hemans’s name has long been synonymous with a poetics of domesticity and femininity. Writing at the beginning of her reappraisal, Glennis Stephenson still maintained that ‘Hemans supports conventional gender ideology and creates a poetic character that decorously appears to confirm the expectations of her audience concerning why she wrote, what she wrote, and how she wrote – a character clearly gendered “feminine”’.⁵³⁷ During the past few decades, several critics (including, most notably, Susan Wolfson) have argued that Hemans’s alignment with these ideals is far more problematic than it has been traditionally thought to be.⁵³⁸ Their aim has usually been to show how, while performing the role of the ‘poetess, celebrating hearth and home’, Hemans often subverts feminine and domestic values from the inside.⁵³⁹ In doing so, however, they never directly question Hemans’s privileged relationship with this kind of poetry and the poetic persona that it entails. They still define her as an author writing within this genre, however much she problematises it. Although this approach is invaluable in allowing for a more comprehensive appraisal of Hemans’s complex and often contradictory affiliation to the female poetry of the domestic affections, there are aspects and parts of her work that these readings do not account for and that have been so far overlooked. The poetic claim at the heart of ‘A Spirit’s Return’ is one of them.

By adopting a necromantic and vatic stance, Hemans boldly challenges the limiting definition of poetess. As Wolfson points out, the term is ‘not only a diminutive, but also a negative wrapped in faint praise’, which indicates the lesser poetry written by ‘a separate and secondary gender’.⁵⁴⁰ Anne

⁵³⁷ Glennis Stephenson, ‘Poet Construction: Mrs Hemans, L.E.L., and the Image of the Nineteenth-Century Woman Poet’, in *ReImagining Women: Representations of Women in Culture*, ed. by Shirley C. Neuman and Glennis Stephenson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), pp. 61–73 (pp. 61–62).

⁵³⁸ For some significant examples of this critical trend, see Susan J. Wolfson, “‘Domestic Affections’ and “the spear of Minerva”: Felicia Hemans and the Dilemma of Gender’, in *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776–1837*, ed. by Joel Haefner and Carol Shiner Wilson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 128–66; Tricia Lootens, ‘Hemans and Home: Victorianism, Feminine “Internal Enemies,” and the Domestication of National Identity’, *PMLA*, 109.2 (1994), 238–53; Susan J. Wolfson, ‘Felicia Hemans and the Revolving Doors of Reception’, in *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception*, ed. by Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen C. Behrendt (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), pp. 214–41; Cottingham; Brandy Ryan, “‘Echo and Reply’: The Elegies of Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, and Elizabeth Barrett’, *Victorian Poetry*, 46.3 (2008), 249–77.

⁵³⁹ Stuart Curran, quoted in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. xxi.

⁵⁴⁰ Wolfson, ‘Felicia Hemans and the Revolving Doors of Reception’, p. 219.

Mellor well explains the implications of the word by identifying the *poetess* and the *female poet* with two distinct traditions of poetry written by women. On the one hand, the category of the poetess encompasses the women poets who celebrated the circle of the domestic affections and ‘who saw themselves as writing a specifically “feminine” poetry’.⁵⁴¹ On the other, the ‘literary tradition of the female poet’, which originated ‘in the writings of the female preachers or prophets’, allowed women to claim ‘divine authority [...] for their prophetic verse’ in a way comparable to how ‘the canonical male romantic poets claimed divine authority or “poetic genius” as the inspiration and origin of their writing’.⁵⁴² In line with the long-established reception of Hemans, Mellor considers her to be an eminent representative of the first kind of poetry and completely overlooks the fact that her late production is far closer to the genre of the female poet. As illustrated by Melnyk, towards the end of her career Hemans had recourse to religious ideology as a means that ‘can also allow a woman poet to claim the vatic power that male Romantic poets represented as their birth right, but that female poets were popularly denied’.⁵⁴³

‘A Spirit’s Return’ does not fit into either of these categories. The speaker’s visionary and prophetic power of voice is not granted by the intervention of divine inspiration but ascribed to a supernatural source. The resulting poetic persona is far from both the poetess and the female poet and akin, instead, to the model of supernatural genius and poet-prophet that is usually associated with ‘masculine’ Romanticism. Not coincidentally, Hemans’s poem has been shown to establish an intertextual dialogue predominantly with the works of her male contemporaries. The speaker’s primary relationship with a male context is indicated in the text not just by her similarities with male Romantic heroes but also, more explicitly, by the use of the term ‘brotherhood’ (25) to indicate human ties. That Hemans conceived the figure of the poet as exile from the Other World in distinctly masculine terms is further confirmed by the fact that it is given a male identity in ‘The Requiem of Genius’. ‘A Spirit’s Return’ interestingly differs in this regard. When discussing ‘The Rock of Cader-Idris’, I have used the gender-neutral form *they* to refer to the speaker, as their gender is not specified in the poem. The same might be technically said of ‘A Spirit’s Return’, but the male identity of the beloved, alongside the arguably heteronormative context of the poem, leads the reader to safely identify the speaker as a woman. In order to assert a traditionally masculine voice and authority, Hemans does not assume a male poetic persona. She subversively maintains a female identity whose characterisation, however, is not gendered, in that her gender does not define her. She lacks the attributes that were deemed to be typically feminine at the time and that can be found in Hemans’s

⁵⁴¹ Anne K. Mellor, ‘The Female Poet and the Poetess: Two Traditions of British Women’s Poetry, 1780-1830’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 36.2 (1997), 261–76 (p. 262).

⁵⁴² Mellor, ‘The Female Poet and the Poetess’, pp. 262, 263.

⁵⁴³ Melnyk, p. 76.

other works: most notably, domesticity, given that her home is a ‘silent hearth’ (28) from which she has always been isolated, and passivity, given her incredibly forceful necromantic agency.

In ‘A Spirit’s Return’, Hemans makes a bold statement about her poetic identity, claiming a supernatural and vatic power that places her on the same level as her male contemporaries, possibly even above them, as her poem triumphantly succeeds where theirs ultimately fail. Richardson maintains that Hemans ‘begins by emulating the dialogic poetics of Wordsworth and Coleridge, developing a scenario codified by Byron and Shelley, eventually turning aside or diverging from her models in choosing to represent what in *Manfred* and *Alastor* tragically resists representation: the “glorious intercourse” between questing human subject and her spirit-lover’.⁵⁴⁴ Though I have shown how ‘A Spirit’s Return’ criticises – instead of emulating – the poetics of Wordsworth for its actual lack of a genuine dialogic dimension, the rest of the statement is quite accurate. Together with Seth Reno, who investigates Hemans’s ‘Romantic acknowledgement of a transcendent, otherworldly concept of love’, Richardson is the main critic to consider her works within the context not of the female poetry of domesticity but of ‘high’, male Romanticism.⁵⁴⁵ It is not by chance that Reno and Richardson focus on *Songs of the Affections* and on ‘A Spirit’s Return’ rather than on her earlier (or later) production. Neither of them, however, goes as far as to contend that, by writing poetry in relation to the Romantic masculine tradition, Hemans’s end is to actually claim a poetic authority that is on par with that of its representatives. This is due to the fact that they both do not pay sufficiently keen attention to her masterly treatment of otherworldly communication and its instrumental role in establishing a distinct poetic voice.

A tendency to present contact with the Other World as a means to gain and assert a supernatural vocal power that self-consciously jeopardises her identification with the quintessential poetess resurfaces multiple times in Hemans’s poetry, taking different forms at different stages of her poetic career. The poetic investiture at the heart of ‘The Rock of Cader-Idris’ performs an analogous function in that, as pointed out by Reno, it ‘announces her newfound role as a serious poet’, that is, ‘not a poetess, or a poet of the domestic affections, but a Romantic poet’ who ““inherits” the “flame” of the Romantic poetic tradition’.⁵⁴⁶ Hemans sets out to occupy this role by evoking the Welsh tradition of ‘the bard as imaginative visionary’, not in order to make any genuine plea in favour of

⁵⁴⁴ Richardson, ‘Spiritual Converse’, p. 136.

⁵⁴⁵ Reno, ‘Felicia Hemans and the Affections’, p. 5. As Lilla Maria Crisafulli highlights, ““high” Romanticism [...] has been used by analogy with “high culture” and ‘has been traditionally associated with male/masculine culture’ (Lilla Maria Crisafulli, ‘Within or Without? Problems of Perspective in Charlotte Smith, Anna Laetitia Barbauld and Dorothy Wordsworth’, in *Romantic Women Poets: Genre and Gender*, ed. by Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Cecilia Pietropoli [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007], pp. 35–61 [p. 36]).

⁵⁴⁶ Reno, ‘Felicia Hemans and the Affections’, pp. 14, 15.

Welsh nationalism but to adopt this poetic persona.⁵⁴⁷ The poet-bard presupposes a model of agency that is consistent with the passivity of the poem's speaker, as bards derive their authority from being mouthpieces for the whole nation and using their voice as a channel for the voices of others.⁵⁴⁸ The impression that something *other* than the poet shapes 'The Rock of Cader-Idris' is heightened by the fact that it is composed on the tune of 'The Ash-Grove'. The rhythm and the musical structure of the air determine the poem's form, thus translating the idea of the poet as passive recipient of other voices (in this case, the earlier song) on the level of the linguistic and metrical texture of the text. As Susan Stewart argues, the 'residual meanings at work' in pre-existing meter and music act as a sort of haunting and point to the fact that 'poetry involves being spoken through as well as speaking', more prominently in the case of proper *contrafacta* like 'The Rock of Cader-Idris'.⁵⁴⁹

A similar operation can be found in Hemans's later religious poetry, where, as previously mentioned, she turns to 'religious inspiration as a way of vindicating women's poetry and freeing it from the confines of affectional tradition'.⁵⁵⁰ The poetic persona that she fashions for herself at the end of her career receives her vatic authority from God and, like the bard, is a vessel for someone else's words. Both these configurations of poetic identity contemplate supernatural intermediation at the expense of the agency of the poet, who merely falls under this otherworldly influence. Yung-Ok An highlights how 'the passivity involved in gift-accepting and charm- and spell-receiving' typically accompanied – and 'tempered' – Romantic women's narratives of supernaturally infused authorial power.⁵⁵¹ The bard and the divinely inspired poet are relatively socially acceptable masks for female authors to perform a role usually denied to them, as they rely on the legitimacy of religion and/or uphold dominant associations of femininity with passivity, both of which neutralise much of their transgressive potential. 'A Spirit's Return' is radically different and far more subversive. Written between 'The Rock of Cader-Idris' and her sacred poetry, it belongs to an intermediary stage of Hemans's quest for an 'undomesticated' voice, an aspiration that has only been acknowledged by a few critics in its individual manifestations, never as a recurring concern of her poetry. 'A Spirit's

⁵⁴⁷ Edward Larrissy, *The Blind and Blindness in Literature of the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 42. For further insights on Hemans's relationship with Wales, see Lootens; William D. Brewer, 'Felicia Hemans, Byronic Cosmopolitanism and the Ancient Welsh Bards', in *English Romanticism and the Celtic World*, ed. by Gerard Carruthers and Alan Rawes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 167–81; Matthew C. Jones, "'I Fear the Spirits of Its Celebrated Bards, Are Entirely Fled': Felicia Hemans's Wales Revisited", *European Romantic Review*, 29.6 (2018), 711–32.

⁵⁴⁸ Kirsteen McCue distinguishes the nineteenth-century figure of the bard as the mouthpiece for the whole society from that of the minstrel, who was considered to be an inspired isolated figure: see Kirsteen McCue, 'The Culture of Song', in *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*, ed. by David Duff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 643–60 (p. 654).

⁵⁴⁹ Susan Stewart, 'Lyric Possession', pp. 39, 38.

⁵⁵⁰ Melnyk, p. 74.

⁵⁵¹ Young-ok An, 'The Poetics of the "Charmed Cup" in Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon', *Studies in Romanticism*, 53.2 (2014), 217–38 (p. 226).

Return' corresponds to a bolder but isolated moment of this quest in which Hemans claims the supernatural inspiration and vatic authority usually reserved for her male contemporaries by playing the active part of a necromancer who, instead of channelling the voice of others, is endowed with the unparalleled vocal power of invoking and evoking the dead. In doing so, she establishes herself the contact with the Other World that will grant her supernatural genius: she is not simply the object but the subject of her own poetic investiture.

4.4 Gentle friend, distant reader

The speaker's outstandingly successful calling out to the Other World is not the only communicative act that 'A Spirit's Return' represents and performs. The unfolding of this chapter has resembled a Russian doll, starting from the core of Hemans's poem and slowly assembling its outer layers. The time has come to take into consideration the most external one. The 'lay of triumph' (89) that the speaker sings is a tale told not simply to the reader but to an express interlocutor who has been cursorily mentioned when dealing with apostrophes as the gentle auditor. This communicative situation frames the whole poem and is foregrounded from its very first line: 'Thy voice prevails; dear Friend, my gentle Friend!' (1). The incipit immediately establishes the poem as an utterance directed to an addressee as well as an utterance that entails some difficulty. The fact that the voice of the friend 'prevails' (1) means that there must be something over which it needs to prevail in order to reach the speaker, in other words, that there is some kind of obstacle or impediment to overcome. The same idea is reiterated in the following lines, where the 'stream' (3) that stands for the flow of the speaker's speech is said to be 'troubled' (4), just as troubled is the flow of the syntax and metre. Lines 3-6 present a combination of enjambments and mid-line caesuras that strengthen the impression of an irregular, obstructed flux. The speaker wants but struggles to 'unseal[...]' (2) her 'long-shut heart' (2) and 'unveil[...]' her 'dark records' (15) to her gentle friend.

The qualification of the addressee as a friend is to a certain extent baffling, for friendship evokes a degree of closeness and communicative openness that is undermined by the insistence on hindrances and closedness. The invitation to '[c]ome' (7), which opens the second stanza, amplifies the feeling that there is a separation between the speaker and her friend by turning the emotional distance implied in the image of the 'long-shut heart' (2) into actual physical distance. It is a typical phatic attempt to create spatial copresence which simultaneously reveals that the two interlocutors are not in the same space when the communication happens. The reason why the speaker is so remote from her friend may seem enigmatic only if one has not yet read the whole poem. The speaker's claim that she is now unable to offer that 'worthier love' (20) that she would have 'pour'd' (20) on the

listener ‘in life’s fresh vernal morn’ (18) because her heart is ‘all o’erworn | By its deep thirst for something too divine’ (19-20) is readily understandable in the light of her long-standing estrangement from fellow human beings and desire for a deeper communion with the Other World, both of which have been intensified following her encounter with the returned spirit. There is no need to explain the situation in a romantic way, as Richardson does, and identify the addressee as a male suitor whom the speaker cannot love back because she is still in love with the dead.⁵⁵² As reiterated, despite appearances, love is not the actual point of ‘A Spirit’s Return’. Likewise, there is no cogent reason to believe with Williamson that the addressee is a female friend who serves as a model of domestic virtues and propriety in opposition to the speaker.⁵⁵³ The text does not offer any clear indication as to the friend’s gender and neither does it matter, for the poem already provides all the necessary information to make sense of the obstacles and distance between them.

In short, the speaker has difficulties in communicating with her interlocutor because of their lacking commonality, as she feels more deeply connected to the otherworldliness of the spirit than to the humanity of the friend. Richardson rightly remarks that the final address to the ghost makes him appear ‘more real (to the speaker, and perhaps to the reader as well) than the increasingly irrelevant Friend’, but he does not account for why this is the case.⁵⁵⁴ The spirit *is* more real to the speaker, for she shares more common ground with him and his unearthly essence. The distance over which the friend’s voice must prevail to reach the speaker is metaphysical as well as spatial and emotional. The communication between them has itself an otherworldly component insofar as the speaker does not truly belong to this world. In a similar fashion to Byron’s revenge stanzas, the poem may be read as an instance not only of communication *to* the Other World but also *from* the Other World. It comes to us – and to the ‘gentle Friend’ (1) – as uttered by someone who has communed with a higher plane of existence and is now in a liminal condition, irremediably detached from human life, waiting to be rejoined to her true home beyond through death. The utterance constituting the poem is clearly indicated to be the speaker’s last words: once the ‘freed waters’ of her speech will have ‘flow[ed]’ (5), ‘rocks must close | For evermore’ (5-6) between the speaker and her friend.

The exceptional smoothness and mutuality that have been seen to characterise the speaker’s communication with the spirit do not extend to that with the gentle friend, which appears to be far more precarious and uncertain. It is almost paradoxical that a poem revolving so much around the triumph of the speaker’s voice should begin by asserting that the addressee’s voice prevails but, as a matter of fact, this initial statement is not upheld by how their communication plays out in the rest of ‘A Spirit’s Return’. The whole poem has a strong communicative orientation, as the speaker

⁵⁵² See Richardson, ‘Spiritual Converse’, p. 127.

⁵⁵³ See Williamson, pp. 30–31.

⁵⁵⁴ Richardson, ‘Spiritual Converse’, p. 135.

constantly engages the friend while telling her story: ‘O, gentle Friend! to love in doubt and woe, | [...] Is to love deeply’ (63, 65), ‘oh! sweet Friend! we dream not of love’s might’ (105), ‘I tell thee that a power | There kindled heart and lip’ (131-32), ‘Has thou been told that from the viewless bourne | The dark way never hath allow’d return?’ (155-56), ‘How shall I tell thee of the startling thrill | In that low voice’ (190-91), ‘O Friend, I woke | *Then* first to heavenly life!’ (192-93), ‘Couldst thou know | How every breeze then summons *me* to go!’ (241-42). If closer attention is paid, however, it becomes apparent that this dialogic tension is never fully realised. As Richardson points out, “‘A Spirit’s Return’ hovers strategically between monologue and dialogue, the speaker’s words shaped (and indeed inspired) by an awareness of the auditor’s expectations and reactions, and yet leaving the auditor effectively mute’.⁵⁵⁵

The speaker carries on a seemingly interactive narrative, yet her questions are never met with a reply. More significantly, she does not seem to be truly expecting one. Most of the time either are her questions rhetorical and do not need answers (such as 155-58) or she provides the answer herself. ‘Know’st thou what I sought?’ (135), she asks and immediately replies: ‘Communion with the dead!’ (137). The same happens when she ponders on the reinvigorating power of spring: ‘Dost thou not rejoice, | When the spring sends forth an awakening voice | Through the young woods? – Thou dost!’ (237-39). In other instances, the speaker seems to anticipate, even ventriloquise the questions that the friend may ask, asking them in their place and giving the semblance of a dialogue to an utterance that is actually monological. While recounting her supernatural encounter, for example, she imagines that her addressee would assume the experience to be fearful, so she proceeds to correct them after giving herself voice to their assumption: ‘with *fear*? – Oh! *not* with fear!’ (187). A similar controlling attitude emerges at several points in the poem, as the speaker attempts to direct and sway the auditor’s response, urging them to ‘[b]elieve [...] not’ (159) what they have been told about the impossibility of crossing the abyss of death or to ‘deem [...] not | That on the sad and consecrated spot | [her] soul grew weak’ (129-31). Though the first line suggests that the poem might be the answer to an unheard utterance of the friend, their voice – instead of prevailing – is continually prevailed over by that of the speaker and systematically excluded from the text. Its silencing is not just a linguistic effect but also explicitly commanded by her: ‘Hear me in tenderness and *silent* faith’ (16, italics mine).

The fact that the dialogical texture of the poem is weaved, sustained, and dominated by a monological voice casts a shadow over the effectiveness of the speaker’s communication with her human addressee, raising the doubt that she has been speaking to herself all along. As a matter of fact, whether she manages to reach out to her friend across the physical and metaphysical distance that separates them is left uncertain. The phatic request to ‘[c]ome’ (7) belongs to an already ongoing

⁵⁵⁵ Richardson, ‘Spiritual Converse’, p. 125.

communication, and the text provides no indication that it is granted. As the gentle friend seemingly remains absent from the scene, the speaker's words run the risk of being uttered into a void and falling prey to the solipsism that she had so decisively avoided in her quest for supernatural communion. 'A Spirit's Return' presents an unusual and perhaps surprising case in which the possibility of making successful contact with the Other World is far more secure than that of communicating with an earthly interlocutor. This discrepancy becomes particularly interesting when it is considered in connection to the communicative act and situation of the poem itself. The latter can be regarded as an utterance addressed to a reader, who occupies the same position of the friend: the position of the *you* in relation to the poem's *I*. The poetic identity that is fashioned for the speaker and the way in which it reflects on that of Hemans have already added a metapoetic dimension to the text, which makes the correspondence between intradiegetic and extradiegetic addressee more plausible and relevant. From this standpoint, the distance, lack of common ground, and overall precariousness that characterise the communication between the speaker and the friend may therefore be understood as mirroring and shedding light on how the poem envisages its own communication with readers.

The impression of a gulf between poets and their audience that jeopardised the ability of the former's works to communicate effectively with the latter was a widespread concern at the beginning of the nineteenth century. New developments in print and the unprecedented expansion of the book market had profoundly affected the relationship of authors with their reading public, which was larger and more diverse than it had ever been. As Lucy Newlyn points out, '[l]iteracy further increased in the first two decades of the nineteenth century when, as a result of technological changes – the first hand-operated iron-frame printing-press, the Fourdrinier papermaking machine, and stereotyping – cheaper books became possible, allowing more people to read than ever before'.⁵⁵⁶ This produced a fundamental 'shift from a literature written for an elite audience to one written for the public at large'.⁵⁵⁷ In her influential book *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism* (2003), Newlyn examines the effects of such momentous changes, focusing on the 'authorial anxiety' that 'manifested itself in the Romantic era', especially with regards to poetry, whose 'status' was more 'threatened [...] by the rise of the reader'.⁵⁵⁸ She calls this phenomenon 'anxiety of reception'. Faced with 'the decline of patronage' and 'the rise of criticism as a profession', writers 'could no longer regulate or predetermine their reception' and had to turn 'increasingly to the public for their hopes of survival'.⁵⁵⁹ At the same time, this 'dependency on unknown readers, whose numerical power and anonymity were felt to be threatening' gave rise to 'a sense of alienation' in authors, who felt estranged and remote from their

⁵⁵⁶ Newlyn, p. 7.

⁵⁵⁷ Newlyn, p. 7.

⁵⁵⁸ Newlyn, p. x.

⁵⁵⁹ Newlyn, p. 8.

audience.⁵⁶⁰ As Andrew Elfenbein maintains, during the Romantic period, '[p]rint created a crisis of common ground, in which the potential gap between author and audience widened frighteningly'.⁵⁶¹ The lack of a common ground that could ensure the proper reception and understanding of literary works was most prominent in the case of poems, which took on 'the fears of incomprehension associated with the early eighteenth-century novel'.⁵⁶²

In light of all this, the communicative distance and divide between the speaker and her addressee in 'A Spirit's Return' can be interpreted as a way in which Hemans gives voice to worries and anxieties that were common to Romantic poets and stemmed from their perception of an increasingly precarious relationship with the reading public. The speaker's endeavour to exert total control over the communication and the auditor's reception of her story can be regarded as a reaction to this prevailing sense of uncertainty and perhaps even an attempt to mitigate it, at least within the fictional boundaries of the poem. Such reading is further supported by the fact that these issues were particularly pressing for Hemans, who 'emerged in that period when the culture of the book was probably at its apogee' and was affected by what Andrew Bennett calls the 'increasing professionalisation and commercialisation of writing' more closely than other authors.⁵⁶³ She was, in fact, among the most popular poets of the time, one of the very few who could rival Byron in sales, and she relied on poetry as her primary source of income.⁵⁶⁴ Unlike Byron, who was literally exiled from his audience, Hemans would be assumed to be remarkably close to her readers. Her immense fame and commercial success would suggest that she knew perfectly well how to communicate with them effectively and that she had no reason to share the feelings of alienation and misunderstanding of authors like Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth, who had the impression of facing 'the disintegration of a coherent and sympathetic audience' largely because of their 'disappointing sales', as Bennett points out.⁵⁶⁵ Hemans's popularity, however, did not spare her similar concerns, quite the opposite.

In a letter to Rose Lawrence, dated 10 February 1835, Hemans complains about the adverse impact that the need to publish and be appreciated by the public had on her career: 'It has ever been one of my regrets that the constant necessity of providing sums of money to meet the exigencies of the boys' education, has obliged me to waste my mind in what I consider mere desultory effusions'.⁵⁶⁶ The letter reveals that her poetic aspirations did not conform to the tastes of the public and that she

⁵⁶⁰ Newlyn, p. 8.

⁵⁶¹ Elfenbein, p. 14.

⁵⁶² Elfenbein, p. 109.

⁵⁶³ Marlon B. Ross, 'Foreword: Now *Our* Hemans', in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. x–xxvi (p. xi); Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity*, p. 20.

⁵⁶⁴ For an overview of the material and economic aspects of Hemans's relationship with publishing, see Paula R. Feldman, 'The Poet and the Profits: Felicia Hemans and the Literary Marketplace', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 46 (1997), 148–76.

⁵⁶⁵ Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity*, pp. 20, 21.

⁵⁶⁶ Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, p. 445.

felt compelled to comply with the latter strictly for financial reasons. Hemans's dissatisfaction with the sentimental poems (the 'desultory effusions') that shaped her success betrays a certain frustration at her – partly self-perpetuated – confinement to the role of poetess of the domestic affections and starkly contrasts with her extremely positive assessment of 'A Spirit's Return': 'I prefer that poem to anything else I have written'.⁵⁶⁷ These opposite evaluations confirm the existence of some sort of rift between the poem at the centre of this chapter and the bulk of her literary production, while also pointing to the importance of 'A Spirit's Return' as an experiment for Hemans in writing the poetry that she truly valued, regardless of the public's expectations and desires. As Chad Edgar highlights, Hemans usually published in a way that allowed her to 'respond quickly to her audience's demands', as periodicals provided her 'with the unique opportunity of "collaborating" with her readers': she could see whether 'her readers liked a particular series or poem within a series' and, in that case, 'continue in that vein'.⁵⁶⁸ Such collaboration, however, did not engender a sense of closeness, rather of estrangement, perhaps even of resentment, as her letter suggests.

The lacking common ground and unbridged gap that troubles the communication between the supernaturally altered speaker of 'A Spirit's Return' and her human interlocutor, who one would expect to be more easily available than a spirit from another world but who actually turns out to be far more inaccessible, mirror Hemans's uneasy relationship with a reading public whose appetites she felt disconnected from yet somewhat subjugated to. The controlling stance adopted by the poem's speaker may then be read as an attempt to reclaim power – or at least a semblance of it – in the face of an extratextual communicative situation where Hemans's voice was systematically prevailed over – and, in a way, controlled – by an invisible, anonymous audience. Once again, otherworldly communication as the most extreme form of communication at a distance serves as a perfect means for Romantic poets to convey the challenges and complications of reaching out to the other that was the increasingly distant reader. Hemans detects this correspondence and skilfully exploits it through a poem in which readers are placed in the same position as a remote addressee and communicative contact with them remains haunted by the suspicion of solipsistic failure.

The uncertainty surrounding the communicative frame could also affect the speaker's speech – as well as the poem itself – more pervasively by raising another kind of suspicion: that the truthfulness of what she tells should be questioned as much as the fact that she is telling it to anyone. The tale of otherworldly communion and investiture at the heart of 'A Spirit's Return' depends, in fact, entirely on the speaker's own account of it. If the reliability of her utterances were undermined,

⁵⁶⁷ Quoted in Hemans, *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*, p. 445.

⁵⁶⁸ Chad Edgar, 'Felicia Hemans and the Shifting Field of Romanticism', in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 124–34 (p. 125).

the reality of her supernatural experience would also be called into doubt, and the reader would perhaps even contemplate the other possibility offered by ‘the Rock of Cader-Idris’: that the speaker has been struck by ‘madness’ (16). Such an approach, which revolves around the idea of the poem’s speaker as an unreliable narrator, would resemble the way in which Victorian dramatic monologues are typically read. It would rely on the same ‘dramatic irony’ that, as Glennis Byron highlights in her detailed study of the genre, is often exploited to indicate ‘the presence of a double-voiced discourse’ in these poems: on the one hand, what the speaker says; on the other, what the poet truly means.⁵⁶⁹

‘A Spirit’s Return’ does present some of the features that have come to be associated with the dramatic monologue as developed by Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Elizabeth Barrett in the following decade: most notably, a speaker that is technically ‘distinguished from the figure of the poet’ and ‘an auditor who must, in order for the monologue not to slide into dialogue, remain silent, or at least unheard by the reader’.⁵⁷⁰ Byron actually identifies a few poems by Hemans as the earliest experiments with, and examples of, this budding genre. In addition to ‘Properzia Rossi’ (1828), ‘Arabella Stuart’ (1828), ‘The Chamois Hunter’s Love’ (1830), and ‘The Vaudois Wife’ (1830), she briefly mentions ‘A Spirit’s Return’ but considers it as yet another instance where the female speaker is wholly ‘absorbed into the identity of the man she loves’.⁵⁷¹ This misguided interpretation unsurprisingly stems from her conventional understanding of Hemans as a self-appointed ‘icon of female domesticity, celebrating home and hearth, the fidelity of women, the glory of maternal love’, who at best resists and troubles this essentialist construction of a feminine identity from within but never transgresses its boundaries. If read more closely, however, ‘A Spirit’s Return’ jeopardises not only the idea that the world depicted in Hemans’s poetry is exclusively one ‘rigidly divided by familiar gendered roles’, as shown so far, but also its own possible affiliation to the genre of the dramatic monologue.⁵⁷² Though Byron usefully reminds readers that dramatic monologues come in a variety of forms and that the characteristics pinpointed by strict definitions can be present to different extents, Hemans’s poem fits into them less than would at first appear and likely be deemed acceptable.

Dorothy Mermin identifies ‘the presence of an auditor from whom the speaker wants (and often gets) a response: not as a consequence of the completed utterance, but while he is speaking’ as the main distinctive aspect of dramatic monologues and claims that this is a way for the poet to ‘incorporate into the poem the reader he wants or fears, and try out ways of talking to him’.⁵⁷³ Her

⁵⁶⁹ Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2003), p. 16.

⁵⁷⁰ Byron, pp. 11, 20.

⁵⁷¹ Byron, p. 48.

⁵⁷² Byron, p. 48.

⁵⁷³ Mermin, pp. 2, 8.

points seem to resonate with my reading of ‘A Spirit’s Return’, but only to a limited degree. As this section has illustrated, despite the semblance of a continuous interplay between speaker and auditor, the fact that the former truly wants or expects a response from the latter is highly doubtful. The impression that the listener might at any point interrupt or even just turn away from the speaker’s utterances, which, according to Mermin, distinguishes the Victorian dramatic monologue from Romantic lyrics, is denied in Hemans’s poem by the fact that they are actually absent from the scene. Whereas the genre implications of the auditor’s absence may be debated, the status of the speaker poses more insurmountable issues.⁵⁷⁴

Even at a first glance, Hemans’s speaker is more ‘vaguely particularised’ than those that are typical of Victorian dramatic monologues: she has no name, and her story is not set in a definite time or place.⁵⁷⁵ She ultimately does not appear to be ‘a clearly fictional character’, at least not as fully-fledged one as the protagonists of dramatic monologues.⁵⁷⁶ Such a distinction is signalled by Hemans herself, since her poems that fall better within the genre have the name of the fictional speaker or at least some indicator of their identity in their title, but this does not apply to ‘A Spirit’s Return’. Moreover, while the poem presumably assumes the reader not to believe that the speaker’s supernatural encounter literally happened to the poet, it also suggests that the former’s experience does, in a certain sense, belong to the latter, insofar as the type of poetic voice and authority that results from it does. ‘A Spirit’s Return’ has been shown to encourage and even predispose an overlapping between the figures of the speaker and the poet that would be inadmissible in dramatic monologues, where, as Byron points out, ‘there are, to varying degrees, always signals that we should not conflate poet with speaker’.⁵⁷⁷

The question of whether Hemans’s poem is a proto dramatic monologue may seem beyond the scope of the present study, but it allows me to make two important final points. On the one hand, its closeness to the genre signals that we have come to the edge of Romanticism as traditionally defined. ‘A Spirit’s Return’ is a transitional poem belonging to a transitional period, during which the Romantic experiment with the communicative potentialities and limitations of poetry is giving way to new ways of writing poetry as represented communication enclosed within a fictional frame. On the other hand, by not being reducible to ‘a fictional act of speech’ by a character, Hemans’s poem retains what Culler considers to be the eminently lyric quality of being itself ‘a poetic speech act’ rather than merely the representation of one.⁵⁷⁸ It showcases, in Waters’s words, lyric’s ‘freedom to

⁵⁷⁴ Byron accepts the possibility that the auditor can ‘be oblivious or entirely omitted and the poem still function as a dramatic monologue’ as long as there are ‘markers of communication’ (Byron, p. 23).

⁵⁷⁵ Byron, p. 13.

⁵⁷⁶ Byron, p. 16.

⁵⁷⁷ Byron, p. 13.

⁵⁷⁸ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 111, 114.

move between communicative frameworks with a suddenness, or disregard, rare in any other use of language', simultaneously sustaining different forms and levels of address and performing the very acts of communication that it narrates or dramatises.⁵⁷⁹ As is typical of the lyric and, I have argued, of Romantic poetry, the poem exploits the performative power of poetic language to make things – including communication – happen and, in doing so, metapoetically claims the exceptional voice that such exceptional communication entails. Reading 'A Spirit's Return' as a dramatic monologue told by an unreliable narrator would mean domesticating its engagement with supernatural communication into a neatly-tied fiction, saving the poet (if not the speaker) from the embarrassment of calling those who cannot possibly reply and, even more, of imagining that they could. In their treatment of interactions with the Other World, however, Hemans and the other authors have proved to be far less wary of embarrassment than later critics and far more seriously interested in exploring, at times even embracing, the (im)possibilities that open up when both poetry and communication are pushed to their extremes, when we reach out to Otherness – and dare to make contact.

⁵⁷⁹ Waters, p. 7.

Coda

In his 1833 essay ‘What Is Poetry?’, John Stuart Mill famously contends that the difference between eloquence and poetry is that ‘eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*’. Maintaining that the former ‘supposes an audience’ while the ‘peculiarity’ of the latter lies ‘in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener’, he concludes that poetry ‘is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude’ and that ‘[a]ll poetry is of the nature of soliloquy’.⁵⁸⁰ Mill’s considerations have long been interpreted as emblematic of a ‘Romantic view of poetry’ that, as Eileen Sperry highlights, ‘centres on this ideal of subjectivity’ and is characterised by an ‘aversion to the communal or the communicative’.⁵⁸¹ Mill goes as far as to write that when the poet ‘turns round and addresses himself to another person’, what he writes ‘ceases to be poetry’ altogether.⁵⁸² His theorisation of poetry’s resistance to ‘the injunction to communicate’, to use Guillory’s words, has been frequently extended to encompass and define the lyric as a whole genre. Northrop Frye, for instance, quotes Mill’s words to illustrate the distinctive overheard quality of lyric utterances, claiming that ‘[t]he lyric poet normally pretends to be talking to himself or to someone else’ and, in so doing, ‘turns his back on his listeners’.⁵⁸³ This idea of the lyric as a mere pretence, including a pretence of communication, is aligned with dominant accounts of its self-reflexive and incommunicative nature which have been discussed during the present study. As Monique Morgan stresses, Mill’s seminal essay has often ‘led to the critique that lyric poetry, especially Romantic lyricism, is overly self-absorbed and isolated, even solipsistic’.⁵⁸⁴ It is not by chance that, as pointed out by Langan and McLane, it was written ‘with Wordsworth in mind’.⁵⁸⁵

A critical stance towards Mill’s retrospective celebration of Romantic solitary expressionism already emerged during the following decades, as exemplified by another pivotal text of nineteenth-century poetics. Published twenty years after Mill’s ‘What Is Poetry?’, Matthew Arnold’s Preface to his 1853 *Poems* proclaims his departure from, and dislike for, the modern way of writing poetry as a ‘dialogue of the mind with itself’.⁵⁸⁶ Contradicting Mill’s ‘radical distinction’ between ‘the interest excited by poetry’ and that ‘derived from incident’, Arnold maintains that ‘the true basis of the interest in a poetical work’ is to be found precisely in the ‘actions’ it tells.⁵⁸⁷ The prominence given to a

⁵⁸⁰ John Stuart Mill, ‘What Is Poetry?’, in *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: The Victorian Era*, ed. by Joseph Black and others, 2nd edn (Broadview Press, 2012), pp. 77–84 (p. 80).

⁵⁸¹ Sperry, p. 200.

⁵⁸² Mill, p. 81.

⁵⁸³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, 15th edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 249, 250.

⁵⁸⁴ Morgan, p. 130.

⁵⁸⁵ McLane and Langan, p. 244.

⁵⁸⁶ Matthew Arnold, *On the Classical Tradition*, ed. by Robert Henry Super, 5th edn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986), p. 1.

⁵⁸⁷ Mill, p. 78; Arnold, pp. 5, 3.

poem's narrative contents is accompanied by a preoccupation with how they 'are to be communicated': ideally, 'in an interesting manner by the art of the Poet'.⁵⁸⁸ As Dorothy Mermin rightly notes, what emerges from the Preface is a conception of poetry 'primarily as communication'.⁵⁸⁹ Arnold's communicative perspective, which is at complete odds with that of Mill, ultimately results in equating poetry to a medium with which to convey a story in the most efficient and straightforward way. This becomes apparent from his remarks on one of the Romantic poems considered in the previous chapters: *Isabella*. Arnold finds fault with Keats's poem because 'the action' is too 'feebly [...] conceived' and 'loosely constructed' compared to Boccaccio's 'pregnant and interesting' exposition of the same tale.⁵⁹⁰ In other words, he would want *Isabella* to better satisfy the informational demands of storytelling that I have, instead, argued it purposely resists and defies. The ideas expressed by Arnold in the Preface are particularly important because they are representative of a certain strand of Victorian attitudes towards poetry and 'its power to communicate'.⁵⁹¹ As shown by Isobel Armstrong's survey of Victorian reviews, his disapproval of subjective poetry as 'morbidly unhealthy and introspective, depressing and *lowering*' was 'in agreement with a substantial amount of Victorian criticism'.⁵⁹²

The ways in which the poems under study have been seen to engage – often lyrically – with communication with the Other World offer a picture of Romantic poetry and of its use of lyric language that, despite its inevitably limited scope, significantly deviates from the self-absorbed subjectivism informing Mill's and later Victorian understandings of Romanticism as well as more recent accounts of what Virginia Jackson famously called 'the lyricization of poetry'.⁵⁹³ By this term Jackson means the post-eighteenth-century process that led a variety of poetic subgenres to collapse into 'the expressive romantic lyric of the nineteenth century', which was deemed to 'require as its context only the occasion of its reading' and to be 'independent of social contingency, perhaps not intended for public reading at all'.⁵⁹⁴ Jackson historicises and calls into question this self-involved abstraction that has come to characterise the theory and practice of lyric reading, reducing it to 'an idealized scene [...] progressively identified with an idealized moment of expression'.⁵⁹⁵ In a way, the present study welcomes her invitation to 'try to keep both [poems'] material and contingent as well as their abstract and transcendent aspects in view' by relying on the effects of suspended

⁵⁸⁸ Arnold, p. 3.

⁵⁸⁹ Mermin, p. 5.

⁵⁹⁰ Arnold, p. 10.

⁵⁹¹ Mermin, p. 4.

⁵⁹² Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry, 1830-1870* (London: Athlone Press, 1972), pp. 32, 33.

⁵⁹³ Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 6.

⁵⁹⁴ Jackson, p. 7.

⁵⁹⁵ Jackson, p. 7.

immediacy and ever-present unfolding that are typical of this lyricised conception of poetry while also opening up the texts to a dialogue with contextual elements of their production and reception without, however, falling into the deterministic approach of a certain historicism. The poems under scrutiny have been shown to simultaneously entertain different communicative frames, envisaging phantasmatic converse with multiple audiences, both near and far, present and future, historical and atemporal, diegetic and extradiegetic, and thus contradicting Mill's idea that turning to someone else necessarily means withdrawing from actual listeners. This constitutive dialogic indeterminacy provides an alternative view of lyric that departs from the expressive model at the centre of Jackson's work and, as she points out, of popular post-eighteenth-century lyric theories, shifting the focus from first-person expression to second-person openness and thereby inviting a rethinking of the centrality attributed to self-reflexivity in traditional definitions of Romantic lyricism.

Instead of soliloquies or dialogues of the mind with itself, the texts at the heart of the present study have turned out to be nuanced and committed explorations of communicative (im)possibilities and of lyric poetry's unique ability to sustain them, explorations that denounce coeval tendencies to solipsism, while remaining inescapably haunted by it. While they are aware of the uncheckable nature of poetic utterances, which cannot ever truly make space for a response, these four poets push such limitations by exploiting lyric's performative power to make things happen and summon ghostly impressions of presence as well as by questioning the very assumption that successful communication requires the mutuality of an answer. Drawing on the phatic implications of calling and envisioning communicative modes that challenge the dominant informational models of the time, where what is said is less important than the relational fact of being in communication, the considered poems mobilise extreme figurations of contact with the Other, commit to their potentialities and dangers, and, in doing so, trouble the idea that lyric's embarrassingly outlandish speech acts can be nothing but a pretence. While it distances them from the subjectivism theorised by Mill, their serious and multifaceted concern with communication, however, does not bring them closer to Arnold's and Victorian ideals of poetry as a medium. The priority given to phatic and relational dimensions, both when depicting and performing communicative acts, actually entails an almost opposite view of what, how, and why a poem communicates. The works by Shelley, Byron, Keats, and Hemans that have been here investigated ultimately fall outside this dichotomy. Not only do they rewrite the self-absorption that is usually associated with typically Romantic gestures like apostrophic reaching out and introspective turning inwards under the sign of a tension towards Otherness (without and within), but they also refuse to equate poetry's mission with an as efficacious as possible transmission of content, favouring instead communication's capacity to be, first and foremost, a bridge across even the most abyssal distances, however spectrally fragile and hazardous.

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