

THE DISSOLUTION OF CHARACTER IN LATE ROMANTIC BRITISH  
LITERATURE, 1816-1837

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By

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Late Romantic Literature and the Problem of “Stitched-together-ness.”

Consider the following description of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and its famous monster:

*Frankenstein*...questions the very idea of nature....The monster exists and so implies personhood, and figures forth an essentialist view of nature. But insofar as this nature is abject and its stitches are showing, this “essence” includes arbitrariness and supplementarity. He’s a horrific abject that speaks beautiful Enlightenment prose.<sup>1</sup>

Not only Shelley’s novel, but much of British literature after Waterloo (1815-37) runs the risk of being overshadowed by critical emphasis on its derivative character. As Timothy Morton points out concerning the creature itself, any work in which “the stitches are showing” seems to lose its claim on authentic, essential being. Yet, at the same time, it provokes meditation on the arbitrary and fluid nature of identity. Critics have long emphasized the “stitched together” aspect of late romanticism at the expense of its dynamic, experimental pluralities. The stories they tell about late romantic literature (especially poetry) tend to rationalize the neglect to which the period has been subject, rather than enable its recovery. Lionel Stevenson refers to the “third decade of the nineteenth century” as an “amazing hiatus in English poetry,” a time when romanticism

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007), 194.

proper becomes “vulgarized.” Virgil Nemoianu observes that “the 1820s and 1830s seem an embarrassment to the historian of English literature.” Its writers (Nemoianu studies Byron, Keats, De Quincey, Peacock and Scott) tend to produce a “lower romanticism” reliant “on other sources and on rewriting.” Herbert Tucker sees the poetry of the 1820s as domesticated, full of “home and its attendant tropes,” as an art once exotic but now primarily an affair of the “hearthside or the parlor table.” For Daniel Riess the texts produced in these decades tend to be little more than commodities, written “amid the ever-increasing commodification of literature and the visual arts.”<sup>2</sup> Vulgarized, diluted, domesticated, commodified—the literature of the period hardly stands a chance.

Scholars should not be so quick to characterize British literature in the 1820s and 1830s as the intellectually aimless stuff of a second-hand romanticism. Many works written in these decades are powerful critiques of romanticism. What unites them is a shared interest in renegotiating the high romantic model of subjectivity as a coherent, organic and transhistorical reality—a model that these authors neither quite discard, nor accept as inherited. When we attend to this critique, a new and exciting constellation of attempts to remodel the romantic subject emerges in the years after Waterloo. We come to notice that after the fall of Napoleon and during the gradual restoration of the old European monarchies, British romantic writers undergo a sort of identity crisis. Some recent critical accounts illuminate this new field of possibility. Jacques Khalip claims that

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<sup>2</sup> Lionel Stevenson, “Miss Landon, ‘The Milk-And-Watery Moon of Our Darkness,’ 1824-1830,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 8 (1947): 355, 358; Virgil Nemoianu, *The Taming of Romanticism: European Literature and the Age of Biedermeier* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984), 41, 50; Herbert Tucker, “House Arrest: The Domestication of English Poetry in the 1820s,” *New Literary History* 25.3 (1994): 522, 525; Daniel Riess, “Laetitia Landon and the Dawn of English Post-Romanticism,” *Studies in English Literature* 36 (1996): 808.

“late Romantics perceive the subject to be...an illusion or ideology of heroism in a post-Waterloo society that is all too aware of its historical distance from and loss of an individualism that is at its core deeply inauthentic.”<sup>3</sup> According to Khalip, “we [have] yet to fully account for the theoretical complexity of the period’s explorations of subjectivity.”<sup>4</sup> Mark Sandy and Sarah Wootton are also interested in how and to what extent “Romantic models of subjectivity...were...remodel[ed] by Post-Romantic philosophers and artists.”<sup>5</sup>

It should be clarified at the outset that there is no one hegemonic concept of the human subject shared by the early romantics and susceptible to future renegotiation by the late romantics. Late romantics certainly target the notion that the creative artist suffuses his/her written compositions with personal interiority in an effort to revitalize a spiritually fallen world,<sup>6</sup> but only some first-generation authors may be said to endorse this ideology some of the time. Or perhaps none of them ever really and whole-heartedly endorses it. And if all this is true—if there is no one high romantic ideology of the subject—then it is not so much that late romantics remodel a fixed conception, as that they participate in an epistemological discussion under the influence of certain inherited biases, as I will argue in brief preliminary case studies (see Section 2, below) of William Hazlitt and Letitia Landon.

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Khalip, *Anonymous Life: Romanticism and Dispossession* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Sandy and Sarah Wootton, preface to *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 51 (2008), doi: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/019256ar>.

<sup>6</sup> This is one of the central arguments of M. H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford UP, 1953).

The foremost inherited bias is the Wordsworthian notion of the self as a spiritual organism: as an immortal substance subject to growth and change during its pilgrimage on earth. In many of his “egotistically sublime” poems (as Keats would later call them), Wordsworth traces the “organic” development of his own mind (or a mind he encourages the reader to imagine as his). His presumption is that although the self evolves and adapts through interaction with its environment, it is always, ultimately, the same “I.” For instance, there may be three “Wordsworths” present in “Tintern Abbey”—a careless boy, a distracted and sensual youth (of twenty-three) and a man who has extended his moral sympathies (of twenty-eight)—but the poet-speaker understands all three as modifications of the same essential Wordsworth. In autobiographical poems like “Tintern Abbey,” “There Was a Boy,” “Resolution and Independence” and “Elegiac Stanzas,” Wordsworth tries to uncover what Robert Platzner calls “the inner integrity and wholeness of life” through all of life’s complicated vicissitudes.<sup>7</sup> The soul may be subject to a sort of organic development while incarnate here on earth, but its vital principle endures throughout time and space, and intimates the soul’s immortality. In the *Excursion* Wordsworth aims to delineate the “passions” and “feelings.../ Essential and eternal in the heart,” core emotions that, he claims in “Home at Grasmere,” are buried deep in “the mind of Man,/ My haunt, and the main region of my song.”<sup>8</sup> In his great “Ode” he advances the Platonic argument that men and women are immortal spirits, who leave Eternity at birth

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Platzner, “De Quincey and the Dilemma of Romantic Autobiography,” *Dalhousie Review* 61 (1981-82): 605.

<sup>8</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James Butler and Michael Jaye (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2007), Book 1, lines 372-73; and “Home at Grasmere,” in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (New York: Oxford UP), lines 989-90.

and may recollect it in anamnestic trances wherein the material world falls away into unreality.

For some critics, even Lord Byron has the reader imagine a coherent self—if not an immortal or an organic one, at least a single source or agent positioned at a critical distance from his texts and responsible for whatever is said in them. According to Mark Schoenfield:

Wordsworth portrays his career in the unifying architectural metaphor of a gothic church...and Byron interweaves his poetry with the stabilizing (if fragile) sovereignty of his lordship through complex networks of autobiographical reference. Both of these models propose a coherent inner self, or at least a self accountable for its own instabilities, and obscure the point that this self is a mediated public figuration.<sup>9</sup>

For Schoenfield, both Wordsworth and Byron do what they can to resist the power of contemporary periodical critics to “define literary identities.”<sup>10</sup> They make art as if convinced of the existence of an a priori and “coherent inner self,” susceptible to critical misrepresentation but not essentially alterable.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Schoenfield, “Butchering James Hogg: Romantic Identity in the Magazine Market,” in *At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist, and Materialist Criticism*, ed. Mary Favret and Nicola Watson (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), 208.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Schoenfield’s formulation more accurately captures the legacy of these poets as their successors understood it, than does the “unbearable arbitrariness of subjectivity” attributed to them by Henri Peyre and others (Henri Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1963], 126). See Andrew Cooper, *Doubt and Identity in Romantic Poetry* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988); Nicola Watson, “Trans-figuring Byronic Identity,” in *At the Limits of Romanticism*, 185-206; Andrea Henderson, *Romantic Identities*:

For both Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (if not necessarily for Byron), the soul is immortal, and its existence has preceded and will continue to outlast its brief incarnation in time and space. By this definition the soul is transhistorical, and “character” is the manifestation or outer circumference of the soul on earth.<sup>12</sup> When the liberals called Robert Southey a traitor for his newly assumed conservatism, and the conservatives called him a traitor for his past Jacobinism, Coleridge defended the integrity of Southey’s character in a poem, aptly titled “A Character.” The lines promote the idea of personal character as a permanent reality. They suggest that Southey was never a ruthless anarchist (despite his having written the radical play *Wat Tyler* in 1794), and that he would have written what he felt in his heart when he felt it, even if the political circumstances of the day—the 1794 Treason Trials—had been dramatically different. There is a need in Coleridge, as in Wordsworth, to uphold an integral and transhistorical model of the self that many late romantic authors seem collectively to resist.<sup>13</sup>

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*Varieties of Subjectivity, 1774-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996); and Nancy Yousef, *Isolated Cases: The Anxieties of Autonomy in Enlightenment Philosophy and Romantic Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> I am primarily interested in how late romantic authors, writing between 1816 and 1837, reformulated inherited notions of “character” in their texts—character in the sense of a unified or cohesive substance inherent in a given person or work of art. I am therefore more concerned with what Diedre Lynch calls “the history of individualism and characterization,” a history she subordinates, in her research, to “a *pragmatics* of character.” Lynch looks at how “eighteenth-century writers and readers *used* the characters in their books” to “renegotiate social relations in their changed, commercialized world, to derive new kinds of pleasure from the changes, to render their property truly private, [and] to cope with the embarrassment of riches” (*The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998], 4-5).

<sup>13</sup> See S. T. Coleridge, “A Character,” in *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004).

I view the monster of *Frankenstein* as the supreme objective correlative for a widespread cultural paradigm in late romantic British literature. Here is a creature who has feelings and desires and an acquisitive intellect, but is also manifestly pieced together by human hands from body parts taken from charnel houses. That the monster is the brief incarnation of an eternal Platonic soul is out of the question. Perhaps he has a self in the Cartesian sense because he thinks. Or perhaps he is an embodied representation of the Humean self—a “bundle or collection of different perceptions, which...are in perpetual flux and movement.”<sup>14</sup> In any case, the monster is an essentially inessential creature. If the literary texts produced in the period after Waterloo tend to show their “stitches,” it is because their authors’ presumption of the existence of “character”—that special *je ne sais quoi* that makes a text “itself” and a person “himself” or “herself”—has started to weaken. I read the so-called derivative texts of late British romanticism as symptomatic of a widespread cultural “mood,” in which the fissures in all essential categories were beginning to widen. By “mood” I mean what Thomas Pfau refers to as “a fundamental psychological climate, which in turn has been encrypted in a distinctive structure of discourse.” For Pfau, “mood” precedes both rational thought and affective experience. It is a “dispositional relation to the world”; a “fundamental manner”; a sort of “attunement”; a “presupposition for and medium of thinking and acting”; the a priori “horizon wherein all conscious practice...is being transacted.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (London: Henry Frowde, 1888), 252.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005), 6, 9-10.

Unlike their predecessors, the authors studied in this dissertation all fear that having an identity means moral and intellectual stagnation. To have an essence is to be *constituted*. But at the same time, a self that is entirely conditional and arbitrary is also a source of anxiety. As a result, their texts linger in a sort of epistemological middle ground: a safe and experimental space wherein the discomforts inherent in each philosophical alternative—the self as transhistorical organism and the self as nonessential construct—can be avoided. Percy Shelley writes a poem, *Alastor* (1816), whose speaking “I” is meant to represent what he calls the “one mind,” a sort of transindividual consciousness of which all individual minds are said to be the “marks” or “modifications.” William Hazlitt associates the soul with an internal bias fixed at birth and visible in the human body, but not necessarily (à la Plato, Wordsworth and Coleridge) with an immaterial substance fixed in eternity. Letitia Landon creates picturesque characters who confuse and even synonymize surface and depth; her texts capitalize on the contradictions inherent in both personal and fictional subjectivities. Mary Shelley is Blakean and Hegelian in her insistence that a person without psychological contraries makes no moral and spiritual progress. All these authors thrive on the psychological climate or “mood” wherein their texts emerge, one marked by the systematic fragmentation of identity, the incipient dissolution of the idea of character. Their “aesthetic...insist[s] on the difficulty of recognizing...nondemonstrable identities.”<sup>16</sup> A high romantic essentialism threatens them from the past, and the inessential monstrosity of *Frankenstein* looms in the present and in the near and distant future.

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<sup>16</sup> Khalip, *Anonymous Life*, 22.

## 2. The Interior Exteriorized in William Hazlitt and Letitia Landon: Two Preliminary Case Studies

Throughout this study, I am interested in the concept of literary “sincerity” to the extent that it relates to epistemological anxieties concerning the reality and integrity of the “I” (both personal and textual). In a recent article, Angela Esterhammer describes what she calls “Byronic sincerity.” It is practically the opposite of the familiar, Wordsworthian sort, in that it has nothing to do with the sensible manifestation of a private mental state.<sup>17</sup> In other words, sincere art does not make visible the contents of the artist's invisible mind. That idea is simply scandalous, since, as far as Byron is concerned, “the mental states of others are unknowable except by the indirect evidence of appearance, language, and other external or publicly shared conventions.” For Byron, the sincere artist produces only appearances, epiphenomena of the artistic process that are fluid and unpredictable, “fickle and capricious.”<sup>18</sup> These appearances are fickle because a precondition of Byronic sincerity is emotional “mobility,” what he defines as “an excessive susceptibility of [sic] immediate impressions.”<sup>19</sup> An artist who would communicate something “sincere” must be in a state to receive all physical and mental stimuli with equal readiness. Whatever passes through the artist's mind-as-open-nerve

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<sup>17</sup> For Wordsworth, to write sincerely requires “moral...virtue,” or “veracity, earnestness [and] integrity,” or “undividedness of mind” (Herbert Read, “The Cult of Sincerity,” *Hudson Review* 21 [1968]: 58; David Perkins, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of Sincerity* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1964], 3; Stuart Hampshire, “Sincerity and Single-Mindedness,” in *Freedom of Mind and Other Essays* [New York: Oxford UP, 1971], 246).

<sup>18</sup> Angela Esterhammer, “The Scandal of Sincerity: Wordsworth, Byron, Landon,” in *Romanticism, Sincerity, and Authenticity*, ed. Timothy Milnes and Kerry Sinanan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 116, 111.

<sup>19</sup> These are Byron's words; he refers to the French term *mobilité* and defines it in a footnote to *Don Juan*, Canto 16, stanza 97.

appears to the world as a physical gesture, or expression, or string of text—just as it entered the mind (so the emphasis is *not* on the processing or creative transmutation that the mind does when it receives impressions). These end-products or end-appearances do not render the mental state of the artist, nor even the mental precondition of emotional mobility that makes them possible in the first place.

Hazlitt and Landon are two writers, never before compared at length, who share what I call a similar “exteriority complex.” Neither of them really eradicates the notion of the inner self, the noumenal substance of the soul or person, but at the same time neither seems to have any quasi-religious faith in it. Their texts reshape, relocate and familiarize romantic “interiority” in fascinating ways. Depth is made superficial and surface is made deep. Both Hazlitt and Landon remove the “self” from its mysterious and othered realm and reposition it in the material world—in observable images, in the human face or in its portrait. It is as if these authors are wrestling with the concept of existence before essence (admittedly a worn existentialist cliché), but without making the epistemological leap to acknowledge it as a truth. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the onset of existentialist thought is right around the corner: as early as 1835 Søren Kierkegaard writes in his journal:

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind *what I am to do*, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain understanding must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself...the thing

is to find a truth which is true *for me*, to find *the idea for which I can live and die*.<sup>20</sup>

Hazlitt and Landon proceed toward a similar intellectual impasse even in the 1820s. They are at the edge of a great philosophical turn. As authors it is not their lot to realize or internalize the idea of inessential subject—the monster of Frankenstein—but to be aware of it as something potentially real. Their texts tame this inchoate idea, reduce its threat, negotiate with it, subject it to a variety of intellectual and creative experiments, and ultimately (at least for a while) keep it in an obscure and dormant position.

Hazlitt is preoccupied with the notion of human identity. He writes several essays on the subject in confident Enlightenment prose. For the most part he comes across as a fierce essentialist determined to explain the personal character of each and every individual as a stable, observable and unproblematic fact. Take the argument of his brief essay “On Personal Character” (1826): “No one ever changes his character from the time he is two years old; nay, I might say, from the time he is two hours old. We may...mend our manners...but the character, the internal, original bias, remains always the same, true to itself to the very last.”<sup>21</sup> Hazlitt also describes true character as organic in its development. It can grow in all directions but only out of a single seed of determinate properties: environment does “little more than minister occasion to the first predisposing bias—than assist, like the dews of heaven, or retard, like the nipping north, the growth of

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<sup>20</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Soul of Kierkegaard: Selections from His Journal*, ed. Alexander Dru (New York: Dover, 2003), 44.

<sup>21</sup> William Hazlitt, “On Personal Character,” 1826, in *The Plain Speaker*, vol. 8 of *Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Duncan Wu (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1998), 215. This edition of Hazlitt’s works is hereafter abbreviated as *SWWH*.

the seed originally sown in our constitution.”<sup>22</sup> None of what Hazlitt concludes, incidentally, paints a very hopeful picture for the would-be moral regenerate. A vicious person can change his behavior but never his inviolable nature: the “drunkard” will “soon...forget his resolution and constrained sobriety, at sight of the foaming tankard,” and “the shrew, the jilt, the coquette, the wanton, the intriguer, the liar, continue all their lives the same...They might as well not be, as cease to be what they are.”<sup>23</sup>

For Hazlitt, character is not only fixed at birth, but remains available for empirical observation and inspection throughout life. The trick is knowing how to look for it. In his essay “On the Knowledge of Character” (1821), Hazlitt claims that we often err in our attempts to know someone truly. We put our trust in circumstances that mislead us. For instance, neither what an individual does for a living, nor what he says, nor how he behaves, is a reliable index to his character: all three “may be counterfeited.”<sup>24</sup> According to Hazlitt, the only surefire evidence we have for who a person “is” rests in physical appearance: what he calls the “original bias” of a person is indelibly impressed on that person’s facial features and expressed in his/her bodily demeanor. In social situations and especially on first impressions, the language of the human body does not lie: “[w]e do not change our features with our situations; neither do we change the capacities or inclinations which lurk beneath them.”<sup>25</sup> In this view there is almost a one-to-one relationship between a visible feature and an invisible inclination and no human machination can violate it. One can no more suppress his/her authentic self than s/he can

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 223-24.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., “On the Knowledge of Character,” 1821, in *Table Talk*, vol. 6 of *SWWH*, 271.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., “On Personal Character,” 215-16.

alter the natural reflexes and nuances of his/her body. In fact, not even a person in the middle of a theatrical performance can mask his/her real character. So long as the features are present the “character,” the “person,” is present.

But this is not to say that no one tries to smother and recreate his/her “first predisposing bias.” A crafty person can muddle the clear language of the human body indefinitely—perhaps for a lifetime. Sarah Walker is one such “hypocrite.”<sup>26</sup> Walker was a servant-girl whom Hazlitt met in 1820 in a lodging house and with whom he subsequently fell in love, or at least in lust. She was the daughter of his landlady and chose not to return his affections (and a year after they met Hazlitt divorced his wife). Hazlitt describes Walker as a “little, demure, pretty, modest-looking girl, with eyes timidly cast upon the ground, and an air soft as enchantment,” but on the inside her “true character” is anything but modest and enchanting: it is downright vile.<sup>27</sup> Or so he subjectively concluded after a lot of time and heartache. As far as he was concerned, *Walker* is the one to blame for keeping the silly romantic escapade alive: *she* habitually deceived him with her “faultless, undeviating, consistent, consummate...acting.”<sup>28</sup> But then again, her acting was never actually faultless. Two small outlets of truth helped Hazlitt see past the performance—her eyes. As he claims, the single “circumstance that could lead to a suspicion of her true character was a cold, sullen, watery, glazed look

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., “On the Knowledge of Character,” 273.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., *Liber Amoris: Or, The New Pygmalion*, 1823, ed. Gerald Lahey (New York: New York UP, 1980), 251.

about the eyes.”<sup>29</sup> Walker may be an excellent actor, but she is no match for Nature, to whom her body must maintain its allegiance and correspondence.

To a postmodern reader all of this may sound a little far-fetched and unscientific. Essentially, Hazlitt is using empiricist discourse and rhetoric to argue that the eyes are the windows to the soul. He tells the full story of his relationship with Sarah Walker in his scandalous autobiographical novel, *Liber Amoris: or, the New Pygmalion* (1823). Its protagonist, “H,” makes romantic and sexual advances toward “S,” who amuses herself for a while at his expense only to snub him in the end (at least, “H” *thinks* she snubs him—in truth she never promises him a thing). Feeling angry and betrayed, “H” proclaims that his sometime love “has not one natural feeling in her bosom,” that she is “incapable of feeling the commonest emotions of human nature.”<sup>30</sup> Now, it may seem plain to us that Hazlitt is painting a portrait of Walker as evil and unnatural because she has rejected him and he is upset. But he would never admit as much—especially in his essays. *There* his theory of character is meant to sound rational and objective and universal. The subjective and circumstantial opinions of an embittered man can have no rightful place in it. But consider what “H” does in the *Liber Amoris*: announces his intention to “make a Goddess of [“S”], and build a temple to her in my heart, and worship her on indestructible altars, and raise statues to her: and my homage shall be unblemished as her unrivalled symmetry of form.”<sup>31</sup> This statement leads us to believe that it is not Sarah Walker, the impeccable actress, who blinds “H” and everyone else to her true evil character. It is not she who *enacts* the perfect feminine specimen, but rather Hazlitt (or “H”) who deifies her into it. In

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., “On the Knowledge of Character,” 273.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., *Liber Amoris*, 240, 255.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 169-70.

sum, what Hazlitt reveals about his role in the construction of Walker's identity in the *Liber Amoris*—that *he* constructs it both when it is “fake” and when it is “true”—seriously compromises the essentialist claims he makes in the essays. These two registers, the fictional/subjective and the nonfictional/objective, must be read in dialogue for a truer picture of Hazlitt's troubled views on identity.

As confident an essentialist as Hazlitt seems in “On Personal Character” and “On the Knowledge of Character,” he recognizes in other essays that determining essence is often a hazy business of trial and error. For instance, in “On Depth and Superficiality” (1826) he writes that

Depth consists...in tracing any number of particular effects to a general principle, or in distinguishing an unknown cause from the individual and varying circumstances with which it is implicated, and under which it lurks unsuspected. It is in fact resolving the concrete into the abstract. Now this is a task of difficulty, not only because the abstract naturally merges with the concrete, and we do not well know how to set about separating what is thus jumbled or cemented together in a single object, and presented under a common aspect; but [the abstract] being scattered over a larger surface, and collected from a number of undefined sources, there must be a strong feeling of its weight and pressure, in order to dislocate it from the object and bind it into a principle. The impression of an abstract principle is faint and doubtful in each individual instance; it becomes powerful and certain only by the

repetition of the experiment, and by adding the last results to our first hazardous conjectures.<sup>32</sup>

It is not exactly clear how or in what context(s) Hazlitt means to apply this principle. Perhaps he is writing only about visual art. In the same essay he mentions that “[t]he painter...in his mind’s eye penetrates beyond the surface or husk of the object, and sees into a labyrinth of forms, an abyss of colour.”<sup>33</sup> The good artist can see past the sensible externals of an object—shape and color and texture—into the numinous principle or essence that unifies all formal particulars. He can read the harmonizing chaos beneath and along the surface of things. The language here should sound familiar. Hazlitt makes a similar claim about reading the person—that the human body is a composite of features and expressions (surface) that bear the unifying stamp of character (depth). What I find interesting is that Hazlitt analyzes human beings and visual art according to the same empiricist hermeneutic. The studied painting yields a determinate meaning as the studied body yields a determinate character. Each has a gestalt that any intelligent observer can discern. This is an argument grounded in empiricist thought: it implies an a priori faith in reason—not reason in the abstract, Cartesian sense of the word, but a reason whose power lies not in the possession but in the acquisition of truth (what I mean by Hazlitt’s “Enlightenment” prose).

Hazlitt is one of several second-generation romantics who upset and renegotiate high romantic models of the self within a variety of discourses and registers. His particular theory of character tends to neaten and demystify—sharpen and enlighten—the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., “On Depth and Superficiality,” 1826, in *The Plain Speaker*, vol. 8 of *SWWH*, 329-30.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 334.

enigmatic romantic subject. At one point he makes the astounding claim that we can have “a higher idea of [John] Donne from a rude, half-effaced outline of him prefixed to his poems than from any thing he ever wrote.”<sup>34</sup> Why? Because nature inscribes the authentic self on the features. It may be found no where else. For Hazlitt, “[a] man’s whole life may be a lie to himself and others: and yet a picture painted of him by a great artist would probably stamp his true character on the canvas, and betray the secret to posterity.”<sup>35</sup> I find something cheeky and subversive in this claim. It has major implications within the broad sphere of romantic literary culture. One is that we may no longer need to search long and hard to understand who the poet is (as is true for Donne). The huge tracts of self-exploration we find in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, for instance, or in any of his “egoistically sublime” poems, come to seem more indulgent than useful in this light. Perhaps volume after volume of self-scrutiny in blank verse only obfuscates the soul of the artist that corporeal nature has made clear. Another implication is that the self is more or less secular. There is no insoluble mystery hidden away beneath the flesh: no “divine element in the human being, the spark, center or ground of the soul, the divine image and ‘inner light.’”<sup>36</sup> A poem as convoluted as “Kubla Khan,” which situates the character of the poet in a blend of historical, mythological and religious discourses, now seems excessive and off track. As far as Hazlitt is concerned, if a person wants to know Coleridge he

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., “On the Knowledge of Character,” 272.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 271-72.

<sup>36</sup> Ursula King, *Christian Mystics: Their Lives and Legacies throughout the Ages* (London: Routledge, 2004), 87.

should stop reading his poems and “look in [his] face while he is talking.” There alone is “the true index of his mind.”<sup>37</sup>

The strange feature of Hazlitt’s prose is that it ultimately preserves the idea of personal identity—or at least lets it live. It does not deny or invalidate it as a concept. His intervention is rather to suggest how we can externalize, mortalize and delimit deep “character.” It is to reject words (text, discourse) as an effective medium for character and replace words with pictures. As far as portraying the self is concerned, the dynamic, multidimensional and imaginative properties of verbal language are more of a hindrance than a help. For Hazlitt, truly “seeing” character requires visual literacy and perception, which is superior to the imaginative perception that words invite.

Letitia Elizabeth Landon (L. E. L.) is another late romantic author who wrestled with inherited depth-models of subjectivity. The plight of personal interiority in a world of stifling fashionable exteriors fascinated her. It is no wonder: she rose to fame shortly after the ascension of George IV to the British throne (1820). The Regency Era (1811-20) was still fresh in her mind (several of her novels commemorated it—especially her fashionable or “Silver Fork” novel *Romance and Reality*), a time when the corpulent Prince Regent drained the treasury to expand and refurbish his impossibly decadent Brighton Pavilion, and Beau Brummell became a national hero thanks to his genius for wearing clothes. Dandyism—with all its fetishization of the exterior—invaded her texts and threatened to consume their cast of deep-souled romantic heroes. The 1820s also witnessed the rise and immense popularity of the literary annual or gift-book, to which

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<sup>37</sup> Hazlitt, “On the Knowledge of Character,” 273.

Landon was one of the most prolific contributors of her day.<sup>38</sup> Her usual task was to write companion poems for the plates featured in a given annual. Many of these plates were engraved portraits of aristocrats or famous figures, so that Landon was used to seeing face after face aestheticized in the midst of miscellaneous art and advertisements.

The influence of post-Regency visual culture is everywhere evident in the poetry and prose of Letitia Landon. Its showiness and its decadence permeate her texts. But at the same time, she is also a late romantic author. If high romanticism (as we now prefer to call it) was already on the wane when Landon was a child, she was nevertheless well read in Radcliffe and Wordsworth and Byron and Scott, to name only a few of her favorites. She knew well the romantic obsession with deep and dark interiors, literal and

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<sup>38</sup> For the reader unfamiliar with the gift-book or literary annual, the following brief description may be helpful. The annuals were nineteenth-century books, introduced in Britain in the 1820s, immensely popular in the 1830s and nearly extinct by the 1860s. A standard annual included a miscellaneous collection of poems, short stories, essays, travel narratives and other light or “polite” literature. Many of them contained engravings with textual “accompaniments” or “illustrations” provided by popular poets. Annuals were lavishly decorated and cost anywhere from twelve shillings to a guinea. The middle class could usually afford them, and especially when they featured contributions by members of the aristocracy they provided middle-class families with a sense of culture and refinement in an increasingly democratic world. Published in November but dated for the forthcoming year, they were often given as Christmas presents. For further information see A. Bose, “The Verse of the English ‘Annuals,’” *Review of English Studies* 4.13 (1953): 38-51; Anne Renier, *Friendship’s Offering: An Essay on the Annuals and Gift Books of the 19th Century* (London: Private Libraries Association, 1964); Alison Adburgham, *Women in Print: Writing Women and Women’s Magazines from the Restoration to the Accession of Victoria* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1972)—particularly chapter fifteen, “The Annuals, Their Editors and Contributors”; Glennis Stephenson, *Letitia Landon: The Woman Behind L. E. L.* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995)—particularly chapter six, “‘For Women of Taste and Refinement’: The Use and Abuse of the Drawing-Room Annual”; and Margaret Linley, “A Centre that Would Not Hold: Annuals and Cultural Democracy,” in *Nineteenth-Century Media and the Construction of Identities*, ed. Laurel Brake, Bill Bell and David Finkelstein (Hampshire: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2000).

figurative: the incriminating contents of a chest in a secret room beneath a trap door in the bedroom of a ruined abbey in a secluded forest in the middle of France (as in Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest*), or the profound recesses of Wordsworth's "mind of Man,/ My haunt, and the main region of my song." Perhaps even more than Matthew Arnold, Landon was caught between two worlds: one of interiors and internal (or psychological) reform, and one of exteriors and political reform. In her poems and novels, there is an inevitable tension between a character as autonomous subject and a character as manipulable object. The fictional figures she creates struggle to become more than one-dimensional. They *would* be well-rounded, it seems, except for certain looming social and cultural forces that aim to bind and frame them into fashionable pictures, to make gift-book plates out of them—forces that Landon's fiction does not ignore. Many of her characters are quasi-romantic adventurers (male and female) who fall short of the psychological complexity their backgrounds and lives lead us to expect. These "shortcomings" are symptomatic of Landon's waning trust in the construct of personhood.

Landon completed four three-decker novels in her lifetime (her fifth novel, *Lady Anne Granard, or, Keeping up Appearances*, was unfinished at the time of her death). I am concerned here with the first three. Her earliest novel, *Romance and Reality* (1831), is unquestionably a work of the fashionable Silver Fork school. Her second and third novels, *Francesca Carrara* (1834) and *Ethel Churchill* (1837), are loose historical romances; the one set during the English Civil War and closing with the Restoration in 1660, and the other set in the early eighteenth century. The plots and characters of the latter two are far more delicately drawn and complex than what we find in *Romance and*

*Reality*. In this respect they read more like Victorian novels. And yet, even these historical romances seem fraught with a basic assumption of the Silver Fork school—that “the world is a place of make-believe and sham.”<sup>39</sup>

In all three novels, in fact, essence is relegated to the realm of appearance, and character to the realm of caricature. It is also difficult to tell where Landon stands on the matter—whether she is an essentialist or a materialist at heart. But this may not be the right question to ask. What Landon *does* in her novels is more important, and is similar to what Hazlitt does in his essays: she writes as if from within a foundationalist discourse, but blends depth and superficiality whenever she speaks of the self. She raises interiority to the surface and conflates it with what is visible. Her characters are an oscillating mix of subject and object, inaccessible human and accessible picture.

The narrator and characters in *Francesca Carrara* are no less fixated than Hamlet on what *seems* and what *is*. Take their views on human language. The novel's narrator cannot decide whether writing communicates anything substantial. In one of her strange intrusions into the text she exclaims: “even to myself how strange appears the faculty, or rather the passion, of composition! How the inmost soul develops its inmost nature on the written page...My world is in the afar-off and the hereafter...Still, the spirit's wing will melt in the feverish exertion, and the lofty aspiration [will] grovel for a time dejected on the earth.”<sup>40</sup> She seems to mean that composition—in this case prose more than poetry—is at once a natural and a supernatural act. One the one hand it is an earthly and a bodily

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<sup>39</sup> Matthew Rosa, *The Silver-Fork School: Novels of Fashion Preceding Vanity Fair* (New York: Columbia UP, 1936), 15.

<sup>40</sup> Letitia Landon, *Francesca Carrara*, ed. F. J. Sypher (Delmar: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1999), 3:6-7.

effort. The author is passionate, exerts herself, feels fever, grovels before her audience and knows what it means to be dejected. But at the same time writing is also an act of soul-making. The secret depths (“inmost nature”) of the human spirit can materialize through and in and as text. The narrator claims that while her soul belongs in heaven, “in the afar-off and the hereafter,” it can be somehow reified—“the spirit’s wing will melt”—on the earthly page. Near the end of the same volume, however, the narrator shocks us with a contradiction: “how poor,” she observes, “is the boasted power of the writer!—his subject-words desert him...the fault [is] on language itself; for how much is there of passionate feeling that could never yet be written or told!”<sup>41</sup> Why the discrepancy? First writing captures the human soul on the page, and then it is powerless to express human emotions. Perhaps whatever Landon jots down depends on her mood at the time. Or maybe she is hopelessly ambivalent about what it means to be a writer. Or maybe the narrator is not meant to stand for Landon at all, venting the frustrations of a nineteenth-century British author. What is certain is that Landon is captivated by the paradox of verbally mediating immediate inspiration.

The narrator is not the only character in *Francesca Carrara* who wallows in the mediating power of language. The Comtesse Madame de Soissons (née Maria Mancini) has a conversation with Francesca Carrara on the subject. Both female characters are native Italians and childhood friends. At one point in the novel Francesca comes to the French court to visit Madame de Soissons, who says the following:

“...words...make the destiny of empires and of individuals.

Ambition, love, hate, interest, vanity, have words for their engines,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 3:251.

and need none more powerful. Language is a fifth element—the one by which all the others are swayed. . . . A word will part friends, and for ever—a word floats down the stream of time when all else has perished; in short, how do we persuade, invent, create, and live, but by words?—they are at once our subjects and our masters. Judicious those who devote at least half their life to their study.”

“After all, they are but the outward signs.”

“And is not the outside every thing in this world?” interrupted Madame de Soissons.<sup>42</sup>

Recall the essay Hazlitt writes on “Depth and Superficiality” a few years earlier. A similar (and similarly nuanced) concept is at stake here. For Madame de Soissons, words are the “engines” of human feelings—“love, hate, interest, vanity.” No scrap of mental content can exist that words do not arbitrate and mediate. The countess evokes the immaterial, imperishable force of the word as a hegemonic “fifth element” that overrules the material world. Words are all but inseparable from thoughts. Without words, the passages begs us to consider, thoughts as we know them would not exist.

Francesca fails to understand that words are inseparable from thoughts, the “engines” of feeling from the feelings themselves. The entire novel, it seems, is centered on the negotiation of surface and depth, counterfeit and genuine, outward and inward. Throughout the novel Francesca is falsely courted by the villainous Francis Evelyn (a sneaky cavalier), the cap-à-pie look-alike brother of her real lover Robert Evelyn (a noble roundhead). For almost the whole plot Francesca mistakes Francis, who stumbles upon

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 3:203-04.

her in France, for Robert, whom she met early on in Italy and truly loves. It is not until the end of the third volume that Francis is exposed and executed by the forces of Cromwell and Robert is rightfully restored to Francesca. But *Francesca Carrara* is not a straightforward and didactic work of historical fiction. It does not teach us that appearances are deceiving and true love wins in the end. In the last volume of the novel, Francesca is not rewarded for her virtuous devotion to the “true” Robert: both set sail for America only to drown in the English channel.

If Landon echoes William Hazlitt when her characters discuss the philosophical problem of surface and depth, she also shares his interest in the relationship between the self and its visual representation. Recall that, for Hazlitt, one can have “a higher idea of Donne from a rude, half-effaced outline of him prefixed to his poems than from any thing he ever wrote.” Hazlitt locates true character in the features, and when these are unavailable in person one must have recourse to a some sort of visual representation—a portrait or even a sketch. I find that Landon experiments with this concept and takes it to an unexpected extreme in her fiction. I am also convinced that she read the relevant essays by Hazlitt (though I have not found any hard evidence on this point), but whether she did is less important than her shared preoccupation with identity and/as portraiture.

In *Ethel Churchill*, one of the eponymous protagonist’s friends, Lady Marchmont, describes London life in a letter to her uncle. She writes that in order for a female to be beautiful in London she simply *must* have her portrait painted—preferably by Sir Godfrey Kneller (the leading portraitist of the early eighteenth century). According to

Lady Marchmont, “a portrait of his is a positive diploma of loveliness.”<sup>43</sup> Eventually her wish comes true and Kneller agrees to paint her. But as the moment approaches she fears his portrait will be prettier than she is. Kneller reassures her: “do not be afraid—you shall only look your best; your picture [w]ill teach you [the] duty you owe to yourself—you must try to look like it.”<sup>44</sup> There is something important and paradigmatic in this strange imperative. Kneller goes beyond the opinion of Madame de Soissons that the world cares only for appearances. He suggests that a person has an ethical obligation to aspire to and become a representation. Interiority is cast as a childish thing that has to be put away with other childish things. I read this passage as more than a satirical comment about superficial women who are seduced by urban culture. I think it expresses a real fear that there may be no “interior.” Perhaps interiority is a sentimental construct that becomes more important to us the older and more nostalgic we get. Perhaps in retrospect we only imagine that childhood had nothing to do with material pressures and everything to do with the spontaneous expression of an inner uncorrupted person—Wordsworth’s “seer blest.” These intimated fears suggest a tentative but persistent critique of romantic notions of the deep self.

Landon seems to keep the idea of interiority always on the verge of death but never to kill it off completely. Lady Marchmont writes to her friend Ethel Churchill as the portrait is underway:

It is delightful to think how we shall set each other off [in public]. I am dark, classical, and have some thoughts of binding my black

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., *Ethel Churchill*, ed. F. J. Sypher (Delmar: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1992), 1:73.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 1:77.

tresses with myrtle, and letting Sir Godfrey Kneller finish my portrait as Aspasia: you, on the contrary, are soft, fair, with the blue eyes and golden hair of a Madonna. We shall always be contrasts.<sup>45</sup>

In *Ethel Churchill* (as in Landon's other novels) the characters often understand themselves in terms of pictures. Lady Marchmont conceives of herself as Aspasia, the fifth-century mistress of the Athenian statesman Pericles, and of her friend Ethel as a Madonna figure. She writes of their eventual appearance in public as an interaction between two paintings—as if this were a condition to aspire to. And perhaps it is. Assume for a moment that a certain class-consciousness is tied up in this ubiquitous aspiration to be an image. If the literary annual, known for its elegant aristocratic portraits, is often read as an opportunity for middle-class readers to learn refinement, to view and absorb image after image of static gentility, then the climate of *Ethel Churchill* makes perfect sense in its historical context. Its characters aspire to divest themselves of all that is not tangible and, in a sense, paintable—all that is not, perhaps, fashionably genteel. When Ethel visits the Duchess of Buckingham in London, she observes a certain “something about her which gave more the idea of a picture than of a human being.”<sup>46</sup>

The real question becomes whether Landon's novels condemn or applaud picturesque representations of otherwise “deep” characters. One of her favorite authors is Walter Scott, whom she acknowledges as “the founder of a new school—the picturesque, which now, more or less, influences all our writers. ‘Waverley’ was a succession of

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 2:202-03.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 2:214.

pictures—both landscape and portrait—indeed all his characters give the idea of portraits rather than inventions.”<sup>47</sup> She also claims that Scott “rarely creates a character,” that he “is not given to subtle analysis” and that “we never come upon those remarks which seem like a window suddenly thrown open, that we had never seen unclosed before; but he is the great master of the outward and the actual.”<sup>48</sup> Is this praise or reproof? Is it a good thing to be “the great master of the outward,” of the character-as-portrait? It almost sounds as if she wishes, on some level, that Scott, and she, and perhaps other novelists of her time, were less picturesque in their delineation of character; as if it were better for the “window[s]” of fictional souls to be “suddenly thrown open” by writers of more delicate sensibilities. But then she herself is a firm disciple of Scott. She hardly ever creates characters with memorable psychological complexities. In my view the reason is not that Landon is incapable of making a deep character, or that, as a slave to the literary market, she only wants to create what everyone else, including Scott, is creating to appease public taste. I suggest that her choice to create picturesque characters instead of deep individuals amounts to a tentative rejection of interiority: why use the novel to tell lies about the mysteries and searchable secrets of the soul? Maybe the Francescas of the world are all misguided and should cede victory to the Lady Marchmonts.

### **3. The Plan of this Dissertation**

The following chapters discuss literary productions that challenge both personal and textual subjectivities: the self as it is presumed to exist apart from verbal (or visual)

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<sup>47</sup> Letitia Landon, *Critical Writings by Letitia Elizabeth Landon*, ed. F. J. Sypher (Delmar: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1996), 113.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

mediation, and as it is presumed to exist within a verbal (or visual) text. But to challenge is not consistently or categorically to subvert. In my view the late romantics are not *convinced* (to quote Khalip again) that the “subject” is an absolute “illusion” and that “individualism” is “at its core deeply inauthentic.” As critics we have to exploit the epistemological liminality of late romantic British literature. The authors I study are occasionally direct and polemical in their denial of individualism, but more often prodding and speculative. None of them (Percy Shelley is the best candidate for an exception) seems prepared to annihilate, once and for all, the idea of the individual agent. The idea is that individualism is wearing rather than worn away. It is not yet the time to suggest new and postmodern alternatives to essentialist epistemologies, because these epistemologies are still alive and powerful—crumbling, not crumbled. The derivative self and the derivative text may show their “stitches,” but these stitches are not yet deliberately and convincingly torn apart.

Chapter one discusses the first long poem of Percy Shelley’s maturity, *Alastor* (1816), and argues that individual identities are designedly absent within the discursive structure of the poem. Shelley provides a variety of formal cues in *Alastor* that instruct readers in how to read the poem—not as anything resembling a narrative text with discrete, reliable characters, but as the articulation of a collective or transindividual consciousness, the quasi-Berkeleian “one mind” he was growing to accept at the time of poem’s composition. Chapters two and three focus on Letitia Landon. The second chapter contends that Landon, even more than Keats, deserves the title of the “chameleon writer,” since her texts, not only poems but also novels, essays and personal letters, are so ideologically inconsistent as to suggest her nascent view of a subject that is always-

already-interpellated. The third chapter is an extended application of this argument. It explores the ideological mutability of the “I” that speaks the short companion poems in *Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrap-Book*, which Landon edited between 1832 and 1837. These “poetical illustrations,” authored by Landon, were set beside a series of engravings in the *Scrap-Book* as verbal accompaniments to the images, and were meant somehow to illuminate or expand the significance of the plates. Landon encourages her readers to believe that the “I” in these short poems is the voice of the author, but ultimately the poems undermine this encouraged connection, when one “I” is pitted against another in an ideological battlefield that has no winners and no losers.

The fourth and final chapter is devoted to the late novels of Mary Shelley, with a focus on *Falkner*. I read *Falkner* as a novel stamped with an “Hegelian sense of modernity” that recognizes the individual’s “subjective freedom,” while also suggesting that part of this freedom means experimenting dynamically with multiple fictional “selves.”<sup>49</sup> Although Shelley’s late novels are often thought to reproach the theatrical self-representations nursed by male romantic authors, I view *Falkner* as a novel that promotes a healthy theatricality through its protagonist, Rupert John Falkner, who has a penchant for identifying himself with literary and dramatic figures. Within the novel, the alternatives to Falkner’s dynamic individualism take the form of static, mechanical and impossible characters: dead versions of Godwinian sincerity fettered to the necessitarian laws of the Shelleyan universe.

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<sup>49</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick D. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT P, 1987), 4, 17.

My hope is to enrich the critical study of late romantic British literature by examining new pairs and groups of authors. Landon and Hazlitt form one such pair; Landon and the Shelleys, whose works are put in dialogue with each other in the following chapters, form another. Landon and Mary Shelley both wrote primarily in the 1820s and 1830s. Both responded to the “sanitary crisis” in London during the early nineteenth century—when “overcrowding dead and decaying bodies and sewage” led to a “miasmatic theory of ‘filth’ as a dangerous, class-specific menace.”<sup>50</sup> Shelley addresses the “ever-present threat of miasmatic influence” in *The Last Man* (1826), and Landon addresses it in her “concern with decay and disease” at the heart of all things.<sup>51</sup> Both create heroines who cross-dress as male warriors and then die in battle to prove their constancy to a loved one, and heroes whose identity is stolen.<sup>52</sup> Both celebrate the artistic genius native to Italy (especially the improvisatori there—whom Shelley saw personally). Shelley centered her third novel, *Valperga* (1823), around the life of Castruccio Castracani, the late medieval Italian warlord and duke of Lucca. *Valperga* turned out to be a “major inspiration” for a play Landon wrote on the same subject late in her career: *Castruccio Castracani; Or, The Triumph of Lucca: A Tragedy* (1841).<sup>53</sup> Shelley certainly

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<sup>50</sup> Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2003), 198.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> See Letitia Landon, “Inez,” in *Poetical Works of Letitia Elizabeth Landon, “L.E.L.”* ed. F. J. Sypher (Delmar: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1990), 360-63; and Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, vol. 4 of *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. Nora Crook and Pamela Clemit (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1996). I refer to the respective characters of Inez and Evadne. This edition of Landon’s poetry is hereafter referred to as *PWL*, and this edition of Mary Shelley’s works is hereafter referred to as *NSWS*.

<sup>53</sup> F. J. Sypher, ed., introduction to *Castruccio Castrucani; or, The Triumph of Lucca: A Tragedy* (Ann Arbor: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 2000), xiii.

read Landon. A chapter in her sixth novel *Lodore* (1835) loosely quotes an excerpt from “The Ring: The German Minnesinger’s Tale” for one of its epigraphs, a poem Landon included in her *Golden Violet* collection (1827).<sup>54</sup> Shelley also read and enjoyed the first novel Landon published—*Romance and Reality* (1831)—especially its third volume.<sup>55</sup> Both authors read John Forsyth, Anna Jameson and Madame de Staël, were avid theatergoers and opera enthusiasts and were fascinated with Percy Shelley (albeit, in Landon’s case, from afar).

But most important to this dissertation is their shared interest in identity and performance: an interest that need not be explained entirely in terms of gender norms or literary market forces. For this is what critics often do. They ask, Is Landon writing as a nineteenth-century poetess? Is Shelley writing as a proper woman? Are these masculinist categories embraced? resisted? assumed and then strategically subverted? How aware is Landon of the alienating processes of literary production and the fraught relationship between artist and audience? How is this awareness reflected in her art? And so on. But maybe these questions are slightly off track. Perhaps asking them is not doing as just a service to these authors as critics seem to think. Granted, Shelley and Landon manipulate

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<sup>54</sup> See Mary Shelley, *Lodore*, vol. 6 of *NSWS* (the epigraph is from chapter fourteen of the first volume, in which Lord Lodore meets Fanny Durham in New York). For the Landon quotation see “The Ring: The German Minnesinger’s Tale,” in *PWL*, 143. The line is: “Change and time take together their flight.” Shelley writes it as: “Time and Change together take their flight.”

<sup>55</sup> In a letter dated 6 December 1831, Shelley asked the publisher, writer and editor Charles Ollier (1788–1859) to send her a copy of Landon’s *Romance and Reality*. She wrote him again on 16 December and said: “L.E.L.’s 3d vol is very good indeed. It is Romance and Sentiment; which is that in which she excels—Reality she has too much fancy and feeling for—I was deeply interested in the 3d Vol—it does her heart and imagination credit” (*The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Betty T. Bennett [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980-88], 3:148, 151).

gender constructs and market forces to their own advantage. Doing so empowers them as women writers and as literary entrepreneurs. But it is reductive to associate these and other female authors so heavily with either sexual character or print culture. I prefer to relocate Shelley and Landon in a philosophical context: to ask how their texts address certain pressing epistemological anxieties of their age. Their shared interrogation of personal and textual “character” demands this relocation.

What I have called “epistemological liminality” is vital to all of these chapters. I prefer the word *liminality* over, for instance, *undecidability*, because the latter is part of a postmodern register that would have been alien to these nineteenth-century authors. Their texts resist the concept of personal identity without showing signs of reducing it to an absolutely undecidable construct. Moreover, it is this shared psychological “mood” of epistemological anxiety, anxiety concerning the notion of “character” in its widest sense, that determines how “derivative” these late romantic texts are—not so much the demands of market forces for commodified versions of an outdated romanticism.

CHAPTER I. PERCY SHELLEY'S *ALASTOR*: THE "I" AS TRANSINDIVIDUAL  
CONSCIOUSNESS

**1. The Critical Challenge of *Alastor***

This chapter examines Percy Shelley's long poem *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude*, specifically the poem's first forty-nine lines, thought to be spoken dramatically by a certain "Narrator" (who purportedly speaks the whole poem). I argue that, in the opening lines, any sense of the "Narrator" as a definable character, a separate consciousness, dissolves, and that this apparent dissolution is explicable in terms of Shelley's philosophical speculation at the time. Although it makes rational sense for the reader to locate the speech of opening lines in a discrete agent, Shelley uses the "I" to represent the voice of what he calls the "one mind," a sort of transindividual consciousness of which all individual minds, not truly existent as such, are said to be the "marks" or "modifications." I also want to suggest that since the early twentieth century, criticism on *Alastor* has moved in a particular direction: readers have continued to challenge the existence of reliable "characters" or points of reference in the poem. I not only want to participate in this critical trend, but to bring it to what I see as its fulfillment—a reading of *Alastor* that presumes the nonexistence, within the discursive structure of the text, of individual minds.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By the phrase "discursive structure," I mean *Alastor* as a discourse: as a "connected series of utterances by which meaning is communicated, esp. forming a unit for analysis; spoken or written communication regarded as consisting of such utterances" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "discourse").

Shelley wrote *Alastor* in the fall and winter of 1815. It was first published in 1816 with eleven shorter pieces. In a brief preface, Shelley observes that *Alastor* is “allegorical of one of the most interesting situations of the human mind,” one “not barren of instruction to actual men.” The preface describes the “situation” of the poem as follows: A young “Poet” and “adventurous genius” sets out on a quest for transcendent knowledge. At first he is satisfied with the “magnificence and beauty of the external world,” which “sinks profoundly into the frame of his conceptions, and affords to their modifications a variety not to be exhausted.” Soon, however, his “mind” grows tired of external objects and desires “intercourse with an intelligence similar to its own.” Insatiable, the poet conceives of a certain “Being,” a perfect “prototype” of the operations of his own mind, but “seeks in vain” to find it. Eventually, “[b]lasted by his disappointment, he descends to an untimely grave.” According to Shelley, the basic moral of the poem is that it is better to love, even to be misguided by, one’s fellow beings, because “[t]hose who love not their fellow-beings, live unfruitful lives, and prepare for their old age a miserable grave.”<sup>2</sup>

As straightforward as the preface sounds, the poem itself is incredibly elusive and resistant to critical interpretation. Nineteenth-century reviewers simply did not understand it and made no attempts to hide the fact. One calls it the “madness of a poetic mind,” another finds it “beyond...comprehension” and a third is “utterly at a loss to convey any distinct idea of the plan or purpose of the poem.”<sup>3</sup> Most early twentieth-

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<sup>2</sup> Percy Shelley, preface to *Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude*, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), 72-73. All references to the text of *Alastor* are taken from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, “Art. XI,” *The British Critic* 5 (1816): 545; Anonymous, “Art. 15,” *The Monthly Review* 79 (1816): 433; Anonymous, “Art. IX,” *The Eclectic Review* 6 (1816): 391.

century critics agree that what actually happens in the poem bears little resemblance to the formulation set forth in the preface. For Raymond Havens, *Alastor* is evidence of Shelley's inability to write a structured poem: "[a]rchitectonics" was "never [his] strong point."<sup>4</sup> Havens and Marion Clyde Wier consider the "real intent" of the poem "overrun with descriptive extravagance and vapid moralizing and maudlin sentiment."<sup>5</sup> Frederick Jones claims that the gap between conception and execution relates to the fact that Shelley struggled to accept the opposed doctrines of Wordsworthian natural religion and Lockean empiricism.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1970s, Earl Wasserman offered what is probably the most enduring reading of the poem to date. In his view, *Alastor* features two distinct characters engaged in dialogue, a "Narrator" and a "Poet" (neither is given a proper name in the text). According to Wasserman, the "Narrator" is more or less a Wordsworthian pantheist with his own "sense of values" and an "exclusive devotion to the Spirit of Nature," who introduces and describes himself in the first forty-nine lines of the poem.<sup>7</sup> In the rest of *Alastor*—nearly

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<sup>4</sup> Raymond Havens, "Shelley's *Alastor*," *PMLA* 45 (1930): 1107.

<sup>5</sup> Marion Clyde Wier and Raymond Havens, "Shelley's 'Alastor' Again," *PMLA* 46 (1931): 947.

<sup>6</sup> See Frederick Jones, "The Inconsistency of Shelley's *Alastor*," *ELH* 13 (1946): 291-98.

<sup>7</sup> Earl Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971), 40, 34. *Alastor* has often been understood as a response to Wordsworth's long poem in blank verse, *The Excursion* (1814). In the 1930s, Paul Mueschke and Earl Griggs argued that "*Alastor* is permeated with the diction, meter, sentiment, and even philosophy of Wordsworth" ("Wordsworth as the Prototype of the Poet in Shelley's *Alastor*," *PMLA* 49 [1934]: 240). According to Cian Duffy, ever since Mueschke and Griggs's study of the intertextual relationship between the two poems, critics have "tended to read the poet-protagonist of *Alastor* as Shelley's corrective response to *The Excursion*'s misanthropic Solitary." Specifically, *Alastor* has been thought to "[attack] both Wordsworth's self-serving retirement and the ideologically destructive product of that retirement," and to establish "Wordsworth's intellectual and political death" (*Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005], 73-74).

seven hundred lines beginning “There was a Poet”—the “Narrator” is said to tell the story of a quixotic, visionary “Poet” on a quest for meaning and truth. For Wasserman, *Alastor* represents an experimental dialogue between the ideology of the “Narrator” and the ideology of the “Poet.” At the end of the poem, the dialogue is left unresolved, and its irresolution is supposed to suggest Shelley’s skepticism: “If we recognize this purposeful ambiguity together with the fact that the poem is spoken by a narrator of a certain character, much in the poem that appears contradictory proves centrally functional.”<sup>8</sup> Lisa Steinman agrees that the poem is meant to indicate Shelley’s skepticism through a carefully regulated tension, although in her mind the tale the “Narrator” tells is about himself: having discovered an internal vacancy brought on by his disappointing experience as a disciple of nature, the “Narrator” recites his own history but disguises it as the tale of a certain visionary “Poet.”<sup>9</sup>

Of all the students of *Alastor* to date, Tilottama Rajan makes the strongest claim for the elimination of the “Poet” as a definable presence or character in the text. She argues that the poem demonstrates the failure of the lyric mode to capture an authentic self in verse. According to Rajan, *Alastor* is a meta-poetic text that “thematizes” lyric and makes it a special “object of reflection.” It advances the position that a lyric poem may be powerless to express interiority, or to preserve a pure and essential moment in the otherwise discursive mess of experience. The unfolding of events in *Alastor* instantiates this point: as the poem moves along, its lyric character “unravels in more extensive structures like narrative.” *Alastor* exemplifies the non-transcendence of the lyric mode. So

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<sup>8</sup> Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, 38.

<sup>9</sup> See Lisa Steinman, “Shelley’s Skepticism: Allegory in ‘Alastor,’” *ELH* 45 (1978): 255-69.

how does the poem fail as a lyric? For Rajan it promises to capture the identity of the visionary “Poet” but is unsuccessful: the “figure of the Poet...never comes alive.” *Alastor* may strive to get at “a unified self-representation” of the “Poet,” but it ends up aborting its quest and admitting defeat. Rajan concludes that the “Poet” is “less a person than a textual figure: a sign that has no objective referent, being rather the sign of a desire, a desire for a Romantic ideology of vision that remains still (to be) born.”<sup>10</sup>

I agree with Rajan’s analysis, but my point is that if her claim is true for the “Poet,” then it should be true for the “Narrator” as well. She grants the “Narrator” a personal agency in defiance of the implications of the poem and of her own argument. As I see it, she needs the a priori idea of individuation to make her case. In her view, the “Poet” is “an archetype or more properly a semiotype in the Narrator’s consciousness.”<sup>11</sup> But it is already problematic that the “Narrator” is said to have a consciousness. Rajan sets him up as an hypostasized being who has opinions and performs actions. He “*defer[s]* lyric as a way of achieving identity with his text, he *casts* his poem as a quest narrative...*trope[s]* narrative as quest...*assumes* that he can fulfil the goals of lyric by a more circuitous path”; “*write[s]* the Poet into the narrative...*enables* him to survive...*chooses* to write his text as a narrative...*abandons* narrative for elegy.”<sup>12</sup> In these examples, Rajan continues to treat the “Narrator” as an individual to carry her point home. But any argument about *Alastor* that relies on individual agencies is biased before

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<sup>10</sup> Tilottama Rajan, “‘The Web of Human Things’: Narrative and Identity in *Alastor*,” in *New Romanticisms: Theory and Critical Practice*, ed. David Clark and Donald Goellnicht (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994), 28-29, 38.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 29. Michael Ferber makes the similar claim that “The Poet is an ideal projection of the Narrator” (*The Poetry of Shelley* [New York: Penguin Books, 1993], 32).

<sup>12</sup> Rajan, “The Web of Human Things,” 43, 46 (emphases mine).

it begins. It assumes that Shelley writes a “Narrator” and a “Poet” into his poem and imagines them as would-be discrete identities. As I aim to demonstrate below, the “Narrator” is not a real ontological presence in the poem and the “Poet” is not a still-born presence—what Rajan calls “still (to be) born.” My purpose in this chapter is to speed up the momentum of *Alastor* criticism and carry it to its logical conclusion: the de-individuation not only of the “Poet” but of the “Narrator” as well.

## 2. The Unraveling of the “Narrator” in the “Exordium” and the “Boast”

Consider the first forty-nine lines of *Alastor*, which I have divided into two sections I call the “Exordium” and the “Boast” (the italics in the former are mine).

### THE “EXORDIUM” (LINES 1-17)

Earth, ocean, air, beloved brotherhood!

If our great Mother *has imbued* my soul

With aught of natural piety to feel

Your love, and recompense the boon with mine;

If dewy morn, and odorous noon, and even, 5

With sunset and its gorgeous ministers,

And solemn midnight’s tingling silentness;

If autumn’s hollow sighs in the sere wood,

And winter robing with pure snow and crowns

Of starry ice the grey grass and bare boughs; 10

If spring’s voluptuous pantings when she breathes

Her first sweet kisses *have been dear* to me;

If no bright bird, insect, or gentle beast  
I consciously *have injured*, but *still loved*  
*And cherished* these my kindred; then forgive 15  
This boast, beloved brethren, and withdraw  
No portion of your wonted favour now!

THE "BOAST" (LINES 18-49)

Mother of this unfathomable world!  
Favour my solemn song, for I have loved  
Thee ever, and thee only; I have watched 20  
Thy shadow, and the darkness of thy steps,  
And my heart ever gazes on the depth  
Of thy deep mysteries. I have made my bed  
In charnels and on coffins, where black death  
Keeps record of the trophies won from thee, 25  
Hoping to still these obstinate questionings  
Of thee and thine, by forcing some lone ghost,  
Thy messenger, to render up the tale  
Of what we are. In lone and silent hours,  
When night makes a weird sound of its own stillness, 30  
Like an inspired and desperate alchemist  
Staking his very life on some dark hope,  
Have I mixed awful talk and asking looks

With my most innocent love, until strange tears,  
 Uniting with those breathless kisses, made 35  
 Such magic as compels the charmed night  
 To render up thy charge: ... and, though ne'er yet  
 Thou hast unveil'd thy inmost sanctuary,  
 Enough from incommunicable dream,  
 And twilight phantasms, and deep noonday thought, 40  
 Has shone within me, that serenely now  
 And moveless, as a long-forgotten lyre  
 Suspended in the solitary dome  
 Of some mysterious and deserted fane,  
 I wait thy breath, Great Parent, that my strain 45  
 May modulate with murmurs of the air,  
 And motions of the forests and the sea,  
 And voice of living beings, and woven hymns  
 Of night and day, and the deep heart of man.

These lines “pla[y] on the expectation that the act of writing raises—that we will be offered clearly defined moral and emotional reference points.”<sup>13</sup> The idea of the “Narrator” is dismantled in these lines precisely as it emerges. Its development is coterminous with its disintegration. The wonderful paradox here is that the passage unfolds as if it were one long assertion of identity—whoever or whatever it is that speaks

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<sup>13</sup> Barry Magarian, “Shelley’s *Alastor*: The Mutability of Identity,” *Keats-Shelley Review* 12 (1998): 77.

insists that he, she or it *is* something—but as the sequence moves along, its rhetorical form ruptures the idea of an articulating agent even as it seems to advance it. The critics I discussed earlier tend to refuse to let the rupture happen, reassembling what is fragmented for the sake of avoiding a hermeneutic impasse.

Take the syntactic structure of lines two through seventeen.<sup>14</sup> This segment forms a conditional sentence, the first fifteen lines of which represent a lengthy protasis and the last two lines a short apodosis. The protasis is that of a particular (as opposed to a general) condition, since it refers to a definite series of acts whose falsity is not implied. The apodosis is an imperative, making this a so-called mixed condition (the temporal situations in each clause are different). There are three parts to the protasis. In the first part the grammatical subject is “our great Mother,” in the second it is a variety of anthropomorphized natural phenomena and in the third it is the speaking “I.”

Notice that each segment of the protasis contains verbs in the present perfect tense: the “I” implies that certain mental and physical actions completed in the past endure into the present. It suggests that it has, in fact, acted or been acted upon in each of these cases, but what it ultimately means to express is cause: i.e., “it is *because* I am the sort of subject I claim to be in these lines that I deserve the forgiveness I am about humbly to request” (in lines 15-17). But the sense of cause is put in the form of a non-committal condition: the “I” shrouds its identity in less-than-assertive syntax. The paradoxical result of this structure is that we tend to believe what the “I” says all the more. If the “I” had

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<sup>14</sup> One presumption in this chapter is that the syntax of the opening lines of *Alastor* is just as revealing as its rich imagery and figurative language, that “grammatical meanings can be as readily utilized by the poet as lexical ones” (Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1965], 232).

chosen to convey cause directly, instead of indirectly, we might have had reason to doubt its authenticity as a quality forced on our consciousness. As it is, the grammatical form of the sentence creates the impression that the “I” is less self-aggrandizing than its laundry list of merits actually suggests. Without the conditional framework, the exordium would sound very much like the boast (“I have loved,” “I have watched,” “I have made my bed”), and the entire forty-nine lines would amount to one long, shameless and direct self-promotion.

The point is that the “I” is speaking rhetorically: it is using syntax to its own advantage as an available means of persuasion. But why does it need to be rhetorical? At another point the “I” claims to be the artless “lyre” or Æolian harp of nature: a passive instrument that exists merely to be struck by her winds. Why would so obvious and undeniable a “disciple of nature” feel it necessary to persuade the earth, ocean and air of its identity?

Around half of the first forty-nine lines of *Alastor* are enjambed for a pronounced rhetorical effect. In most cases an enjambed line makes perfect sense alone and without the completion of the grammatical unit in the following line(s). In and of itself, this fact may not be of great importance. But at the end of these enjambed lines (each one sensible in itself though part of a larger grammatical unit) the “I” becomes, in a sense, alienated from its ostensible allegiances: the discourse of the “Wordsworthian nature poet” is broken and the “I” is free of it—free, that is, until the reader reconstructs the “I”-as-Wordsworthian in the next line. It is as if the reader is complicit not only in the fusing of grammatical units but also in the process of individuation, that is, in the process that binds the “I” to what Wasserman calls its “exclusive devotion to the Spirit of Nature.”

Between lines two and three, for instance, the *action* of imbuelement is separated from the *substance* of imbuelement, or from that material with which the soul of the “I” is actually imbued, creating a state of suspense prior to our discovery that it is *with* the binding force of “natural piety” that the “Mother...imbue[s]” her son. The form here suggests that the “I” is in a position to escape or at least forestall its vocation, if only an overprotective Mother did not recall it into a kind of forced service. Consider also the break between lines three and four, which not only disrupts the rhythm of the passage but reinforces a distance between the “I” and its presumed filial identity. The separation of “feel” from its direct object (“Your love”) delays for a second our “syntagmatic thinking,” our ability to complete the verb phrase and connect son to mother. The third line can stand alone because the verb *feel* does not require an object. In fact, the absence of a specific object of affection may exalt the “I” even more than its presence would: it grants the “I” a masterful romantic sensibility, suggesting its propensity to feel all things, all objects, with equal keenness (simply to *feel*, instead of to feel the love of a mother). In both cases of enjambment the influence of mother over “son” is momentarily broken and resumed. The arrangement of the lines compromises filial attachment just as the sense of the words seems to insist on it. Perhaps the most revealing example of this technique occurs at line sixteen, when the “I” asks earth, air and ocean to “withdraw,” which, as an intransitive imperative, means to depart (and so the reader construes the line at first). The object phrase “No portion of your wonted favour now!” (line 17), which transitivizes the word *withdraw*, has the sense of being affixed to it as a guilty afterthought. The syntactic

and rhetorical structure of the lines invites us to imagine an “I” that has sought and missed an opportunity to dismiss its anthropomorphized nature-gods in the name of freedom.<sup>15</sup>

Formal structure aside, there is also one strange image in the opening lines that thwarts the reader’s impulse to read the “I” as Wordsworthian. The “I” claims that while nature has not yet revealed to it her deepest secrets—her “inmost sanctuary” (line 38)—it nonetheless remains confident that she will teach it everything, if it can “only stand and wait.” The “I” plans to remain in place in readiness and expectation: “serenely now/ And moveless, as a long-forgotten lyre/ Suspended in the solitary dome/ Of some mysterious and deserted fane” (lines 41-44). The lyre, as noted earlier, is an Æolian harp. Its strings move not on their own accord, but only when struck by the winds (“murmurs of the air”). Its being and movement are inseparable from the motions generated by its environment: “motions of the forests and the sea,/ And voice of living beings, and woven hymns/ Of night and day, and the deep heart of man.” Wasserman connects the lyre in these opening lines to another appearance of it much later in the poem, when the “Poet” dies and the “Narrator” describes his corpse as a thing with “No sense, no motion, no divinity—/ A fragile lute, on whose harmonious strings/ The breath of heaven did wander” (lines 666-68). According to Wasserman:

...when the Narrator describes the Visionary’s dead body, he unwittingly subverts his own supposed values...His later

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<sup>15</sup> There are plenty of subject-splintering enjambments in the opening lines: the phrase “I have loved” is separated from its object “Thee” (the Mother); “I have watched” from “Thy shadow” (also referring to the Mother); and “my heart ever gazes on the depth” from “Of thy deep mysteries.” In the last case the “I” suggests its skepticism concerning the nature of the universe: the cosmos as ungoverned abyss, or “depth,” and the cosmos as quasi-pantheistic space over which something called the Mother is in somehow in charge (lines 19-20, 20-21, 22-23).

management of the same image reveals that for man to be but a passive lyre totally submissive to the forces of nature is actually to be a corpse, senseless, motionless, soulless, and gradually eroded by nature's forces...Now the Narrator's original comparison of himself as poet to the 'long-forgotten lyre' in the 'solitary' dome of a 'deserted' fane, so casually brushed over in a first reading of the invocation, gains its full ironic horror in retrospect.<sup>16</sup>

This argument works only as long as we agree that there are two discrete and knowable agents in *Alastor*: one who tells a story and another who is that story's protagonist. In Wasserman's reading the "Narrator" is a definitive, Wordsworthian character with "values" who is so humanly vulnerable that he "unwittingly" confuses his own images. But what if there *is* no Wordsworthian "Narrator"? To return to the first image of the lyre hanging from the temple ceiling: David Perkins notes that Shelley uses "architectural structures such as pyramids, domes, temples, obelisks, and especially towers" to convey "a product of human thought" and the "notion of permanence"—structures, according to Perkins, set in contradistinction to the changefulness of the natural world.<sup>17</sup> But the "I" of *Alastor* describes itself as a lyre hanging in the dome of a *temple*. The lyre is an object that more or less stands for what is natural: for the fluid assimilation of subject and environment. Only here, the "I" traps the lyre in the roof of an abandoned temple. An object associated with nature and impermanence is enclosed and stifled within a manmade structure associated with permanence. This complicated and

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<sup>16</sup> Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, 37-38.

<sup>17</sup> Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence*, 182.

eerie image helps undermine Wasserman's conception of a nature-loving "Narrator" whose brothers are earth, ocean and air. It simply becomes hard to imagine that there is a consistent, and consistently Wordsworthian, subjectivity behind the "I." But Wasserman must presume that there *is* one such subjectivity and that its essence is Wordsworthian, since he claims that *Alastor* is purposefully organized around a tension between two coherent and discrete agents. But if the agents are absent then the tension is absent, and so the poem's dialogic structure, as Wasserman conceives it, unravels.

### **3. *Alastor* and the "One Mind": The "I" as Transindividual Consciousness**

Most of us look for discrete identities in the texts we read, especially when we read narrative fiction. We tend to want and expect characters that are nuanced but consistently "themselves," suggestive of the same frame of mind. Jonathan Culler claims that readers are often reluctant to let go of this expectation when it comes to lyric poems. As we read a lyric we search, if not always for discrete identities, at least for reliable points of reference as building blocks to sense-making. This is part of what Culler calls the problematic practice of "narrativizing" lyric poems. He claims that our minds habitually construct a place, time, plot and set of characters in order to interpret the virtual spatiotemporal context in lyric, even one without pretensions to realism. For Culler, a lyric poem is all too often read as a "drama of attitudes" at the expense of the fullest possible interpretation: most often one that considers the evident formal features of a poem with as much weight as its less evident narrative features.<sup>18</sup> My formal analysis of the opening of *Alastor* substantiates this point: studying the form of the first forty-nine

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Culler, "Why Lyric?", *PMLA* 123.1 (2008): 203.

lines helped to dismantle the notion of *Alastor* as a “drama of attitudes”—particular attitudes attached to particular agents. But if to narrativize any lyric poem is problematic, to narrativize one by Shelley is doubly so: he is notorious for writing poems that resist critical narrativization and logical reconstruction. One of his trademarks as a poet is that the “concrete individuations” in his verses “seem virtually to lack identity.” His use of metaphor is so “high-handed” that “virtually anything can be compared to anything else.”<sup>19</sup> In a word, nothing can be taken for granted as “itself” in a Shelleyan poem. His texts often force the reader to do the work of individuation: to isolate discursive representations of consciousness into the voices of separate agents.

Shelley considered individual identity a construct used to demarcate and alienate the raw materials of experience. He felt that reason, more than the creative imagination, has a use for it. When one views all living and nonliving things as discrete entities, one learns to make analytic distinctions between them. The rational mind learns to differentiate attributes from substances and substances from substances. Unlike Wordsworth, Shelley refuses to write poems that replicate the individuating tendencies of ordinary life. When his creative imagination is set to work, all phenomena blend into other phenomena.

It may be instructive to compare Wordsworth to Shelley in terms of how each responds to the idea of individual identity in poems. It is well known that most of Wordsworth’s strongest poems are meant to be about himself (or his selves). The transcendent moments in these poems depend on the validity of the subjectivities that Wordsworth treats as real. If, as readers, we choose to invalidate a Wordsworthian “I,”

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<sup>19</sup> Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence*, 168.

past or present or future—assume that it does not really exist as Wordsworth claims it does—then the poem may lose nearly all its force.

According to Thomas Weiskel, all of Wordsworth's "egotistically sublime" poems begin with a sense of anxiety or vacancy. The notion that he is a Cartesian "I" thinking and writing in the present moment troubles him. All external objects start to have an overabundance of meaning: the world appears to him as an "excess of signifieds." A crisis occurs when he realizes that he cannot understand from where all of this meaning comes. The objects in his environment seem dead or inept as "signifiers" of this excess. His desperate solution is to project an objective version of himself, a "me" with a determinate identity, into the distant past or distant future. This self-projection offers him a therapeutic escape from the present moment in all of its unsettling indeterminacy. As Weiskel observes, "the identity, or the 'objective me,' is from the start experienced as if it were an Other, and therefore as a part of an external pattern, a term in a discourse not initiated by the 'I.'"<sup>20</sup> In other words, the identity-construct projected somewhere safe in the unreachable dimensions of the past or the future relieves the poet of his anxiety over a "hyper-signified" present. The relief he feels is the egotistical sublime. A strong example of this process occurs in "Tintern Abbey." It begins when the poet-speaker feels an emptiness on the banks of the River Wye in 1798, five years after his initial visit to Tintern Abbey in 1793. The poem fills this emptiness by projecting subjectivities into the past and future, helping the poet-speaker escape from the dreadful nothingness of pure

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), 150.

subjectivity, of solipsism—from a world full of significance but without any proper signifiers.

Shelley distrusts the very concept to which Wordsworth clings for comfort. Weiskel argues that the author of *Alastor* “fears identity—fears being constituted in the continuity of discourse—because he cannot bear its cost. Shelley’s own fear of identity was extreme, and he is not by any means in control of this poem or its tone.”<sup>21</sup> To be an individual, for Shelley, is to agree to a sort of virtual death: “[i]f you love what is essentially an ideal version or projection of yourself, your love nourishes a growing ‘selfhood’ which is incapable of desire and is (in Keats’s phrase) ‘a thing per se and stands alone.’ Such desire is eros in the service of the conservative death wish.”<sup>22</sup> An ideal and objective “me” has no heartbeat and no sensibilities and cannot “desire” a thing. Shelley would rather suffer incertitude and skepticism than die altogether within a false subjectivity. He sees “personal character” as a sort of manufactured death.

If a Wordsworthian “Narrator” is not the voice of the “I” in the poem, then who or what is? I want to suggest that *Alastor* can also be read as an aestheticized philosophical argument that all individual minds are interconnected in what Shelley calls the “one mind,” a concept he was forming around the time he composed *Alastor*. If we accept this reading, then the “I” in *Alastor*, so resistant to individuation, can be profitably read as an experimental mouthpiece for the “one mind.”

In his short essay “On Life,” written in 1819 and first published in the *Athenaeum* in 1832, Shelley renounces the doctrine of materialism, claiming that “the solid universe

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 148.

of external things is ‘such stuff as dreams are made of.’” He admits that he was once “seduc[ed]” by materialism in his youth, but has since become convinced that “nothing exists but as it is perceived.” What we call the “familiar objects” of the senses are actually “signs, standing not for themselves but for others [other signs], in their capacity of suggesting one thought which shall lead to a train of thoughts.” In other words, matter exists but not outside of the minds that form impressions of it. An object exists only insofar as we have a mental impression of it, and we cannot have a mental impression of one object, or “sign,” without simultaneously calling to mind our mental impressions of other objects (other “signs”). Shelley observes that most children, and even a few enlightened adults, can experience intimations of a perfect interpenetration of mind and object: they can “feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being.” He goes on to articulate at length what he terms “the intellectual philosophy,” which, in view of its importance to the argument at hand, is worth quoting in full:

[T]he existence of distinct individual minds...is...found to be a delusion. The words, *I*, *you*, *they* are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind. Let it not be supposed that this doctrine conducts to the monstrous presumption, that I, the person who now write and think, am that one mind. I am but a portion of it. The words *I*, and *you*, and *they* are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement and

totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually  
attached to them...we are on that verge where words abandon  
us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark  
abyss of—how little we know.<sup>23</sup>

My concern at this point is to unpack what Shelley means by the “one mind,” and to relate its significance to *Alastor*.<sup>24</sup>

Most Shelley critics agree that this “one mind” does not stand for some pantheistic life-force or metaphysical reality apart from strictly human existence. C. E. Pulos suggests that “Shelley’s ‘the one mind’ appears not a metaphysical but a psychological concept, analogous to Jung’s well known theory of the ‘collective unconscious.’ It refers, at all events, to something less than ‘the basis of all things,’” something less than “the Berkeleian concept of reality as mind.”<sup>25</sup> In this sense the term means a sort of manifold or aggregate of human consciousness across time and space, not the mind of a great perceiving God. Wasserman understands the “one mind” as pure existence: “[j]ust as colors are partial modes of light, so each human mind is but a partial mode of the One

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<sup>23</sup> Percy Shelley, “On Life,” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, 506-08.

<sup>24</sup> C. E. Pulos argues that Shelley’s rejection of materialism “occurred...during the years 1814-1816,” so that “the Platonism that strongly colors Shelley’s thought after 1817 must be interpreted as an effect rather than a cause of the poet’s rejection of materialism” (*The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley’s Skepticism* [Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1954], 42). This is an important fact considering that *Alastor* was written late in 1815. For Pulos, Shelley had mostly abandoned his faith in materialism by the time he was composing *Alastor*. I read the poem, consequently, as an experimental outgrowth of this abandonment and the ideas that developed afterward. Kenneth Neill Cameron observes that the philosophical argument advanced in “On Life” was anticipated earlier in Shelley’s career. According to Cameron, the “position” articulated in fragment IV of Shelley’s *Speculations on Metaphysics*, written around 1816-17, “is the same as that in *On Life*” (*Shelley: The Golden Years* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974], 157).

<sup>25</sup> Pulos, *The Deep Truth*, 53.

Mind, which is the one absolute Existence... This 'one mind' is neither an artificial abstraction nor a deity, but is Existence itself." According to Wasserman, for a single person to experience "Existence itself" is unlikely if not impossible, and the reason for the unlikelihood of this experience is that "[a]lthough Existence is to be defined as the One Mind, we exist nevertheless as discrete minds in a spatio-temporal condition that tends to separate into thought and things... on the other hand, were we to experience Existence we would be obliterated as separate identities."<sup>26</sup>

Critics complicate the notion in subsequent decades but its vagueness is never quite eliminated. For the most part it becomes either what Wasserman said it was ("Experience itself") or not quite what Wasserman said it was. P. M. S. Dawson agrees that the "one mind" is not meant to be a great Berkeleian Perceiver, since "Shelley is not interested in questions of ontology" so much as the "moral implications" of these questions.<sup>27</sup> Jerrold Hogle seems to think that a person can intuit and posit the "one mind" but never experience it fully and directly. Hogle writes that the "'one mind' must be intimated only by 'modifications' other than itself transferring themselves toward it by way of each other, yet it must be at a distance from them off by itself as the point toward which transference presses them all without really attaining a oneness-with-itself."<sup>28</sup> To me this statement seems little more than a paraphrase or rearrangement of Shelley's own comment that individual minds are really "marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind."

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<sup>26</sup> Wasserman, *Shelley: A Critical Reading*, 146, 149.

<sup>27</sup> P. M. S. Dawson, *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1980), 107-08.

<sup>28</sup> Jerrold Hogle, *Shelley's Process: Radical Transference and the Development of His Major Works* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), 273.

Timothy Clark and Cian Duffy attempt to ground this wooly concept in historical and cultural realities, although Wasserman's idealist reading, at least for one critic, tends to remain tenable. For Clark, the "one mind" is a "transindividual consciousness in which each individual only participates," a "totality of thought" with not a metaphysical but an "historical and culture nature." Clark compares it to "the popular notion, in critical works of the period, of the 'public mind' as an atmosphere of common opinion within which all think and act."<sup>29</sup> Duffy comes to the related conclusion that the "one mind" is the accumulation of all "reactionary," dogmatic and conventional knowledge—more or less the conservative status quo. The "task of the reformer is to reorient, to *re-imagine* the conventions informing the 'one mind' along politically and ethically progressive lines."<sup>30</sup> In these last two cases the "one mind" is stripped of its tendencies to mysticism. It refers only to common-sense wisdom in the collective. But despite critics' efforts to historicize the "one mind," the text of "On Life" continues to permit Wasserman's idealist reading of it. Hugh Roberts concludes that the ultimate significance of the phrase is simply undecidable, although he also admits that "'On Life' presents no problems and every encouragement for anyone who wants to read the 'intellectual philosophy' as a therapeutic idealism."<sup>31</sup> "Nothing," writes Roberts, "could seem more blatantly idealist" than the notion that "we transcend our habitual view of the spatial and temporal world...with its

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<sup>29</sup> Timothy Clark, *Embodying Revolution: The Figure of the Poet in Shelley* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1989), 39-40.

<sup>30</sup> Duffy, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime*, 70.

<sup>31</sup> Hugh Roberts, *Shelley and the Chaos of History: A New Politics of Poetry* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1997), 133.

aggregative manifold of individual minds, and rise to a point of view from which we can perceive our selves as a conscious portion of 'one mind' composed of all minds."<sup>32</sup>

I suggest that we can understand *Alastor*, "the first long poem of Shelley's maturity," as an experimental attempt to give the "one mind" a poetic voice, to let it speak through the "I."<sup>33</sup> If, as I have argued, it is difficult if not impossible to accept the "Narrator" and the "Poet" as discrete identities, this reading helps explain how a single poem can suggest but never bring to life its so-called characters. Perhaps the reader cannot subject *Alastor* to individuation because separate minds were not part of its plan. The poem aims to textualize, to aestheticize, what Wasserman calls "Existence itself," that ideal state wherein all minds are "obliterated as separate identities."

Because Shelley thought that the "one mind" contains all separate minds within it, the "I" that speaks the first forty-nine lines of *Alastor* seems simultaneously to instantiate Wordsworthianism and to contain a certain intertexture of resistance and annulment. What we as readers witness in these lines is the flickering in and out of "modifications," which reason invites us to consolidate as separate entities, as reference points approximating the individuations familiar to us in everyday experience. We tend to impose on *Alastor* what W. J. Harvey calls our "most intimate sense of character":

When, in real life, we try to describe a person's character we generally speak in terms of a discrete identity. We think of it as something unique and separable from all other identities. We do this, of course, because the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>33</sup> Ferber, *The Poetry of Shelley*, 33.

most intimate sense of character we can possibly have—our knowledge of self—is of this kind.<sup>34</sup>

In the end, *Alastor* is a difficult poem to understand because it challenges what is rational and basic to human experience. It tries to reify the “one mind,” the state of “Existence itself,” wherein individual natures are “dissolved into the surrounding universe” and “the surrounding universe [is] absorbed into their being.” The reader of *Alastor* encounters more than just a challenging text. S/he encounters a hypothetical model of “transindividual consciousness” in blank verse, and his/her struggles to interpret run parallel to Shelley’s early efforts to transcend materialism without being dogmatic, to embrace idealism without being absolute.

In the next two chapters I discuss the poems and prose of Letitia Landon, whose treatment of personal and dramatic subjectivities bears comparison to Shelley’s treatment of them in *Alastor*. What unites the two authors is that both open up the “I” to some larger world or sphere beyond itself. Shelley uses it in an idealized and collective sense: the “I” in *Alastor* is the composite of all individual consciousnesses, unified as that “one mind” of which all separate minds are the theoretical constituents. Like Shelley, Landon frustrates the capacity of the “I” to delimit; to circumscribe a discrete and autonomous agent that seems to possess a unique power. In her corpus the “I” is seldom meant to represent the author’s own “voice,” or even the voice of a character at a ironic distance from the author. It is attached instead to nineteenth-century culture and ideology, subjected in the case of each text to a kind of cultural roulette. For both writers, the “I” stands for something of an inclusive public voice, the voice of a “Spirit of the Age.” Whatever “life” it has is

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<sup>34</sup> W. J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1965), 31.

conceived out of a broad sense of all particular lives indissolubly woven in one inclusive Community or Culture. In short, we may say that both authors work to collectivize or communalize the "I."

## CHAPTER II. LETITIA LANDON: THE REAL CHAMELEON WRITER

Constancy is made up of a series of small inconstancies, which never come to any thing; and the heart takes credit for its loyalty, because in the long-run it ends where it began.

- Letitia Landon, *Romance and Reality*

Most students of romanticism have at least heard of Letitia Elizabeth Landon (L. E. L.) by now. A few of her poems appear in romantic-era anthologies published within the past twenty years, thanks to the surge of critical interest in romantic women writers in the 1990s. One of her essays may occasionally show up in a companion to nineteenth-century culture.<sup>1</sup> But I would hesitate to call her canonized. I would also argue that her work is now marginally anthologized but often misunderstood. A tiny fraction of her corpus serves to encapsulate her role as an artist wherever she appears in edited collections. Most of her prose stays out of print and only her sentimental love-poetry tends to get read.

I want to make three major claims about Landon in this chapter. The first is that we can rarely ground an argument (and make totalizing statements) on our impressions of her personal opinions. Her poems, prefaces, novels, essays, footnotes and private letters yield no reliable portrait of her personal character or beliefs.<sup>2</sup> She is arguably more

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<sup>1</sup> Her essay "On the Ancient and Modern Influence of Poetry" (1832), for instance, appears in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Herbert Tucker (Malden: Blackwell, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Serena Baiesi argues that Landon "assert[ed] her own ideas, aesthetics, and personality through her poetry," that she "express[ed] her own subjectivity as a woman who actively

difficult to “read” than most, if not all, late romantic authors. The second claim is that if we want to make sense of Landon we have to examine not this or that poem, nor this or that large group of similarly themed poems, nor even just poems. We have to consider all the genres in her oeuvre and account for what deep-seated assumptions seem to generate a lifelong host of logical contradictions. The student of Landon is best served who reads her poetry against the background of her prose (especially her novels), and vice versa: the novels, virtually unread, tend to debunk the ideologies in her poems, and the poems tend to do the same to the novels.

The third claim is that there *is* one reliable and consistent fact evident throughout her giant corpus—its inconsistency of persuasion. One of her speakers promotes the Wordsworthian sense of an occult relationship between the human and vegetable worlds and another thinks the idea absurd; one touts Protestant theology and another sounds pagan; one is a neo-Platonist (à la Percy Shelley) and another a firm materialist; one lists the obvious advantages of British imperial expansion and another launches heartfelt attacks on it. Consider the following remarkable dichotomies we can trace throughout her corpus:

Hardship Inspires Good Art	Hardship Inhibits Good Art
Neoplatonism	Materialism
Man/Nature Metaphysically Related	Man/Nature Analogously Related

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took part in the literary, social, and also political community of her century” (*Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Metrical Romance: The Adventures of a “Literary Genius”* [Bern: Peter Lang, 2009], 40). The second part of this statement is true: Landon “actively took part in the literary, social, and political community of her century.” But every published writer does this perforce. I disagree with what Baiesi extrapolates from this fact—that Landon uses literary texts to assert her “personality.”

Pro-Industrialism	Anti-Industrialism
Pro-Imperialism	Anti-Imperialism
Nationalistic	Unpatriotic
Pro-Picturesque	Anti-Picturesque
Christian	Pagan
Memory as Salvific	Memory as Destructive
Love's Mutability Celebrated	Love's Mutability Censured
Sympathy/Benevolence	Skepticism/Selfishness
Good Poetry Is Imaginative	Good Poetry Is Realistic
Poetry Remedies Selfishness	Poetry Promotes Selfishness

This is a striking list of inconsistencies. It may imply that Landon distrusts all verbal mediation of immediate ideas, or that, in her mind, impersonal words can never be the reliable vessels of personal thoughts. But there is more to her work than a lifelong sense of the insufficiency of words to express mental content. Her compositions seem to proceed from the a priori principle that thought is mediated even before it is textualized. The self never emerges in her poems and prose as a force that struggles to maintain its integrity against the demands of civilization, but as the inevitable product of its historical and cultural environment. In a word, the Landonian “I”—even and especially in personal letters and footnotes—“enact[s] cultural identities.”<sup>3</sup> Landon writes as if she has internalized a notion that most romantic authors would prefer to leave unexplored: the notion that the human mind may not be a “fully conscious agen[t] of ideological

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine Burroughs, *Closet Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romantic Women Writers* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997), 20.

patterning and historical change,” so much as “the individualized manifestatio[n] of historical processes.”<sup>4</sup>

Although Landon and Percy Shelley share an interest in disempowering the “I” as a personal shaper of meaning, Landon’s critics tend to emphasize only her texts’ artistic derivativeness. They read her free embrace of derivativeness as evidence that she is a slave to market forces and a popular taste she did not create.<sup>5</sup> I disagree. Even if she *can* be said to write, at times, according to the demands of popular taste, this does not mean that we should call her a *slave* to that taste. We need to renegotiate our terminology and how it conditions our impressions of authorship. If an author is complicit in the trends and forces of the literary market, this complicity does not add up to slavery and ignorance. There are different kinds of complicity. I associate Landon with a complicity that emancipates her from the Wordsworthian slavery of individual taste-making.

I suggest that we regard Landon as an author who triumphs over Wordsworthian individualism rather than an author who triumphs over print culture. Ghislaine McDayter argues that Landon “should be recognized not as a female artist who ‘sells herself’ in an inauthentic relationship with her audience, but rather as an artist who understands the operations of production in the modern literary world and sees it as part of her poetic

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<sup>4</sup> Marlon Ross, *The Contours of Masculine Desire: Romanticism and the Rise of Women’s Poetry* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 10.

<sup>5</sup> One critical trend is to read Landon and many other poets of 1820s and 1830s as, to some extent, sell-outs: authors who commercialize art and produce derivative, cozy, domesticated versions of romanticism. See Stevenson, “Miss Landon,”; Nemoianu, *The Taming of Romanticism*, 41-77; Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1992), 66; Tucker, “House Arrest”; Riess, “Laetitia Landon and the Dawn of English Post-Romanticism”; Jerome McGann and Daniel Riess, introduction to *Letitia Elizabeth Landon: Selected Writings* (Orchard Park: Broadview, 1997).

process.”<sup>6</sup> While I agree with the first part of this statement, that Landon is no mere prostitute of her talents, I prefer to deemphasize her role as a market-savvy entrepreneur. In my view, Landon’s power as an author need not be attached to the market forces within which she worked and which she knew intimately. Her work is better read as complicit in the disintegration of the Wordsworthian self that pervades late romantic British letters. I read Landon’s inconsistencies as part of a mindset that has emancipated her from the Enlightenment, and subsequently from the romantic, celebration of the free-thinking individual. It is no longer a matter of doubting the romantic artist as self-generating creator alienated from society and culture. It is a matter of doubting the existence of the subject *qua* subject.

Glennis Byron notes that the seminal dramatic monologues of Tennyson and Browning are often thought to be the poems that challenged the “supposedly autonomous, authoritative and unified Romantic subject,” instead “constructing a self that is...the unfixed, fragmented product of various social and historical forces.”<sup>7</sup> I support this theory, adding that Landon’s role in this renegotiation process must not be underestimated. Her texts likewise challenge the link between the “I” and its author, only not so much within the discursive structure of each particular text—as in a Tennyson/Browning dramatic monologue—as throughout her career, encouraging readers

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<sup>6</sup> Ghislaine McDayter, “Celebrity, Gender and the Death of the Poet: The Mystery of Letitia Elizabeth Landon,” in *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, ed. Charles Mahoney (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 346.

<sup>7</sup> Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 42-43.

to assume that the two are linked, and then splintering the unification of the “I” while the assumption is secure in the reader’s mind.<sup>8</sup>

The rest of this chapter is divided into three sections, each of which explains in what sense and to what extent Landon’s chameleonic texts “work.” The first section offers a paradigm for understanding how her “I” simultaneously suggests and denies “character.” I compare the conflicting voices of her speakers to the vacillating voices of “Lui,” the financially-strapped, overshadowed, middle-class French entertainer of *Rameau’s Nephew*. Just as most guesses concerning the latter’s true motivations/allegiances as a character are as valid as most others, so it is with Landon, who eludes critical pinpointing by leading readers in one viable direction now and in another viable direction later. Her texts on the same subjects are playful, sentimental, morose, severe, pious and back to playful again—and replete with contradictions. Nothing approximating her overarching “ethos” is quite determinable (although, perhaps, one can make a case for a series of ethos “clusters”). The second section examines some of the most important high romantic discourses wherein her voices conflict: the purpose and nature of poetry, the imagination and materialism/spiritualism. Her inconsistencies on these subjects demonstrate that Landon challenges romanticism not only, as McGann and others have argued, by negating it, but by alternately championing and negating its core values and making the whole affair seem unimportant and arbitrary.

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<sup>8</sup> Glennis Stephenson admits that, in Landon’s case, the “I” is never to be identified with the author. But she also “add[s] the qualification that the one thing Landon repeatedly does...is encourage the reader to make just such an identification” (*Letitia Landon: The Woman Behind L. E. L.*, 73).

The last section narrows the focus and looks at Landon's relationship to William Wordsworth. If Landon's text tend to "stage" or attitudinize both romanticism and anti-romanticism, Wordsworthianism and anti-Wordsworthianism receive considerable treatment. Landon trivializes the serious business of Wordsworth's philosophical poetry by "wearing" it now and again, by casting it as part of an intellectual system not worth direct and consistent negation. She pays Wordsworth homage here and derides him there—and all the while seems to be wrestling with no great level of influential "anxiety." In her case the anxiety of influence appears to have moved beyond anxiety altogether. Influence is relaxed. Or it is not so much a flowing in, an influx, an *in-fluere*, but a flowing on or around. It can be pushed aside or rubbed off, put on, removed. Harold Bloom claims that when a "strong, authentic"<sup>9</sup> poet (from the Renaissance onward) writes a poem, that poem is an unraveling of his personal anxiety at having been preceded by another strong, authentic poet—mostly male poets entangled in virtual father-son relationships. For Bloom, the strong poem itself is a record of anxiety. I think that almost the reverse is true in Landon's case. She is a "strong poet" in proportion as she presents herself as immune (not unconsciously beholden) to a fanatical need to misinterpret old poets in an effort to feel confident and autonomous as an artist.

I suspect that critics can find inconsistency in most authors if they look closely enough for it. My claim in this chapter (which holds for the following one as well) is that Landon's ideological inconsistency is not only exceptional but animated by a subtle and subversive politics that attacks "character" without seeming to—often, indeed, while

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<sup>9</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1997), 30.

seeming to plead the case for “character.” A thorough examination of her work reveals that she remains deeply suspicious of constancy as an ethic.<sup>10</sup> In this chapter’s epigraph she refers to constancy as “a series of small inconstancies, which never come to any thing.” Constancy is not faithfulness or steady adherence, so much as many tiny, sequential and abortive instances of unfaith. Nor, however, does her work suggest that she locates some radical or liberating ethic in inconstancy. What I mean is that I hesitate to compare her motivations as an artist to those of another famous writer on inconsistency, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson applauds inconsistency as a distinctly ethical alternative to the stagnancy that comes with retaining all of one’s prejudices:

With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said to-day.—‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood.’—Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.<sup>11</sup>

Landon is not interested in pushing this sort of ethical program on her readers. To be both “great” and “misunderstood” by inverting the ethic of consistency is to pledge devotion to

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<sup>10</sup> At the book stage, I may choose to investigate the connection between the sexual inconstancy in Landon’s personal life and the political/ideological inconstancy in her literary texts. She is now known to have given birth to three illegitimate children in her long and adulterous love affair with the publisher William Jerdan.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *Essays: First and Second Series*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), 1:58-59.

an idea possibly as delusional as the first. Landon does not live and die with any party. Her textual politics challenges the idea of partisanship altogether. Is it at this point, moreover, that I break with the criticism of Jacques Khalip, who argues that a few late romantics (Hazlitt, Keats, the Shelleys) strive after subject-less-ness for ethical reasons.<sup>12</sup>

### **1. Landon as *Lui***

Landon holds an exceptional place in the canon of British romantic writers insofar as critics can oppose one another diametrically (and repeatedly) on basic points concerning her aesthetic and cultural allegiances. In *Romanticism and Gender*, Anne Mellor writes that Landon is “entirely complicit in her culture’s construction of female beauty, rewriting her own life and subjectivity to conform to preexisting categories. Sorrow, Beauty, Love, Death—these are the subjects of Landon’s poetry.”<sup>13</sup> Glennis Stephenson agrees that Landon writes about “love, erotic passion, feelings”—but stresses this as an act merely to secure “popularity with the public.” Behind the scenes Landon is an “astute businesswoman with a pressing need to make a living” and a “keen sense of the literary market.” But Stephenson studies only Landon’s poetry (leaving her novels completely out), and so it comes as no surprise when she claims that, instead of “distinguishing the various figures” in her texts, Landon “tends to draw them closer and closer together until they all appear as subtexts of one highly personalised, feminised

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<sup>12</sup> According to Khalip, certain late romantics who cultivate “anonymity” as writers free themselves from the “troubling *ethical* bonds of subjectivity.” As “impoverished subjects, absented from social recognition and self-display,” these authors “became instances of new potentialities that found ethical...value in projects that maintained the anonymous *as* anonymous, in stark opposition to the logic of personhood” (*Anonymous Life*, 4-5).

<sup>13</sup> Anne Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 114.

primary text—a primary text that is, basically...L.E.L. speaking the heart.”<sup>14</sup> Tricia Lootens is one of the first critics to challenge this homogenization of Landon’s poetic voices. According to Lootens, “Letitia Landon did more than write or enact poetic femininity” in her verse: she was also a satirist, a moralist and an artist who “indulged in cosmic weariness and epigrammatic, often bleak humor.”<sup>15</sup>

I take Lootens’s revisionist claim for granted. I also think it has critical implications yet to be addressed. It is a fact that Landon wears many masks and writes in many modes. It is also a fact that her poems reproduce a variety of popular sentiment. But we need not conclude from these facts that her career is primarily an affair of opportunism and subsequent personal regret.<sup>16</sup> There is instead a freedom and mobility in her texts’ casual disregard for the value of subjectivity and self-representation. If the high romantic artist positions the subject outside or on the fringes of culture, Landon renegotiates the spatial arrangement. She locates the subject in the immediate center of culture and ideology and allows these twin forces to do their inevitable shaping work.

The eponymous protagonist of Denis Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew* startlingly anticipates Landon’s treatment of subjectivity. Diderot wrote *Rameau’s Nephew*, a

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<sup>14</sup> Stephenson, *Letitia Landon: The Woman Behind L. E. L.*, 2, 14, 4, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Tricia Lootens, “Receiving the Legend, Rethinking the Writer: Letitia Landon and the Poetess Tradition,” in *Romanticism and Women Poets: Opening the Doors of Reception*, ed. Harriet Kramer Linkin and Stephen Behrendt (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1999), 251, 254-55.

<sup>16</sup> Leighton considers Landon a poet who *knows* that she has “wasted her gifts instead of nurturing them” (*Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart*, 66). McGann and Riess observe that her “rehears[al] [of] established forms and ideas” is part of “a poetic discourse of personal disillusionment” (introduction to *Letitia Elizabeth Landon: Selected Writings*, 23). Riess supposes that Landon is “[d]isgusted by the degradation of poetry by the annuals, yet dependent upon them for her continued existence...The result is a poetry of self-destruction” (“Laetitia Landon and the Dawn of English Post-Romanticism,” 823).

philosophical dialogue, in the 1760s and 1770s. Goethe translated it into German in 1805 and an authentic French version of it appeared in 1823. (Landon published *The Improvisatrice* in the following year. Whether she read *Rameau's Nephew* is a matter of speculation—although she knew her French.) Diderot models the main character of his dialogue, called *Lui*, after Jean-François Rameau, nephew to the great composer Jean-Philippe Rameau. *Lui* is a bizarre and unpredictable performer-extemporizer of culture, of ethics, of his own life. He recognizes that “every man takes one or another ‘position’ as the choreography of society directs,” and “[w]ith the mimetic skill which is the essence of his being, [he] demonstrates how he performs the dance upon which his survival depends.” Importantly, it is precisely because he is mimetic that *Lui* possesses that “liberty...we wish to believe is inherent in the human spirit...in its consciousness of itself and its limitless contradictions.” As an improvising artist he “invokes...moral categories at the same time that he negates them.”<sup>17</sup>

I would describe the Landonian “I” in similar terms. It evokes aesthetic/political/moral categories *and* negates them—only not immediately and overtly. Its negation of these categories lies in its many casual, tongue-in-cheek contradictions of its own professed doctrines. The “I” uses a rhetorical posture of sincerity to advocate for the position *x* in, say, a novel. Within that very novel it may use the same rhetorical posture of sincerity to argue for a position opposite to *x*. Or it may be the case that two first-person poetic speakers—in different poems within the same collection—advance opposite ideologies, even as Landon identifies herself as author and “I” in that collection’s preface. I do not mean to imply that Landon is devilishly conscious of each instance of

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<sup>17</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972), 31-33.

ideological contradiction and the “trick” it plays on her readers. My point is that her texts seem to emerge from an a priori dissolution of the idea of character. Her countless clashing texts problematize the very idea of the valuing subject. They suggest an arbitrariness at the root of personal advocacy.

*Rameau's Nephew* consists of *Lui* and the narrator, *Moi*, having a long and funny philosophical conversation in a fashionable Parisian café. Rameau enters the scene having just lost his position as a sort of clown-servant in the house of the wealthy state treasurer, Bertin, for insulting his mistress (the actress Mademoiselle Hus) in a moment of weakness and exasperation. The narrator, more or less an upright, respectable and practical citizen, urges Rameau to return to the house of Bertin, apologize for his offense and perhaps get his job back before he is replaced:

All the same, I should go along with that ravaged face, those wild eyes, shirt torn open, tousled hair, in fact in the really tragic state you are in at the moment. I should throw myself at the goddess's feet, glue my face to the ground, and without raising myself address her in a low, sobbing voice: ‘Forgive me, Madame, forgive me, I am an unspeakable wretch. It was just an unfortunate moment...

(The funny thing was that while I was holding forth to him in this way he was doing the actions. He flung himself down with his face pressed to the ground, he seemed to be holding the point of a slipper between his hands, and he wept and sobbed, saying: “Yes, my little

queen, yes, I promise, never in my life, in my life.” Then suddenly  
rising to his feet he went on in a serious and thoughtful tone...)<sup>18</sup>

Exactly as *Moi* advises him, *Lui* is busy melodramatically performing the actions. Throughout the dialogue, in fact, he is nearly all show: when it is his turn to speak he enacts his own words, occasionally beating his forehead with his fist, or cracking his joints, or performing a sonata with an invisible violin (and sweating heavily)— “[o]ne passion after another flitt[ing] across his face...tenderness, anger, pleasure, grief.”<sup>19</sup>

It is simply unclear just who or what Rameau *is* or means to be. He seems to be only what he performs, but at the close of the conversation he is tinged with a plausible affection for his young son. In the end, the dialogue makes no dogmatic assertions about life or human character. It is more of a speculative gesture. It imagines a world where all behavior is performative but never absolutely discounts the possibility or potential value of personal sincerity. The narrator (who in one sense stands for the reader) cannot decide if he should criticize or pity the spectacle Rameau makes of himself. But perhaps Rameau is not meant to be pitied. Perhaps he is not the sad fatalist and materialist he appears, who apes what his patrons expect and despises himself for it. He is just as likely a happy epicurean who embraces a self that emerges in the performance. At one point he admits that his identity is an undecidable mystery—“Devil take me if I really know what I am”<sup>20</sup>—and there is power in this admission. It prevents him from being like the narrator:

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<sup>18</sup> Denis Diderot, “Rameau’s Nephew,” in *Rameau’s Nephew and D’Alambert’s Dream*, trans. Leonard Tancock (New York: Penguin, 1966), 48.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

fixed, inflexible, patterned after a single persona and set of habits that make him both stable and stagnant.

The wild image of *Lui*, enacting the advice of *Moi* without openly evaluating its merit, illustrates how a text by Landon operates beneath the surface. Nor should this comparison surprise us. Landon wrote in the center of what Virgil Nemoianu calls the Age of Biedermeier (1815-48), characterized in part by a “return to eighteenth-century attitudes.”<sup>21</sup> Her novel *Romance and Reality* (1831) is more or less one long conversation of sparkling wit and badinage—a faithful recreation of Enlightenment salon culture. Her mature novel *Ethel Churchill* (1837), set in the early eighteenth century, features social landscapes modeled after the paintings of Antoine Watteau, duels among aristocrats and a cast of characters including Lavinia Fenton, Sir Robert Walpole and Alexander Pope.

Angela Esterhammer has associated Landon with the improvisational tradition in eighteenth-century Italy.<sup>22</sup> In a recent essay she writes that “the figure of the improviser allows [Landon and her British contemporaries] to reflect on their own relation to an audience, the often vulnerable status of poets and poetry, and the problematics of celebrity.”<sup>23</sup> I would argue that Landon has a deeper relationship with improvisation than

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<sup>21</sup> Nemoianu, *The Taming of Romanticism*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> In 1824 Landon published *The Improvisatrice*, a long poem about a female Florentine poet who extemporizes verse for her audiences. She also worked closely with the novel *Corinne; or Italy* (1807) by Madame de Staël. Corinne is a fictional character based on the real Italian improvisatrice Corilla Olympica (1728-1800), who was crowned at the Capitol in Rome in 1776. Staël wrote her novel in French, including the spontaneous verses performed by Corinne before audiences (readers were invited to imagine that the French prose was an inferior version of the unknown Italian poems Corinne “actually” sang). Landon converted the French prose-songs into iambic pentameter verse for an 1833 English translation of the novel.

<sup>23</sup> Angela Esterhammer, “Spontaneity, Immediacy, and Improvisation in Romantic Poetry,” in *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, 334.

this formulation implies. First, as an essayist, novelist and dramatist, she is more than a poet writing about what it means to be a poet. Second, her texts not only *use* an improvisational tradition but are themselves improvisations: their casual disregard for the Wordsworthian, depth-model of the self is at the heart of their Italian and Della Cruscan style. Esterhammer notes elsewhere that the eighteenth-century Italian improviser, on stage, “seems to create not only new verses, but a *new identity*, on each occasion and for every audience, in a manner that may strike spectators as impetuous, opportunistic, or too overtly performative.”<sup>24</sup> Landon creates in a similar fashion. She writes as if the identity of the author is a product, not a catalyst, of art. For this reason Landon, not Keats, is the true chameleon author.

## 2. A Chameleonic Corpus

In a letter to Richard Woodhouse, dated 27 October 1818, John Keats observes that a poet

has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetic and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none; no identity...he has no self, and if I am a Poet...not one word I ever utter can be taken for

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., *Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 7.

granted as a opinion growing out of my identical nature—how can  
it, when I have no nature?<sup>25</sup>

I suggest that this credo applies to Landon more than to any other romantic poet, even Keats. Her identity is always indeterminable. The “I” she uses in poems and novels and essays and letters and even footnotes is consistently inconsistent. Keats may champion the notion that the poet has no identity, but as an author and thinker he is easier to characterize than Landon: we can more or less agree on whether an idea is Keatsian, whether Keats would want to claim it and adopt it and flesh it out in his poetry. Along with the other canonical romantics (Lord Byron perhaps excepted), Keats struggles to establish a coherent theory of poetry.<sup>26</sup> Blake has the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (a sort of manifesto, though admittedly less about poetry than printing), Wordsworth the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge the *Biographia Literaria*, Shelley the *Defence of Poetry* and Keats the concepts of the characterless poet, negative capability and others. Landon maintains no such systematic theory as to what poetry is and should do. On a few occasions she claims that it should teach us to be less selfish and materialistic, but she is unwilling to attach herself even to her own theory. She compromises and changes it over time. In this respect her career leans toward the opposite of what David Perkins calls the romantic “quest for permanence.” Insofar as the concept of permanence implies the development of a durable and confident theory of poetry—or at least the struggle to

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<sup>25</sup> John Keats, *The Selected Letters of John Keats*, ed. Lionel Trilling (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951), 152.

<sup>26</sup> According to Marshall Brown, what separates preromantic from romantic authors is the importance to the latter of coming up with affirmative documents about the writing process (*Preromanticism* [Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001], 2-3).

arrive at one and live it out in art—Landon operates comfortably under a poetics of *impermanence*.

Her best-known statement on the role of the poet is a short article, “On the Ancient and Modern Influence of Poetry,” published anonymously in *The New Monthly Magazine* in 1832. In the article she claims that throughout history poetry has had two main functions: in the ancient world it civilized the savage, and in the modern world it prevents civilization from “growing too cold and too selfish.” Poetry elevates our human nature: it nurtures our rational and ethical and beautiful qualities, and suppresses whatever in us is crude or degenerate. The “best and most popular . . . poetry makes its appeal to the higher and better feelings of our nature.” It is made up of “spiritual awakenings, and deep and tender thoughts” that the poet can enlist in a war against materialism, utilitarianism, selfishness, the “hurry and the highways of life.” In brief, poetry brings spiritual heat back to the cold and over-refined. And although poetry should be both beautiful and original, beautiful poetry alone is better than none at all.<sup>27</sup>

In her preface to the *Venetian Bracelet, The Lost Pleiad, The History of the Lyre, and Other Poems* (1829), Landon anticipates “On the Ancient and Modern Influence of Poetry”:

A highly cultivated state of society must ever have for concomitant evils, that selfishness, the result of indolent indulgence; and that heartlessness attendant on refinement, which too often hardens while it polishes. Aware that to elevate I must first soften, and that if I wished to purify I must first touch, I have ever endeavoured to

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<sup>27</sup> Landon, *Critical Writings*, 62.

bring forward grief, disappointment, the fallen leaf, the faded flower, the broken heart, and the early grave. Surely we must be[come] less worldly, less interested, from this sympathy with sorrow in which our unselfish feelings alone can take part.<sup>28</sup>

Here Landon casts herself as a poet whose mission is to extend human sympathies. I find it interesting that she justifies her repetitiveness on the grounds that it is ethically motivated. She lists a few of the macabre images and plots recycled in her poems as if half-admitting how formulaic and lifeless they become with overuse. But she also implies that they are necessary, as medicine to the sick or punishment to the recalcitrant. Her poems are supposed to work by the steady and gradual administration of the same effect, again and again, exposing the self-absorbed reader to one opportunity for imaginative sympathy after another. The reader is healed by small doses of tenderness. One of the poems in the *Venetian Bracelet* volume, "A Summer Evening's Tale," repeats the premises advanced in the preface:

Oh, never had the poet's lute a hope,  
An aim so glorious as it now may have,  
In this our social state, where petty cares  
And mercenary interests only look  
Upon the present's littleness  
...  
Where the smooth surface of society

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., preface to *The Venetian Bracelet, The Lost Pleiad, The History of the Lyre, and Other Poems*, in *The Complete Works of L. E. Landon* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1854), 2:102.

Is polish'd by deceit, and the warm heart  
With all its kind affections' early flow,  
Flung back upon itself, forgets to beat,  
At least for others:—'tis the poet's gift  
To melt these frozen waters into tears,  
By sympathy with sorrows not our own

...

Young poet, if thy dreams have not such hope  
To purify, refine, exalt, subdue,  
To touch the selfish, and to shame the vain  
Out of themselves

...

If thou hast not some power that may direct  
The mind from the mean round of daily life,  
Waking affections that might else have slept,  
Or high resolves, the petrified before,  
Or rousing in that mind a finer sense  
Of inward and external loveliness,  
Making imagination serve as guide  
To all of heaven that yet remains on earth,—  
Thine is a useless lute: break it, and die.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., "A Summer Evening's Tale," in *PWL*, 330-31.

According to these lines the poet is the moral and aesthetic savior of a cold and calculating civilization. In moral terms she is sent to heal the small-minded, the covetous, the selfish and the unambitious. Her lute can “melt” the “frozen waters” of the human heart that, “[f]lung back upon itself, forgets to beat,” or it can “touch the selfish” and “shame the vain/ Out of themselves.” In aesthetic terms the role of the poet is to “rous[e] in th[e] mind a finer sense/ Of inward and external loveliness.”

In all three locations, article, preface and poem, an “I” argues that poetry should generate human sympathies and promote high-cultural ideals.<sup>30</sup> A humanist aesthetic is preached. But how do we reconcile this voice with other voices that seem set on contradicting it? The narrator of *Romance and Reality*, a skeptical, Rochefoucauldian “I,” writes that “the poet feeds the fever in his veins—works himself up to the belief of imaginary sorrows, till they are even as his own.”<sup>31</sup> This statement seems to challenge the sympathetic program advanced in “A Summer Evening’s Tale.” The poet who, in the words of that poem, encourages our “sympathy with sorrows not our own,” is here more delusional than didactic: he writes to “fee[d] the fever in his veins.” The same narrator

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<sup>30</sup> Judith Pascoe observes that Landon is “more interested in theatrical effect than hortative value” (*Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry, and Spectatorship* [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997], 235). This comment seems inapplicable here. The essay, preface and poem all stress the “hortative value” poetry has or should have.

<sup>31</sup> Landon, *Romance and Reality*, ed. F. J. Sypher (Delmar: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1998), 2:45. We may read this statement as romantic irony, in addition to reading it as a “sincere” sentiment Landon encourages readers to consider her own. Perhaps it ironizes Wordsworth’s similar claim in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*: “it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time, perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure” (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *William Wordsworth: What Wordsworth calls a purpose-driven “delusion” Landon calls a “fever,” in a sense pathologizing Wordsworthian sympathy.*

says elsewhere that “Fear and sorrow are the sources of sympathy; the misfortunes of others come home to those who are anticipating their own.”<sup>32</sup> These are forceful words, which ascribe commiseration to selfish fears and seem to be part of a distinctly *anti-sympathetic* ethos.

Wordsworth famously asked what a poet is and how a poet should write. Landon is flexible and noncommittal in her answers. In one place she identifies writing verse as a bodily indulgence. “[L]ike all pleasures,” she claims in a letter, “it is dearly bought; it is always succeeded by extreme depression of spirits, and an overpowering sense of bodily fatigue.”<sup>33</sup> Poetic composition is a pleasure that thrills and afflicts; the raw material of it moves through, exhilarates and enervates the writer. Elsewhere she writes that poetry emanates from the human body, specifically the dazzling female body in the midst of social intercourse. In a passage from *Romance and Reality*, the narrator describes a beautiful woman at the Athenaeum as the living incarnation of poetry. She has a

song-like voice...laugh, like the sound of a shell which...is filled with morning sunshine and bursts into music...wit...whose acid was...of champagne, whose pearls dance on the surface and melt into blending sweetness—Ah! one moment’s pause—I have renounced poetry, of which, sweet lady, you were to me the embodied spirit.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 2:13.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., *Letters: by Letitia Elizabeth Landon*, ed. F. J. Sypher (Ann Arbor: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 2001), 168. This edition of Landon’s letters is hereafter abbreviated as *LL*.

<sup>34</sup> Landon, *Romance and Reality*, 1:277.

Here the ideal is trapped or contained in the real. The spirit of poetry flashes in the voice and laughter and wit of a beautiful woman, modeled on someone Landon knew well—Rosina Bulwer-Lytton. The fact that the woman described here is based on one of Landon’s personal friends suggests that Landon herself is behind the “I,” or at least that she encourages her readers to think so. But then is she also behind the narrating “I” of *Francesca Carrara* (1834), who associates poetry with something barely within our intellectual grasp: with “the light” or “luminous aspect of some still summer star...poetry...the faint echo of the mysteries of the universe—the beautifier and unraveller”?<sup>35</sup> In this single excerpt poetry is described as distant starlight; then the “luminous aspect” of a star; then an echo of cosmic mysteries; then something that beautifies; then something that reveals or “unravel[s].”

The human imagination is another ambivalently described concept: alternately divine and Satanic. In “A Summer Evening’s Tale,” we recall that the imagination is “a guide/ To all of heaven that yet remains on earth.” The narrator of *Francesca Carrara* refers to it as “man’s noblest and most spiritual faculty,” one that “ever dwells on the to-come.”<sup>36</sup> And yet the same narrator writes that “[n]othing...frames such false estimates as the imaginative temperament. It finds the power of creation so easy, the path it fashions so actual...and the fancied world appears the true copy of the real.”<sup>37</sup> The implication here (à la Samuel Johnson) is that the imagination is verisimilar to a fault. The eponymous heroine of *Francesca Carrara* speaks of the wiles of the imagination, “which, like a spring confined to one spot, collects its pure waters, and is at once a beauty and a

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., *Francesca Carrara*, 2:263.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 3:160-61.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 1:113.

blessing; but which, allowed to spread abroad in every direction, oozes through the marshy earth, becomes stagnant, and is habited by the loathsome reptile,” until what “would have been a green haunt, with its fair fountain, is a dreary and useless quagmire.”<sup>38</sup> The point of Francesca’s simile seems to be that the imagination is harmless, even beautiful, when under control, but deleterious when overindulged. And worse, it is very hard for a person not to overindulge it. By nature it is a serpentine and elusive power. When active it does whatever it can to resist the control of the mind that operates it: “[t]he imagination shuns to reveal its workings, unless it can clothe them in some lovely and palpable shape.”<sup>39</sup> One and the same novel conceives of the imagination as a guide to both heaven and hell.

Landon often sounds like genuine materialist and cynic. One of her speakers laments “the so false exterior of the world!/ Outside, all looks so fresh and beautiful;/ But mildew, rot, and worm, work on beneath,/ Until the heart is utterly decay’d.”<sup>40</sup> Another writes that “Constancy is made up of a series of small inconstancies, which never come to any thing; and the heart takes credit for its loyalty, because in the long-run it ends where it began.”<sup>41</sup> Some critics read passages like these and agree that the rhetoric of the melancholy poetess is a sham, but assume that the next step is to lend most or all credence to its opposite—the disillusioned artist who is all polish and wit and coldness. Daniel Riess claims that Landon treats “the Romantic vision of a poetry which transcends commercial exploitation [as] an illusion”; McGann and Riess, that her “self-consciously

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 1:168-69.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1:227.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., “Roland’s Tower,” in *PWL*, 276.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., *Romance and Reality*, 3:111.

quotational writing works to demystify the ancient authority of poetry”; Mellor, that she “[i]mplicitly embrace[s] David Hume’s skeptical argument that the mind can only know the empirical sensations transmitted through the body”; and Craciun, that she exposes the “material properties of imagination, corporeal properties that Wordsworth tried to put to sleep.”<sup>42</sup> These pronouncements can only be made under the presumption that one set of like-minded minded speakers can represent the Landonian ethos. But these criticisms have only a partial truth. We cannot use Landon’s language in a few passages as evidence of her materialism any more than we can use some of her other, more vaporous and metaphysical language as evidence of her Neoplatonism. (Admittely, poetry critics always pick and choose, so that, for instance, the “true” Wordsworth is the poet of the *Prelude* and not the *Excursion*.)

Landon just as often writes of delicate and *immaterial* realities, as if roused by the same speculative passions as Percy Shelley,<sup>43</sup> whose influence in the following excerpts is clear:

O earth,

Yet art thou touch’d by heaven, though only touch’d,—

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<sup>42</sup> Riess, “Laetitia Landon and the Dawn of English Post-Romanticism,” 807-27, 824; McGann and Riess, introduction to *Letitia Elizabeth Landon: Selected Writings*, 23; Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, 120; Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, 200.

<sup>43</sup> Michael O’Neill is the first critic to write at length about the intertextual relationship between Landon and Shelley. He claims that “we may be wise to take issue with the view that Landon, at her poetic best, is most finely understood as an undermining critic of Romantic illusion” or a “pitiless unmasker of Romantic poetry.” According to O’Neill, Landon both “sympathizes” with and “qualifies” Shelley’s poetry. If she “does not disavow its hold of her imagination” entirely, she nonetheless “withholds total assent from his vision” (“Beautiful but Ideal’: Intertextual Relations between Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Percy Bysshe Shelley,” in *Fellow Romantics: Male and Female British Writers, 1790-1835*, ed. Beth Lau [Burlington: Ashgate, 2009], 215, 211).

Thy pleasures are but rainbows, which unite  
The glad heavens with thee in their transient beauty,  
Then melt away again upon the clouds.<sup>44</sup>

Beauty is the shadow flung from heaven on earth—it is the type of  
a lovelier and more spiritual existence, and the broken and  
transitory lights that it flings on this our sad and heavy pilgrimage,  
do but indicate another and a better sphere, where the beautiful  
also will be the everlasting.<sup>45</sup>

I am often tempted to liken our mental world to a shadow flung on  
water from some other world—broken, wavering, and of uncertain  
brightness.<sup>46</sup>

...love, which, though tried, thwarted, and turned aside from its  
perfectness in the wayfaring below, is still the animating spirit of  
the universe.<sup>47</sup>

The first three passages view earthly life as the shadow of a heavenly or quasi-platonic  
reality. In the sublunary world one can feel only intimations of a wonderful existence  
beyond comprehension. Mortal pleasures and beautiful objects are evanescent tastes or

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<sup>44</sup> Landon, "The Mountain Grave," in *PWL*, 343.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, "No. 8.—Isabel Vere," in Laman Blanchard, *Life and Literary Remains of L. E. L.*, vol. 2 (London: Henry Colburn, 1841), 114-15.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, *Romance and Reality*, 2:24.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, *Francesca Carrara*, 2:265.

fractions of eternity. The language here has Christian affiliations, but it is obscure enough to suggest the pleasure Landon feels in dwelling in the uncertainty or liminality of faintly resonant imagery. It is not the crisp and clear-cut Christianity touted by her poetic speakers in *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap-Book*, who condemn eastern idolatry in the name of Church and King. There Christ and God are named; here the closest we come to Christian doctrine is the mention of human life as a pilgrimage, of heaven and eternity. The fourth excerpt, holding that "love" is the "animating spirit of the universe," may be compared to Percy Shelley's *The Daemon of the World* (1816), in which the daemon or intermediary spirit, Love, comes to the sleeping Ianthe in a chariot and grants her temporary access to the Platonic flame behind the veil of life and the senses.<sup>48</sup>

Landon not only borrows from Shelley his "delight in the abstract and the ideal,"<sup>49</sup> but also imitates his peculiar style, as described at length by William Keach. She uses imagery to express the operations of the human mind, making sensory images the tenors of metaphors or similes and mental activities the vehicles (as in a cloud that moves as swift as thought); or she describes images and objects in a way that makes them seem to evanesce or dissolve in our imagination; or she writes reflexively, analyzing an "object or action" by comparing it, "implicitly or explicitly, to an aspect of itself."<sup>50</sup> A good example of reflexive writing occurs in her poem "The Dream," spontaneously recited by a Scottish

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<sup>48</sup> Landon seriously qualifies the idea that love is the "animating spirit of the universe," spoken by the narrator of *Francesca Carrara*, in her poem "The Lost Pleiad." In that poem the speaker observes that "Love is of heavenly birth,/ But turns to death in touching earth" ("The Lost Pleiad," in *PWL*, 198).

<sup>49</sup> Mary Shelley, preface to *The Poetic Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, in Matilda, *Dramas, Reviews and Essays, Prefaces and Notes*, vol. 2 of *NSWS*, 257.

<sup>50</sup> William Keach, *Shelley's Style* (New York: Methuen, 1984), 79.

minstrel in *The Golden Violet*, in which the “lowering sky” “gather[s] darkly,” “[a]s if fearing its own obscurity.”<sup>51</sup>

Or take her conflicting views on remembrance. If memory for Wordsworth is the stuff of salvation, a shred of divinity in us that unifies our lives and connects new consciousnesses with old, for Landon it *is* nothing: like everything else its essence is indeterminable. It is destructive: it looks on the past as a series of “wrecks,” as “[a]ffections wasted, pleasures fed,/ And hopes now numbered with the dead.”<sup>52</sup> It is utilitarian: “We remember but what can be put to present use.” It is deceiving: whatever “we felt” in the past is necessarily “faint and uncertain in its record.”<sup>53</sup> And it is salvific: “Hope springs up in joy from Memory’s ashes.”<sup>54</sup> We cannot explain the sentimental variety here unless we see all discourses and rhetorics as ephemeral, assumed in and through and for the utterance alone.

### 3. Ad Hoc Wordsworthianism

Most of the poems I cite in the rest of this chapter were originally published in a fashionable literary annual, *Fisher’s Drawing Room Scrap-Book*, between 1832 and 1838. Landon excels at writing for an annual (a *mélange* of genres and modes) because she is a master of ideological variety. She can perform in short lyric poems whatever popular idea or doctrine a given engraving suggests to her. Often her poems read as advertisements for ideologies: straightforward, catchy and easily digestible. But the rub is that, as quasi-advertisements, the poems are performatively expressed and only coated

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<sup>51</sup> Letitia Landon, *The Golden Violet*, in *PWL*, 130.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, untitled epigraph, in *Ethel Churchill*, 2:201.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, *Romance and Reality*, 2:162.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, “The Guerilla Chief,” in *PWL*, 282.

with a veneer of sincerity. Considered in the collective they suggest an author who half-expects the reading public to extract ideologies from them and—to whatever extent—fetishize these ideologies along with the knickknacks and second-hand art advertised in the same volumes. In my view this is what gives Landon a sense of power. Her speakers are all earnestness and conviction, and she allows if not encourages readers to interpret their sentiments as hers—which they customarily did.<sup>55</sup> But her various literary modes and all the incompatible ideas she appears to endorse indicate that her view of art has little or nothing to do with the subjectivity of the artist. Instead she comes across as more of a faceless shuffler and artificer of doctrines. Whatever sense of the personal character of the poet we can draw from the texts is, at best, an accident or epiphenomenon of the creative process.

The “poetical illustrations”—short lyric poems—meant to describe or somehow complement the engravings in *Fisher’s* demonstrate how easily and conveniently a Wordsworthian aesthetic is adopted and discarded. Landon was often assigned to write companion poems for engravings depicting natural scenery, and she made use of Wordsworthian ideas and language to drive her points home. But in the end her texts resist classification: one of her speakers (she almost always uses the “I”) is all but a disciple of Wordsworth and another seems long ago to have dismissed his philosophy as naïve and inadequate. Each poetic disposition has the feel of something extemporized and meant to sound inspired, credited, validated by the author. But sooner or later another poem presents a speaker of a different persuasion—although still as earnest-sounding as

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<sup>55</sup> Stephenson notes that nineteenth-century readers were quick to identify the “poet with the poem,” especially when the poet was female (*Letitia Landon: The Woman Behind L. E. L.*, 6).

the first. In the end we arrive at two conclusions. The first is that where Landon stands on Wordsworthian doctrine is ambivalent and indeterminable. The second is that this indeterminability is pervasive and important: the freedom with which Landon's first-person speakers change persuasions suggests her awareness that love of nature is an ideological construct rather than a spiritual reality.

Consider the poem "Linmouth" (1833), a companion piece to an engraving of a small rural valley in north Devon.<sup>56</sup> The poem is an encomium to London life mixed with some light derision of rural sensibilities. One short credo in it stands out: "There's more for thought in one brief hour/ In yonder busy street,/ Than all that ever leaf or flower/ Taught in their green retreat." These lines speak directly to a moral sentiment in "The Tables Turned," a short poem by Wordsworth from the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798): "One impulse from a vernal wood/ May teach you more of man,/ Of moral evil and of good,/ Than all the sages can."<sup>57</sup> It is clear that "Linmouth" is something of a response to "The Tables Turned," which stands as a sort of predecessor-poem. Each text uses the meter of the ballad stanza and its less common rhyme scheme (*abab*). The syntactical structures of the stanzas quoted above are similar. Both poems make declarations about environments that initiate deep thought. The speaker of "The Tables Turned" is clearly a more solitary

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<sup>56</sup> See "Linmouth," in *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap-Book, 1833* (London: H. Fisher, R. Fisher, and P. Jackson, 1833 [1832]), 39-40. All subsequent references to *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap-Book* are abbreviated as *F*, followed by the last two digits of the year of a particular volume's release, not the year of its actual publication (the *Fisher's* volume "for" 1833, for instance—bearing the date "1833" on its frontispiece—was actually published late in 1832). The text of a given poem (including Landon's footnotes) appears on the page number(s) indicated afterward. For instance, "Linmouth" is taken from *F*32, 39-40.

<sup>57</sup> William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, ed. Martin Scofield (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2003), lines 21-24.

figure, a lover of nature who “watches and receives” the wisdom inherent in her “beauteous forms.”<sup>58</sup> He is a bit unclear as to how a “vernal wood” can transmit didactic impulses to a person, but insists nonetheless that an individual can find more wisdom in nature than in books (written by “sages”).

“Linmouth” troubles the argument advanced in “The Tables Turned” when it suggests that an urban scene is full of mental stimulants nowhere to be found in the country. In strict formal terms it is a dramatic monologue: an “I” tells readers that London, not a lone spot in southwest England, is where she prefers to learn about human “sorrow, suffering, and thrall,” where she can hear and feel the “hearse [that] passes with its dead” and the “homeless beggar’s prayer.” For this speaker the city is an exciting melting pot of human characters: “A busier scene for me!/ I love to see the human face/ Reflect the human mind,/ To watch in every crowded place/ Their opposites combined.” Landon attaches a footnote to the poem that echoes its speaker:

...that melodramatic morality which talks of rural felicity, and unsophisticated pleasures... Your philosophers inculcate it, your poets rave about it, your every-day people look upon it as something between a pleasure and a duty... I do own I have a most affectionate attachment for London—the deep voice of her multitudes “haunts me like a passion”... I delight in observing the infinite variety of her crowded streets, the rich merchandise of the shops, the vast buildings, whether raised for pomp, commerce, or charity... The country is no more left as it was originally created,

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., lines 32, 27.

than Belgrave Square remains its pristine swamp. The forest has been felled, the marsh drained, the enclosures planted, and the field ploughed. All these...are the work of man's hands; and so is the town—the one is not more artificial than the other.

Here the idea of the country is divested of its romantic grandeur. It is no more natural or pristine or full of the handiwork of providence than its counterpart the city: it is just as "seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil."<sup>59</sup> Landon even borrows a few lines from "Tintern Abbey" to make her point: in that poem "the sounding cataract/ Haunted [the speaker] like a passion," but here the rushing sound of human crowds is said to have the same effect.<sup>60</sup>

A similar detachment from Wordsworthian sentiment is occasionally apparent in Landon's prose fiction. In an English forest before the Gothic church where she is to marry Robert Evelyn, the eponymous heroine of *Francesca Carrara* notices "an uncertain and sad loveliness on the atmosphere, which harmonised with humanity." But lest Francesca indulge in the idea of a pre-established harmony between humankind and nature, the narrator intrudes to discredit it: "There is something in the shadowless sky and the unbroken moonshine which mocks us with repose. We have no part in it; our own unrest has no sympathy with the blue and spiritual horizon, whose hope is not with this life."<sup>61</sup> For this narrator the horizon is cold and silent and alienated from human affairs. It belongs to the hereafter. It may be suggestive (in another context the heavens are said to

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<sup>59</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," l. 6, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 128.

<sup>60</sup> Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, lines 77-78.

<sup>61</sup> Landon, *Francesca Carrara*, 3:313.

speak “in silence and in sign”),<sup>62</sup> but it is ultimately insignificant. Only a person who is “superstitious...finds similitudes” or harmonies between natural phenomena and human existence.<sup>63</sup>

In spite of these suggestively “urban” comments, Landon may be considered an “urban” author only in terms of a given text, although some critics argue otherwise. McGann and Riess refer to her as a “distinctly...urban writer.”<sup>64</sup> Craciun observes that her “distinctly urban outlook has been overlooked,” and that her “urban sensibility places her squarely in the camp of Byron and the eighteenth-century salon culture which intrigued her.”<sup>65</sup> In my view the words “distinctly” and “squarely” tend to overstate the case. Landon did write silver-fork novels and was certainly intrigued by eighteenth-century culture, but it is misleading to emphasize her urban sensibilities any more than her rural sensibilities. Both are located in the text rather than in the author.

When Landon criticizes love of nature and the country she almost always uses richly stylized language, full of undisguised artifice and wit and rhetorical flourishes. In a letter to her friend Katherine Thomson she writes:

Nothing, I grant, is more luxurious than the gush of fresh air, the sweep of green fields, the fine old trees and the twilight of summer; but it is coming from streets, it is the very knowledge that your pleasure is passing as you enjoy it, that makes a month or two in the country so delightful...the very poetry of Surrey’s beautiful

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., “A Night in May,” in *PWL*, 319.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., “The Mountain Grave,” in *PWL*, 343.

<sup>64</sup> McGann and Riess, introduction to *Letitia Elizabeth Landon: Selected Writings*, 20.

<sup>65</sup> Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, 236.

landscapes would become prose in time. As for social intercourse there is none...No; "London, my country, city of the soul," I am content to dwell for aye with thee.<sup>66</sup>

According to this passage, rural scenery is pleasant only as a distraction, a diversion, a luxury. A sensible person can have no deep or lasting affection for it. It has no intrinsic merit. Or so the voice behind the text would have us think. But is there any reason to take these statements at face value? Consider the last sentence: there is something careless and stagey about it—an apostrophe to London half-written with a line from another author. Elsewhere Landon tells Katherine Wheeler that she prefers "rosewood and mahogany" chairs to "making a chair of a stump, a table of my knees and par consequence a table cloth of my frock." Or: "give me a metropolitan five hundred a-year in preference to a rural five-thousand." Or: "[h]ow pathetically and sentimentally do I muse on the metropolis, my very dreams are beau-ideals of smoke, lamps, shops and pavements." Or: "I have such a horror of living in the country: hawthorn hedges and unhappy attachments always go together in my mind."<sup>67</sup> These statements are more of an occasional posture or a learned character than an expression of genuine sentiment. They belong to a character that Landon plays—even in her personal letters.

With a little effort one can construct the case that Landon is a "distinctly" rural writer. A good portion of her letters and poems profess an exquisite pleasure in nature—admiring it, studying it, valorizing it. She often left her home in London to visit the northern country estate of her uncle and aunt in Aberford. Her appreciation of the area

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<sup>66</sup> Landon, *LL*, 24.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 32, 35, 36, 54.

and the time spent there complicates her familiar preference for London life. Consider the following excerpts from letters: "I enjoyed all the delights of the country in the most resolute manner, for I got ankle-deep in mud yesterday...beautiful...so richly wooded, and not a vestige of London...perpetual succession of showers driving over the hills, like a flight of arrows...water runs through the grounds...fish...fleet of ducks...two or three islands of water-lilies..."; "I am grown so learned on the transmigration of plants..."; "in the more sunshiny patches, snowdrops, and pink and blue hepatices are beginning to peep out, and the greenhouse gives handsome promise of hyacinths, roses, &c."; "I do not think that we are half grateful enough for the lilacs and laburnums"; "spring has just now its few loveliest days; leaves half out of that soft yellow green, while the fruit trees are just opening their blossoms."<sup>68</sup> The language here sounds unpremeditated and sincere. The reader gets the sense of a poet immersing herself in all the warmth and picturesqueness of grass and rain and plants and flowers, and telling her friends enthusiastically about them. The observation that we ought to be more grateful for certain flora has a particularly artless air to it. Her attention to detail, love of the color and pageant of the changing season and satisfaction in solitude suggest affinities with authors like the Wordsworths and John Clare and Charlotte Smith. But this line of critical thinking is ultimately unreliable. Here too we have to be careful. Private letters, whether "urban-" or "rural-sounding," reveal nothing more authentic about Landon than her fiction. The epistle is not a special repository of subjectivity<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 127, 53-54, 57, 88, 181.

<sup>69</sup> Sypher rightly calls her letters "sparkling epistolary performances," part of a "genre" in which her "achievements...well deserve to be placed beside her many-sided literary accomplishments as poet, novelist, short-story writer, critic, and playwright"

Three poems published in *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap-Book*, "Glengariffe" (F33, 33), "Airey Force" (F34, 1834) and "On Wordsworth's Cottage, Near Grasmere Lake" (F38, 30-32), feature first-person speakers who more or less profess an allegiance to Wordsworthian doctrine, and in all three cases the professions sound sincere.<sup>70</sup> More, Landon makes no real effort to distance herself from her speakers. She does not ironize them or emphasize their status as dramatic characters, as organic minds that utter only what seems necessary or natural to them. She chooses to use the "I," but not so as to signal an entity apart from the author. While it is true that she was handed a set of prints and asked to illustrate them under deadlines (a process that frustrated her), texts like these disclose more than just an author doing what she is told in the quickest and easiest way possible. They suggest someone who has come to grips with the fact that ideologies move in and through the individual, the "I," the artist, and surface in the expression—which *is* the individual. They debunk the romantic ideology *as* ideology far ahead of their time.

"Glengariffe" is a lyrical reflection on the picturesque beauties of Glengariff Bay in County Cork, Ireland, written as a companion piece to an engraving after the British

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(introduction to *LL*, vii). Cynthia Lawford, while she admits that the letters do give some "insights" into the "character" of Landon, argues more assertively that readers who complete them "may wonder what, if anything, they have learned." In other words, nowhere in her personal letters are there any "paragraphs explaining at length [Landon's] feelings for any person or her efforts to write any poem or novel." Her "sentiments" are simply "not to be trusted." In fact, for Lawford the greatest danger to the scholar working with the letters—and I agree—is "that of taking some outlandish opinion she dropped in one letter and using it to bolster an entire argument about her writings. Chances are she has contradicted or reinterpreted the opinion somewhere else in the volume or in unpublished letters or somewhere in her literary corpus." Lawford concludes that the letters may even be *less* "authentic" than the works (Review of *Letters: Letitia Elizabeth Landon, Women's Writing* 11 (2004): 125-26.

<sup>70</sup> See "Glengariffe," in F33, 33; "Airey Force," in F34, 41; and "On Wordsworth's Cottage, Near Grasmere Lake," in F38, 30-32.

artist William Henry Bartlett. The poem reads like a pastiche of Keats and Wordsworth, a tribute to the healing properties of natural beauty. It reproduces some of the familiar language and imagery of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," if not the exact sense of that poem. Its speaker tells us that a mind beset by "feverish moods of discontent" and a "sense of personal nothingness" can find solace in the image of Glengariffe Bay. The mental vision of its beauty "haunt[s]" her imagination so pleasurably that she can picture herself nestled comfortably in the "summer solitude" of its "small wood," a safe, darkened place blanketed with grass and flowers and charmed with the "music" of raindrops heard but not felt. The wood is depicted as a natural shelter that almost entirely conceals an interior space from the elements, except where traces of sunlight filter through the apertures of trees stripped of their leaves by time and lightning. All of this approximates the poetic situation in "Nightingale." In that poem, the poet-speaker finds himself in a state of "drowsy numbness" owing to the rich, almost unbearable happiness he feels when he hears the nightingale sing, and he would perpetuate this calming numbness (acquired through poetry) as long as possible in order to escape the "weariness, the fever, and the fret" of life. He follows the song of the nightingale to a forest glade very similar to the one described in "Glengariffe"—a "forest dim" in midsummer, where "there is no light,/ Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown/ Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways."<sup>71</sup>

"Ode to a Nightingale" ends on an ironic note, when the speaker reveals his suspicions that fancy may be no more than an illusory escape from the inescapable real

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<sup>71</sup> John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale," in *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982), lines 1, 23, 20, 38-40.

world. He is not sure what to believe. Some of this uncertainty or negative capability is operative in “Glengariffe” as well, whose speaker poeticizes the pockets of sunlight stealing into the bower (by means of its dead border trees) as “death/ . . .let[ting] in light and life.” A haven that was pleasant and safe now feels contaminated. But on the whole, the poem ends on a note of Wordsworthian confidence in the animating powers of nature. Nature no longer inspires mixed thoughts of life, repose and death, but “fills the mind/ With natural love, and sweet and gentle thoughts,” the sort that “soothe, and calm, and purify,/ E’n ‘mid a busy wilderness of streets.” These impressions recall the central argument of Wordsworth’s unfinished poem, *The Recluse*—that love of Nature leads to love of mankind<sup>72</sup>—as well as the notion in “Tintern Abbey” that envisioning the “forms of [natural] beauty” (enumerated here as “Morning, and flowers; green grass, and aged trees”) can redeem individuals cramped in “lonely rooms, and mid the din/ Of towns and cities.”<sup>73</sup>

In the following year Landon writes “Airey Force,” a poetic illustration of Airey Force Valley in Cumberland, and a text that encourages the reader to associate Landon herself with a positive endorsement or even internalization of Wordsworthian nature-

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<sup>72</sup> Landon may have encountered this idea in Wordsworth’s *Excursion* (1814), in which the Wanderer describes the necessitarian process according to which love of Nature leads to love of man: “the Man,/ Who . . . communes with the Forms/ Of nature, who with understanding heart/ Doth know and love, such Objects as excite/ No morbid passions, no disquietude,/ No vengeance, and no hatred, needs must feel/ The joy of that pure principle of love/ So deeply, that, unsatisfied with aught/ Less pure and exquisite, he cannot choose/ But seek for objects of a kindred love/ In fellow-natures, and a kindred joy” (Book 4, lines 1201-11). What Landon calls “natural love,” or a love inspired specifically by personal communion with natural forms, is an important derivative of the “pure principle of love” in the *Recluse*.

<sup>73</sup> Wordsworth, “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, lines 24, 26-27.

worship.<sup>74</sup> In the picture, a solitary wayfarer crosses a rickety wooden bridge built just above the rushing water of Airey Force. He is positioned so as to appear tiny in comparison to the magnitude and imposing verticality of the waterfall and surrounding valley, which extend upward along three quarters of the plate. The dark shadows of jutting rocks and overhanging trees throw the whiteness of the torrent into relief and add to the sense of the natural sublime, which the opening of the poem captures:

Aye, underneath yon shadowy side  
I could be fain to fix my home;  
Where dashes down the torrent's pride  
In sparkling wave, and silver foam.

We catch the speaker in the middle of (re)affirming a point when the poem opens: that a reclusive residence among sublime natural forms is superior to urban life. Airey Force has a beautiful, arresting and preternatural sound to it, like “Spirit-music<sup>75</sup> on the air,/ An echo from the world of dreams.” It reminds the speaker of “days of old” when the “hermit” “turned to his cell,/ And left a world where all betrays/ Apart with his own thoughts to dwell”—a better existence “than such vain life/ As is in crowded cities known;/ Where care, repining, grief, and strife,/ Make every passing hour their own.” Granted: resistance to industrial capitalism and city life were poetic commonplaces years before Landon was

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<sup>74</sup> Wordsworth would later eulogize the same location in his “Airey Force Valley” (1842), although his poem errs more on the side of subjective *description* than dramatic monologue, insofar as it omits the “I” of the speaker (see William Wordsworth, “Airey Force Valley,” in *Last Poems, 1821-1850*, ed. Jared Curtis [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999]).

<sup>75</sup> Wordsworth may have had the phrase “spirit-music” in mind when, in “Airey Force Valley,” he describes the soft rustling of ash-trees in the wind as “eye-music” (line 14). If so, the borrowing suggests that Wordsworth was at least a casual reader of annuals (and of Landon).

writing. But the language here seems pieced together from Wordsworth (whom Landon is used to quoting), who valorizes hermit figures for their self-reliance, contentment with little and freedom from what Landon calls the “world where all betrays.” In Wordsworth’s view, “world” usually means worldliness, materialism, a thing “too much with us” that severs us from beneficent kinship with Nature—which “never did *betray*/ The heart that loved her.”<sup>76</sup> His poems also insist that the most sinister forces of the world are concentrated in cities. Luke, in *Michael*, falls into “ignominy and shame” when he abandons his paternal plot of ground and agrarian values for life in the “dissolute city.”<sup>77</sup> The Pastor of the *Excursion* associates “enmity and *strife*,/ Falsehood and guile” with those who “dwell/ In *crowded cities*.”<sup>78</sup> Whether it is because of the “*strife*/ That animates the scenes of public life,” or the “trivial pomp and city noise” that “Harde[n] a heart”<sup>79</sup> to natural beauty, the city is viewed as a Father of Lies, a cunning power in the service of the “world” established to dissolve the “filial bond” mankind has (or once had in full) with natural forms.

The speaker of one of Landon’s final poems, “On Wordsworth’s Cottage, Near Grasmere Lake” (1838), positions herself rhetorically as a sort of prodigal-daughter poet who prostrates herself before an old master—the now sixty-eight-year-old Wordsworth—to do worship and receive guidance:

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<sup>76</sup> Wordsworth, “18” [“The World Is Too Much with Us”], in *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), line 1; “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, line 123. The emphasis is mine.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, *Michael*, in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, lines 453-54.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Excursion*, Book 9, lines 661-62, 667-68, 293. The emphases are mine.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, “Conclusion, to -----,” in *Last Poems*, lines 2-3; “To the Lady -----, on Seeing the Foundation Preparing for the Erection of ----- Chapel, Westmoreland,” in *Last Poems*, lines 52-53. The emphasis is mine.

Great poet, if I dare to throw  
My homage at thy feet  
...  
As wayfarers have incense thrown  
Upon some mighty altar-stone,  
Unworthy, and yet meet,  
The human spirit longs to prove  
The truth of its uplooking love.

Landon's vacillating judgments so far on the subject of Wordsworthian poetry and poetics should lead us to expect that this speaker attitudinizes as carelessly as the rest. I read the poem, in fact, as an enactment of unworthiness, a postured apostrophe to the aging sage of Rydal Mount. One contemporary critic, however, had the opposite impression, claiming that the poem "draws forth a burst of homage, which we can easily believe Miss Landon cordially cherishes towards Wordsworth."<sup>80</sup> The mistake in this case is that the reviewer confuses act with actuality, poetic language with personal opinion; but it is an excusable error. Most nineteenth-century readers would "easily believe" that the author of "On Wordsworth's Cottage" is behind the words. There are two reasons for this presumption. The first is that Landon encouraged her readers to identify her own subjectivity with the subjectivities of her speakers. The second is that nineteenth-century readers were already inclined to do this with or without Landon's encouragement, on account of a widespread prejudice that women could put nothing short of themselves—

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<sup>80</sup> Anonymous, "Art. XXIII.—*Fisher's Drawing-Room Scrap-Book, for 1838: with Poetic Illustrations*. By L. E. L. London: Fisher," in *The Monthly Review: From September to December Inclusive*, vol. 3 (London: E. Henderson, 1837), 452.

their emotions, sensibilities, “hearts”—into what they wrote. Women were presumed *unable* to create purely dramatic textual subjectivities.

Frederic Rowton, in his popular mid-century anthology *The Female Poets of Great Britain* (1853), finds all of Landon’s writings sincere:

Persons who knew her intimately say that she was not naturally sad: that she was all gaiety and cheerfulness: but there is a mournfulness of soul which is never to be seen on the cheek or in the eye: and this I believe to have dwelt in Mrs. Maclean’s breast more than in most people’s. How else are we to understand her poetry? We cannot believe her sadness to have been put on like a player’s garb: to have been an affectation, and unreality: it is too earnest for that. We must suppose that she felt what she wrote: and if so, her written sadness was real sadness.<sup>81</sup>

Rowton is sure that Landon’s “mournfulness of soul” was a personal and extra-textual fact, that her “written sadness was real sadness.” Even critics to this day speculate on whether or not Landon was cheerful or grave outside of her writing life—a speculation I find not worth the trouble. As an adult she may have had every reason to be distressed, if only because she was involved in a variety of sexual scandals that her success as a writer helped to publicize. But Rowton needs only two facts to make his claim: that Landon was a woman and that she wrote. He can presume that Landon is melancholy because her

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<sup>81</sup> Frederic Rowton, *The Female Poets of Great Britain: Chronologically Arranged with Copious Selections and Critical Remarks*, 1853, qtd. in Stephen Behrendt, “Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, and the Woman Writer’s Fate,” in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. Paula Feldman and Theresa Kelley (Hanover: UP of New England, 1995), 77.

poetry is melancholy. And the prejudice, of course, does not end with poetry. According to Sarah Stickney Ellis's widely read *The Daughters of England, Their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities* (1842), the woman who "writes for the public"—writes *anything* for the public—prostitutes her very person. She is

laid bare to the coarse cavillings, and coarser commendations, of...critics...blazoned to the world. And then, in her seasons of depression, or of wounded feeling, when her spirit yearns to sit in solitude, or even in darkness, so that it may be still; to know and feel that the very essence of that spirit, now embodied in a palpable form, has become an article of sale and bargain, tossed over from the hands of one workman to another, free alike to the touch of the prince and peasant, and no longer to be reclaimed at will by the original possessor, let the world receive it as it may.<sup>82</sup>

For Ellis, any female who disseminates an original composition disseminates her person verbally incarnate—the "essence of [her] spirit...embodied in palpable form"—to an indifferent, indiscriminate and even indecent (as the excerpt implies) public. She virtually becomes a "fallen" woman, subject to the dirty hands of "workman," "prince and peasant." Rowton's bias may therefore be seen as the product both of popular prejudice and of Landon's persistent exploitation of that prejudice.

Landon discusses Wordsworth directly and at length in *Romance and Reality*. The characters in that novel appreciate him as a moral poet whose business is to extend

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<sup>82</sup> Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England, Their Position, Character and Responsibilities* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1842), 175.

human sympathies by means of the doctrine that love of nature leads to love of man (the central argument of the *Recluse*). Montague Delawarr, a somewhat self-centered opportunist, admires the poetry of Wordsworth for its “mountain range of distant hill and troubled sky—or the lonely spot of inland shaded, linked with human thought and human interest.” Lady Mandeville notes that Wordsworth “wanders through the fields, and calls from their daily affections and sympathies foundations whereon to erect a scheme of the widest benevolence.” The narrator even makes casual observations worthy of a Lakist poet: “it is from the wood and the field, the hill and the valley, that poetry takes that imagery which so imperceptibly mingles with all our excited moods.”<sup>83</sup> The affinities in this last statement seem pretty clear. The narrator claims that ideal poetic imagery is drawn from the recollection of natural forms and the elevated moods in which these forms are experienced. It seems reasonable to infer that Landon is speaking through the narrator in this sentence—or, more accurately, that she encourages us to think she is. Otherwise this characterless, silver-fork narrator has little reason to interrupt the story and tell us about poetic images.

The truth is that the narrator of *Romance and Reality* is as sufficient a stand-in for Landon as any other of her speakers. No one voice or discourse in the Landon corpus has hegemonic authority over the rest in terms of capturing the author’s “self.” The voice of “On Wordsworth’s Cottage” describes Wordsworth’s verse as “music” that can “[call] that loveliness to life/ With which the inward world is rife,” “Music that can be hush’d no more,” a “gushing melody forever,” “music [that] do[th] impart/ ...freshness to the world-worn heart,” “song” that “Forth flows...as waters flow.” And yet Lady Mandeville calls

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<sup>83</sup> Landon, *Romance and Reality*, 1:315, 2:119, 3:299.

Wordsworth “deficient in . . . passion” and a poet who “never fills the atmosphere around with music.”<sup>84</sup> In her letters Landon echoes Lady Mandeville: she refers to Wordsworth as “rugged and mountainous,” as “a poet that even Plato might have admitted into his republic . . . the most passionless of writers.”<sup>85</sup> In the end, the most persuasive way to reconcile all these conflicting voices is to admit that Landon has no interest in reconciling them: to admit that, as far as Landon is concerned, it makes no sense “to speak of a self that precedes its expression,” but only of “selves [that] come into being through cultural forms, such as poems”—or, in Landon’s case, every conceivable genre of text.<sup>86</sup>

Landon casually disregards that famous shibboleth we still encourage creative writers in the academy today to secure at all costs: that secret charm, authorial “voice.” Is it because she wants to earn a living and has no time for voice? Maybe—but I feel that as critics we should start to investigate and nuance the hegemonic power of this explanation. Perhaps the more Landon realized just how serviceable the “I” could be to her or any other professional writer, the more she began to doubt its importance and authority as a signifier of “character,” and even to doubt the notion of character altogether. Throughout her career, the “I” seems to have become not so much a means to mask the “authentic,” as a means to unmask the reality of the *inauthentic*—the self as arbitrary thing, as monstrosity, as stitched-together articulator of judgments of which it is neither the originator nor a special creative alembic through which ideas pass and are transformed.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 2:119.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., *LL*, 46, 145.

<sup>86</sup> Deborah Forbes, *Sincerity’s Shadow* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004), 47.

It is likely that critics have neglected her novels because Landon has refused to give them what they want—a clear sense of voice. We can view her “voice-less-ness” as an unfortunate sort of self-effacement or selling out, or we can see it as the revelation of something important: that personal “character” is a perennial work-in-progress with the stitches showing. Her “characterless,” sewn-together novels reflect this conception. Emerson writes that “Character is centrality, the impossibility of being displaced or overset.”<sup>87</sup> Landon’s novels, essays, poems, letters and footnotes amount to one long, perhaps long overdue, unraveling of this romantic dream—not an absolute denial of it, but a slow chipping away at its foundations. Elsewhere Emerson calls character “a reserved force, which acts directly by presence and without means... a certain undemonstrable force, a Familiar or Genius, by whose impulses the man is guided but whose counsels he cannot impart.”<sup>88</sup> Landon inherits the British version of this “Genius” and consistently compromises it without killing it, dampens but does not extinguish its flame. Her work exposes the futility and the arbitrariness of egotism and ego-centered discourses.

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<sup>87</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Character,” in *Essays*, 2: 98.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:90.

CHAPTER III. SCRAP-BOOK IMPERIALISM: LETITIA LANDON'S AD HOC  
BRITISHNESS IN *FISHER'S DRAWING ROOM SCRAP-BOOK*, 1832-1837

**1. Introduction**

Landon edited *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap-Book* from 1832 until her untimely death in 1838 on the Gold Coast, a British colony on the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa. In truth, the word *edited* is somewhat misleading: Landon wrote all of the verse for the annual in her nearly decade-long engagement with it. With a few exceptions her poems were produced as textual accompaniments or "poetical illustrations" to a series of "remnant plates" collected and arranged in advance by the publishers. The plates were "reprinted from Fisher's other illustrated publications, which Landon recontextualizes and embellishes with fragments of history (also often culled from Fisher's library) as well as with her own trademark spontaneous-styled verse." A standard volume of the *Scrap-Book* (the first annual to use the quarto format) was about sixty pages and featured around thirty plates. It sold for a guinea. For the most part the plates depicted "portraits of aristocrats and famous people, picturesque scenes of English landscapes and monuments, and oriental exotica."<sup>1</sup> Because Landon worked for the annual in the 1830s, when "England assumed her all but absolute presence in the world," it comes as no surprise that *Fisher's* is full of images of British colonial territories—the product of a "culture that knows what it means to own and administer other lands, people, and cultures."<sup>2</sup> As a

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Linley, "A Centre that Would Not Hold," 63.

<sup>2</sup> McGann and Riess, introduction to *Letitia Elizabeth Landon: Selected Writings*, 17, 26.

publication “overtly involved in the education of the middle classes,” one of its desired effects was to “cultivate a sense of national pride.”<sup>3</sup>

Many plates in the *Scrap-Book* depict monuments and landscapes in British India, and the companion poems reflect these images to the extent that they address the idea of Empire. The majority of them are written in the first person: an “I” speaks the lines who has strong opinions about West and East, Anglicanism and Eastern faiths, the benefits and the dangers of technological and industrial advancement. But the rub is that one “I” contradicts another: the sentiments in some scrap-book poems are often at great ideological odds with the sentiments in others. The reader is forced to wonder whether Landon endorses or ironizes the passionate claims her speakers make. My aim in this chapter is to stress how interestingly undecidable the answer is, and what the implications of this undecidability are.

The confusion may lie in the fact that these poems elude classification in this or that traditional poetic genre. The “I” that speaks them is an provocatively ambiguous signifier. Sometimes the poems can read as straight dramatic monologues. The speakers can seem peculiar and narrow-minded, using the image on a plate as an excuse to pontificate about a topic relevant to them but not necessary to readers. Landon seems to ironize their opinions at a critical distance. But at other times the poems read as lyrics in the Millian sense: as when Landon seems to be thinking out loud, musing in her own person and unconscious of an audience.<sup>4</sup> A single text can encourage both readings

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<sup>3</sup> Stephenson, *Letitia Landon: The Woman Behind L. E. L.*, 147, 151.

<sup>4</sup> According to John Stuart Mill, “poetry is *overheard*.” It is marked by the “poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude” (“Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties,” 1833, in *Dissertations and Discussions*

simultaneously. It is best to think of the scrap-book poems as neither quite dramatic monologues nor lyrics. Landon calls them “poetical illustrations,” since their ostensible purpose is to illustrate or illuminate a particular image in words. But then the poems hardly take on the impersonality and objectivity of the pictures: there is always an “I” making statements—impassioned statements, dogmatic statements, ones that often have little to do with what is actually on the plate. The verbal content in many of the poems is, at best, tangential to the visual content on the plate. We need to ask what sort of verbal content this *is* and who or what it comes from.

My argument in this chapter has three parts. First, we cannot nail down what Landon actually thinks and feels about the colliding forces of modernization in nineteenth-century Britain. Her take on, say, British imperialism or the industrial revolution is uniquely indeterminable. Second, it is indeterminable because of a fundamental quality of her poetics whereby she avoids self-positioning and articulations of stable subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> In other words, she rarely “subject[s] the speakers in [her] poems to the same moral imperatives that [she] [herself] feel[s].”<sup>6</sup> The “I” in her verse is neither quite the author nor a dramatic character.<sup>7</sup> It often seems to have *no* character in the

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*Political, Philosophical and Historical*, vol. 1 [London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1867], 71).

<sup>5</sup> McDayter also recognizes this feature of her work as paramount: “Landon’s poetry is remarkable for creating a lyric style *devoid* of emotional subjectivity, using a poetic memory unconnected to any living source” (“Celebrity, Gender and the Death of the Poet,” 343). But there *are* living sources connected to the poems in many cases. The poetic illustrations discussed below reproduce the opinions of various “living” male historians, politicians, clerics and intellectuals.

<sup>6</sup> Forbes, *Sincerity’s Shadow*, 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> According to Charles Lamb, a dramatic monologue is only legitimate if it calls attention to itself as a “medium, and often a highly artificial one, for putting the reader...into possession of that knowledge of the inner structure and workings of a mind in a character,

traditional sense of the word: leaning or aspiring toward neither a dramatic nor an authorial essence. It is more of an impersonal vessel carrying a mindset—a particular mindset suggested by the comments of certain male authorities associated with the production of a plate. In a word, the annual poems ventriloquize borrowed attitudes. Third, the ideological inconsistency in these poems is *inherently political*. Behind the vacillating texts there is a deconstructive politics that fragments and challenges Britishness. Not that Landon set out with an explicit intention to splinter the identity of the British subject and used the annual to do it. Her work is too elusive to support this argument. But the effects of her texts *are* there: the poems demonstrate that many aspects of the British subject are inessential and performable—collectable, reproducible and sellable in a scrap-book. It is this fragmentation of the British identity (and, by extension, all identities), this parceling out of it in so many poems-as-impersonal-attitudes, that renders the verse in the annual a threat to dominant discourse and culture: “disruptive” to the stability of “gender, class, and economic systems.”<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Scrap-Book Imperialism

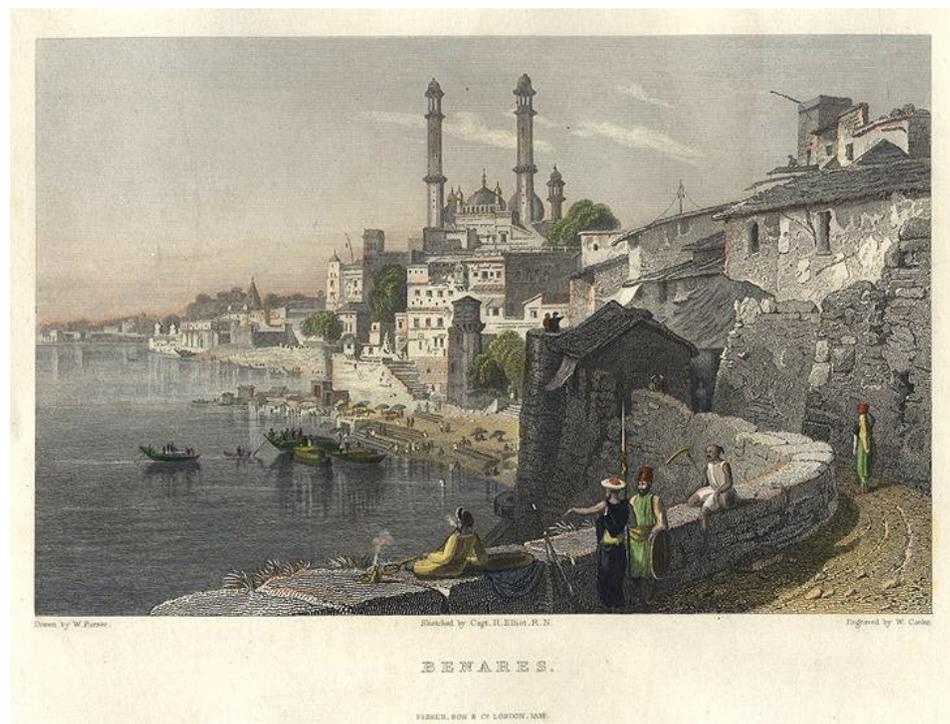
Consider the poem “Benares” (F32, 34). Benares, known also as Varanasi and Kashi, is a city situated along the banks of the river Ganges and is one of the oldest living

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which he could otherwise never have arrived at in that form of composition by any gift short of intuition” (“On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation,” in *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, vol. 1 [New York: AMS P, 1968], 99). The texts in the *Scrap-Book* suggest an opposite perspective. Replicating the inner workings of a mind does not seem to be their object. They read less as botched attempts at organicism and more as critiques of bourgeois interiority and the romantic obsession to realize it in art.

<sup>8</sup> Angela Esterhammer, “The Cosmopolitan Improvvisatore: Spontaneity and Performance in Romantic Poetics,” *European Romantic Review* 16:2 (2005): 163.

cities in India and the world. It is also a place of religious significance. Hindus believe that the Ganges in Benares has the power to wash away sin, and that to die in the city is to break free of the cycle of reincarnation. Landon writes a few lines to illustrate a picture of Benares (fig. 1), which has a rather peaceful aspect. Four men, among them a merchant, a soldier and a laborer, are gathered in the foreground, with two engaged in discussion. The water is still and the sky a uniform grey. At a distance we can see a few small vessels setting out upon the river, and what appear to be several piles of lumber assembled neatly on the shore. A stately palace rises in the center of the plate, although it is somewhat diminished in aspect by some slightly ruinous buildings and walls nearer to the foreground. The overall impression of the picture is one of quiet activity.



**Figure 1**

The discrepancy between plate and poem is a little arresting. We expect the poem to give us at least some impression of the repose suggested by the visual representation, but instead it amounts to an invective sermon against Hindu idol-worship. Benares is described as a “City of idol temples, and of shrines,/ Where folly kneels to falsehood” and where “the pride/ Of our humanity is...rebuked!” The speaker wonders how it is that

Man, this glorious creature, can debase  
His spirit down, to worship wood and stone,  
And hold the very beasts which bear his yoke,  
And tremble at his eye, for sacred things.  
With what unutterable humility  
We should bow down, thou blessed Cross, to thee!  
Seeing our vanity and foolishness,  
When, to our own devices left, we frame  
A shameful creed of craft and cruelty.

The look and sound of the language emphasizes the spiritual depravity of the Hindu population at Benares. Blank verse, with its stately and grave cadence, is appropriate for these homiletic lines. The phrase “Idol temples” also suggests *idle* temples, invoking the familiar stereotype of Eastern countries as lazy and inactive. There are no rhymes, except the end-rhymes “humility” and “thee” in a hortative couplet that seems to contain the real point of the poem—that men and women of all faiths “should bow down” to Christ before it is too late for salvation. Certain alliterative moments spotlight and mock acts of Hindu idolatry: “folly kneel[ing] to falsehood,” “worship[ping] wood,” sacralizing “the very beasts which bear [the] yoke,” “fram[ing]/ A shameful creed of craft and cruelty” (my

emphases). The last line is the most accusatory one in the poem: it condemns Hinduism as not only idolatrous but downright evil.

The poem begs us to ask who its speaker is and at whom she preaches. It is not quite a dramatic monologue, since there is no “I” in the lines and no strong, gradually unfolding character whose behavior or opinions we are invited to critique. But the speaker *is* a kind of evangelizing presence, one who addresses Christ at one point (“thee”) and includes the reader and herself as part of a community of sinners in the hands of an angry God. At first the reader rests comfortably thinking that the citizens of Benares are the targets of the poem, the idol-worshippers, until reminded that s/he too is guilty; that it is “*man*, this glorious creature” who “can debase/ His spirit down”; that it is “*We*” who “should bow down” to Christ in acknowledgement of “*our* vanity and foolishness,/ When, to *our* own devices left, *we* frame/ A shameful creed” (my emphases). The most likely scenario for rhetoric like this is that of a preacher addressing a lapsed congregation, or, more germane to the case, a population of infidels in whose offenses both reader and speaker are implicated as fellow sinners. In a sense the poem is just this—proselytization in verse. But who is doing the preaching? Is it Landon? a definitive character in whom she has some creative investment?

A little examination of context reveals a different conclusion: the “I” is more or less a grammatical vessel created to hold an attitude, which belongs to Reginald Herber, Anglican Bishop of Calcutta. Landon includes a lengthy footnote to the poem, in which she writes that Benares “may be called the Rome of Hindostan, being the sacred city, the centre of the Hindoo religion.” There is no value judgment here. But she follows this

factual statement with a much more value-laden quotation from the journal of Bishop Herber:

Bishop Herber states, that “no Europeans live in the town, nor are any of the streets wide enough to admit a wheel carriage. The streets are crowded with “the sacred bulls devoted to Seeva...walking lazily up and down...Monkeys sacred to Hunooman, the divine ape who conquered Ceylon, are in some parts of the town equally numerous, clinging to all the roofs, and putting their heads or hands into every fruiterer’s or confectioner’s shop, and snatching the children at their meals. Fakirs’ houses occur at every turn, adorned with idols, and sending out an unceasing tinkling of vinas, bugals, and other discordant instruments: while religious mendicants, of every Hindoo sect, offering every conceivable deformity, which chalk, disease, matted locks, distorted limbs, and disgusting attitudes of penance, can shew, literally line the principal streets.”

Herber portrays Benares as a sort of grotesque city of sin. It is replete with crowds, lazy and violent animals (the ones threatening children are sacred), countless houses inhabited by Muslim ascetics (“Fakirs”) and covered in idols, cacophonous sounds made by foreign instruments and religious beggars “lin[ing] the principal streets” marked with every species of grotesqueness.

When we consider the religious and imperialist ideologies operative in Herber’s firsthand account of the city, it becomes clear that “Benares” is a poetic reduplication of

them. Its speaker declaims as an Anglican missionary in British India, a voice of power and authority sensitive to the difficulties of evangelizing in a foreign land. Landon has decided not to try to represent the picture's visual content in her poem, but to assume the tone and spirit of Bishop Herber, who visited Benares and part of whose recorded experience (conveniently available in the Fishers' library) she includes in a footnote. One may say that the rhetorical angle of these lines is mere pandering to conservative taste, or that it gives Landon's illustrations a little elegant variation. But I would argue that "Benares" is symptomatic of something more important. It demonstrates how arbitrary and serviceable British patriarchal and religious values are—especially to the artist who happens to need them in "scraps." In this case Landon appropriates a few powerful cultural imperatives as expedients for her poems, so that imperialist and religious themes in "Benares"—and in all of *Fisher's*—generate the impression of ad hoc pantomimes. If Bishop Herber's values are not visibly ironized in the poem, not subjected to an incisive, tongue-in-cheek critique, their moral force is considerably weakened when we consider the fact that Landon is no all-around Christian poet.<sup>9</sup> She writes about sexual love as

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<sup>9</sup> Landon would have found more descriptions of Benares in Fishers' library than Herber's rather incendiary one. Captain Robert Elliot attends to precisely the same details as Herber in his own description of the city, but demonstrates infinitely more tolerance for Eastern faiths and culture. Elliot is the artist responsible for most of the sketches of Indian landscapes and architecture featured in *Fisher's*, including the plate on which Landon's poem "Benares" is based. His sketches were later engraved, supplemented with descriptions and collected in his three-volume *Views in the East* (H. Fisher, Son, and Co., 1833). Elliot observes the following about Benares in his own words (words Landon, in this case, does not reproduce in a footnote to her poem):

The streets of Benares are peculiarly narrow, while the houses are large and high, richly ornamented with verandahs...and the front of some of them painted with mythological figures. The rich natives ride spirited horses...occasionally a ponderous elephant may be seen coming

earnestly and as often as she writes about Christian love. In her letters she expresses how difficult it is to summon religious feelings she does not have, and in several of her other *Scrap-Book* poems she challenges British imperial involvement in India (see below).

“The Missionary” (F34, 53) is another poem that seems to ventriloquize rather than to express religious prejudices. It serves as a companion piece to two plates—”Interior of Exeter Cathedral” (fig. 2), drawn by the British painter-architect Thomas Allom, and “Triad Figure, Interior of Elephanta” (fig. 3), drawn by Robert Elliott. The one depicts the inside of a late-medieval English cathedral; the other a rock-cut sculpture of a three-headed deity, located in the first of a series of island caves off the western coast of the Indian subcontinent. Two spaces of religious significance, Western and Eastern, are juxtaposed and illustrated jointly by a single poem.

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along...taking particular care not to tread upon any of the children that may happen to be playing about...The gracefulness of many of the washing figures, the various colours of their dresses, the easy and elegant attitudes in which they stand, and the admirable groups into which they occasionally fall, would form excellent subjects for a painter (*Views in the East; Comprising India, Canton, and the Shores of the Red Sea. With Historical and Descriptive Illustrations. By Captain Robert Elliot, R.N.* [London: H. Fisher, Son, & Co., 1833], 1:3).

Perhaps it is unfair of Elliott to aestheticize Benares and its citizens, but he is certainly more charitable than Herber in his account of the city. He notices “mythological figures” instead of offensive idols; “spirited horses” instead of lazy bulls; elephants that “tak[e] particular care not to tread upon...children” instead of sacred monkeys “snatching the children” while they eat; the “gracefulness,” “elegant attitudes” and “admirable groups” of “washing figures” instead of the “distorted limbs” and “disgusting attitudes” of religious mendicants.



**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**

The first plate is a representation of the interior of Exeter Cathedral in Devonshire, erected as a Romanesque edifice in the twelfth century and rebuilt in the Gothic style in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Its walls and ceiling tower over a genteel-looking man and woman in the foreground, replicating a single pattern and receding into the distance until obscured by sunlight. The interior structure is a perfect example of that

succession and uniformity Edmund Burke finds central to the architectural sublime, to the “grand effect of the [a]isles in many of our own old cathedrals.” It has the look of “uninterrupted progression” and “artificial infinity.” There is no indication of that “inordinate thirst for variety” that, for Burke, induces some architects to make buildings that “abound in angles” “prejudicial to [their] grandeur.”<sup>10</sup> In this sense the image is a pure visual specimen of Englishness. The second plate features the wall of an excavated cave located on island hills about eleven kilometers northeast of the Apollo Bandar, Mumbai. It is the first in a series of “Elephanta Caves,” so called after Elephanta Island where the caves are found. Carved into the wall across from the entrance is the bust of a three-headed Shiva. Landon supplies a note to her poem that quotes the following from Robert Elliott: “The figure that faces the entrance...is a gigantic bust...of some three-headed being...to whom the temple may be supposed to be dedicated. Some writers have imagined that it is, what they have called the Hindoo Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.”

It may come as little surprise that “The Missionary” glorifies the Anglican faith at the expense of foreign ones, which it represents as freakish, esoteric and pointless. The first five stanzas applaud the “Time-honoured old cathedrals” of England, part of a great nation unified by its “one creed,” “[o]ne name” and “one altar.” The rest of the poem denigrates religious beliefs common in India (Hinduism is the main target) and empathizes with the hardships of British missionaries who labor to convert heathens to a “purer creed.” The carvings inside the Elephanta Caves are “beautiful” but idolatrous:

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<sup>10</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (New York: Oxford, 1990), 68-69.

“profane” and “earth[ly].” In India, a Christian evangelist must “half unlearn/ The accents of his mother-tongue” in order to make any spiritual progress. S/he must subject him/herself to a sort of physical-cultural contamination “beneath” a “foreign sky” and “burning strand.” The closing lines are hopeful: preaching the “sacred word” on the Indian subcontinent is hard work but it can only save souls and strengthen Christendom. In the Indian city of Cawnpore (Kanpur), for instance, thanks to the efforts of Anglican priest and missionary Henry Martyn (1781-1812), “many a darkened mind has light,/ And many stony heart has tears.” On the subject of Cawnpore, Landon quotes Elliott in a second footnote:

“At [Cawnpore], the excellent missionary, Henry Martyn, laboured for some months, in the years 1809-1810...In the life of Martyn there is an account of his first effort to preach the gospel publicly to a mixture of Hindoos and Mohammedans at Cawnpore. This attempt to make the word of God known to these people, seems to have had a peculiar blessing upon it; and at times he drew together a congregation of eight hundred souls, who frequently burst into loud applause at what he said. Surely, the word of the Lord shall not return to him void.”

In the end, “The Missionary” is a poetic reinforcement of a single sentiment of Elliott’s—that “the word of the Lord shall not return to him [Martyn] void.” As Elliott notes that the work of Martyn “had a peculiar blessing upon it,” so the speaker proclaims that the “toil” of the “soldiers of the Lord” in India “was blest.” She sees the Christian influence on the Indian subcontinent as “morning breaking o’er that night,/ So long upon these godless

spheres.” In one instance she is even a bit nasty: her phrase “fancies monstrous, vile, and vain,” used to describe religious sentiment in India, is a triad of adjectives that corresponds to the three-faced figure carved into rock. As a grammatical mouthpiece for Elliott’s Anglican-friendly opinions, the “I” cannot show an empathetic respect for “other” faiths. Hinduism is viewed as an unfortunate obstacle along the path to Christian enlightenment.

Numerous poems in the *Scrap-Book* condemn eastern idolatries and suggest that saving souls justifies British imperial expansion. “Hurdwar, a Place of Hindoo Pilgrimage” (F32, 18) claims that even “Mid strange idolatry and savage rite,” the Hindu worships the Judeo-Christian God without realizing it. “The African” (F32, 35-56) begins by inviting readers to empathize with a young African prince abducted by “strangers, pale and terrible,” “bound...in [the] narrow hold” of a slave ship and sold at a “market-place.” But we are soon asked to believe that it all works out in the end. The “winds and seas” carrying the slave ship “obey” the will of God, who “knoweth what is best” for the African boy. Eventually a “seraph child/ With eyes of gentlest blue” trains him to put his faith in “the Saviour [who] died/ For man upon the tree.” At last the African-born prince is converted. His “soul received” the words of the holy child “[a]s rains fall fertile on the earth.” “Liverpool” (F33, 13-15) refers to the expeditions of Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander to West Africa (1825-28) to follow the course of the Niger River to its delta. Because these scientist-explorers went in part with the “noble aim” of “civiliz[ing] “[b]arbaric hordes,” of “draw[ing] the savage and unknown/ Within the social pale,” their efforts “Deserve the highest meed.” “Sarnat, a Boodh Monument” (F33, 16-17) accompanies a picture of a Buddhist monument at Sarnath (near Benares). It is an

unfortunate structure, part of a faith that “[taught] mankind/ A new idolatry” and “[bound] the weak/ In their own fancies.” Now it is only a “fallen monumen[t],/ Haunted by dim tradition.”<sup>11</sup>

The point is that Landon gives the average nineteenth-century, middle-class reader no good reason to suppose that she does *not* endorse the ideologies her poems ostensibly advance. The “I” that speaks them is not at an obvious dramatic distance from the author. How, then, do we reconcile Landon’s religious poems with her irreligious personal letters? Consider the circumstances surrounding the publication of *The Easter Gift*. In a letter to Thomas Crofton Croker, dated 25 February, 1832, Landon mentions “a new proposal from Messrs. Fisher,” a “volume of sacred poetry to be called ‘An Easter offering.’”<sup>12</sup> In less than a month (in time for the holiday) *The Easter Gift* is published (24 March), a set of fourteen poetic illustrations produced as companion pieces for plates depicting events in Judeo-Christian history. Each poem is preceded with an epigraph from Scripture and titled after the plate it accompanies—“Christ Crowned with Thorns,” “Judas Returning the Thirty Pieces,” “The Incredulity of St. Thomas,” etc. In her preface to *The Easter Gift; and Other Poems*, Landon writes:

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<sup>11</sup> There are many other speakers in *Fisher’s* that denounce idol-worship with the gusto of a Christian evangelist. To take a few more examples: “Borro Boedoor” exhorts readers to “dethrone the idol” in India “and dispel/ The shadows that but herald the true faith” (F36, 39). “The Sacred Shrines of Dwarka” recommends planting Christian crosses by Hindu shrines in order that the “genial influence” of the “humbler creed”—Christianity—might subdue the “pride, pomp, power” that in Hinduism are “holy attributes” (F37, 17). Tunis, a city in northern Africa, is another heathen place where England, now in a time of peace, should “sow” “[t]he seed of general good”; and the Scottish missionary Robert Morrison is praised for his spiritual labor in China, where he taught “the words of truth and Christian love” to certain “dark priests,” shackled to a “creed that in its darkness errs” (“Tunis,” F38, 15; “Dr. Morrison and His Chinese Attendants,” F38, 37).

<sup>12</sup> Landon, *LL*, 72.

The following pages have been written in a spirit of deepest humility...The pictures are entirely sacred subjects, and their illustration has given me the opportunity of embodying [sic] many a sad and serious thought that has arisen in hours of solitude and despondency. I believe I myself am the better for their existence; I wish their effect may be the same on others. In this hurrying and deceitful world, no page will be written utterly in vain, which awakens one earnest or heavenward thought, one hope, or one fear, in the human heart.<sup>13</sup>

The preface-speaker claims to struggle, through “hours of solitude and despondency,” to reconcile her “deepest humility” with the attention she is bound to get when she publishes original verse. It is a very earnest, a very pious, a very Christian speaker. Behind the scenes, on the other hand, Landon switches masks. In the aforementioned letter to Croker she goes on to discuss the proposal of Messrs. Fisher:

I have written this morning to say give me £25 and I will do it. Do you consider this exorbitant; I never receive less than two guineas for a single picture in any annuals, but I would rather gain less money, and have the credit of the whole work. Now do you think I could collect sin, sorrow, and sanctitude enough for a whole volume of sacred poetry... (*Letters* 72)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., *Complete Works*, 248.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., *LL*, 72.

In two additional letters to Croker, both dated March, 1832, Landon reveals another, not-so-devout side of the composition process:

I now understand what a “religious melancholy” is, I send you the first six poems, and if by a little encouragement you can conscientiously help me out of “the slough of despond” you will do a real christian [sic] charity... The Madonna puzzled me the most, I had in my mind a vesper hymn, when I suddenly recollected that rosaries crucifixes &c. were abominations in the sight of the good Protestants, for whom the Easter offering is destined & so I have taken quite the opposite side. Do you not think one might make an entertaining note of some of the Catholic superstitions relative to the Virgin.

...I am very anxious to have your opinion: really it is not so easy to be pious as people think.<sup>15</sup>

In these last few letters Landon has exchanged the voice of the humble Christian writer for that of the businesswoman poet who can negotiate the price of religious poetry. She refers to “the good Protestants” as if she herself is not of their number. If the preface-writer spent “hours of solitude and despondency” meditating on grave religious mysteries, here the speaker “collect[s]” whatever religious phenomena she needs to get the job done—“sin, sorrow, and sanctitude enough for a whole volume of poetry.” Real “religious melancholy” becomes the sorrow of having to write pious verse for deadlines.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 73.

There are a few ways we can reconcile these clashing voices. The first and perhaps the most common is to assume that “the [religious] sentiments in the poems are all false,” and that Landon is willing to playact Christian devotion if the price is right. Another is to assume that the poems are more sincere than the letters: perhaps, in her letters, “Landon could not speak about spiritual concerns to friends, [and] so she took pleasure in pretending she had none and undermining the expectations that her poems encouraged.”<sup>16</sup> I suggest a third conclusion: that both the poems *and* the letters fail even to approximate what Landon thinks and feels (which never seems to be the point of what she writes). Neither the poetic nor the epistolary “I” is a reliable sign of the author. But at the same time, the “I” is also not a creative character or autonomous agent. It is the unresisted voice of culture and ideology. Landon does not sell her soul to market forces so much as challenge the very idea of a sellable “soul”: what Glennis Byron refers to as the “autonomous, authoritative and unified Romantic subject.”<sup>17</sup> For Landon, what some call “selling out” is an inevitable part of the writing process that can be acknowledged but not avoided. “Transcendence” comes in the strength and longevity of the acknowledgement.

### **3. National Prosperity; Or, Mammonism**

It often happens that two opposed discourses collide with one another in the annual volumes. The end effect is a sense of two camps of faceless poetic speakers at ideological odds with one another, each one striving to overcome the other in argument. A few speakers from each camp are given a short period of time on a rhetorical stage,

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<sup>16</sup> Lawford, Review of *Letters*, 126.

<sup>17</sup> Byron, *Dramatic Monologue*, 42.

perhaps once or twice in a single volume, and the process is repeated throughout eight volumes of poems and plates—as long as Landon is editor of the annual. Only there is ultimately no judge and no winner. A contest appears to be set in motion and each side appears to have its passionate advocates, but there is no real effort to nudge the reader in one or another direction, no “right reading” encoded in a poem or set of poems that teaches the reader how to think about an issue.<sup>18</sup> In this context, British colonialism, imperialism and mercantilism are some of the most important topics Landon addresses. A handful of her speakers strongly promote British technological advancement, industrial progress and international trade, while others presume that all three are rooted in mammonism and an indifference to human casualties. In each poetic illustration the position germane to it is all the speaker knows, the only one she advances, unambiguously, unflinchingly.

The plate entitled “Carclaze Tin Mine, near St. Austle” (fig. 4), drawn by Thomas Allom, depicts a “remarkable and ancient mine” in Cornwall, an excavation of more than twenty fathoms encircled by towering white cliffs. A million tons of rock are said to have been removed from the site over a period of four hundred years.<sup>19</sup> Landon writes a poetic

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Pfau claims that each poem in the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) is secretly encrypted with an ideal “hermeneutic practice” that Wordsworth and Coleridge expect their middle-class audience to absorb (*Wordsworth’s Profession: Form, Class, and the Logic of Early Romantic Cultural Production* [Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997], 144). Each ballad is formally designed to instruct and train the reader in how to read it and other ballads in the collection. I find this argument interesting alongside of the *Scrap-Book* poems. Landon seems to have no interest in being an arbiter of bourgeois literary sensibilities. She has little faith in the idea of the autonomous artist who would stem and redirect the tide of public taste.

<sup>19</sup> John Leifchild, *Cornwall: Its Mines and Miners, with Sketches of Scenery, Designed as a Popular Introduction to Metallic Mines* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1855), 27-28.

illustration to the plate, “The Carclaze Tin-Mine, Cornwall” (F32, 39), and includes the following note:

The produce of the Tin and Copper Mines early attracted the Phoenicians to our coast. Tin was then one of the precious metals, and used for personal adornment; and the barter must have been as profitable, as civilized people always made their dealings with savages. Knowledge usually turns ignorance to profit.

Perhaps the immediate purpose of the note is to give the reader a bit of Cornish history. But among a few facts a peremptory judgment is casually inserted—that “civilized people” are always the real winners in trade with “savages,” since knowledge (Britishness) inevitably profits from ignorance (non-Britishness). At first the poem celebrates the grand aspect and enterprising spirit of late ancient Phoenician traders: their “stately galleys” full of “princely merchants sweep,/ Like conquerors of the winds and waves,/ Over the subject deep.” Their ships have circled the earth and hoarded “gems and spice” from “Indian isles,” “ivory” from Africa and “red gold” from Spain. With all this wealth (the speaker wonders), why did the Phoenicians bother to cross the Atlantic to reach our “wild and barren isle,” then sub-Roman Britain? At this point the poem shifts from a glorification of Phoenician to British commercial power, as if in unspoken acknowledgement of the providential and perfectible course of human history:<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “The Carclaze Tin-Mine, Cornwall” seems to endorse the Hegelian concept of history as the slow emergence of the perfect State. For Hegel, “[t]he process of history appears, in its existence, to be an advance from the imperfect to the more perfect, but one in which the imperfect stage is not grasped abstractly or *merely* as that which was once imperfect, but rather as that which at the same time has its own opposite within itself—i.e., it has what is called ‘perfect’ within it, as a germ or as the source of its drive” (*Introduction to*

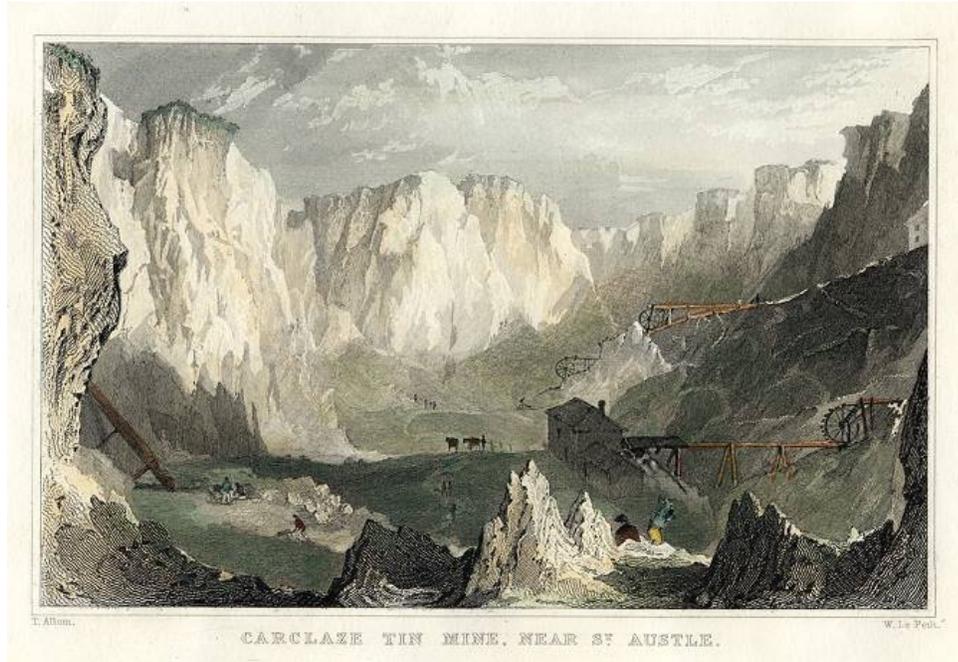
They come to find the precious ores  
That British mountains yield;  
To point to British enterprise,  
Its future glorious field.  
...  
What land but knows her [England's] red-cross flag?  
What sea but knows her prow?  
Riches, and intellect, and peace,  
Have marked the favoured strand:  
God keep thee in prosperity,  
My own sea-girdled land!

The cultural bias here is obvious enough. The Phoenicians move from the brilliant traders of late antiquity to mere suppliers of British wealth—a “savage race, yet from their trade/Rose England’s commerce.” The entrepreneurial spirit of a people that sought to monopolize Cornish tin mines in the fifth century to make a profit is first narrativized and then replaced. The speaker acts as a willing participant in a larger, cultural effort to force local or synchronic histories into a single, diachronic sense of time of which European modernity is the end and goal.<sup>21</sup>

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*the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988], 60). The poem embodies this principle in its narrative. The short poetic account of (imperfect) Phoenician conquest *contains* within it the seed of British imperialism, a more perfect articulation of the State or World Spirit than the example set by its predecessors.

<sup>21</sup> According to Saree Makdisi, romanticism may be viewed as a “constellation of attempts to resist, or to chart out alternatives to,” one grand, unlinear, global narrative of history—an imperial “world-time” (*Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998], 4, 9).



**Figure 4**

With whom is the reader to supposed to identify the patriotic “My” of the final line? with a fictional character? with Landon? What other choice than the latter, really, does the reader have? Landon spent most of her life in London. Her speakers often sing the praises of the metropolis. The note affixed to “Carclaze Tin-Mine” is tinged with the same national and cultural pride as the poem. In all likelihood this is the choice Landon expects her readers to make. But the opinions in the lines are not, at least convincingly, hers: she does not maintain them in her work. Nor, in the case of this plate, do they belong to the artist. The engraving depicts the mine as it existed in the nineteenth century and a few laborers hard at work in it. It offers no hint of the Phoenicians or the early history of Cornish tin-manufacture or anything of the sort—a thematic point of departure Landon invents (with probable recourse to the Fishers’ library).

“Carclaze Tin-Mine” is only one of many poems in staunch defense of British commercial and international interests. The poem “Manchester” (*F35*, 35-36) praises what “[s]cience and labour” have done for the city of Manchester—once a poor “village” on a “barren moor” but now a bustling city of thousands, with “walls...fill’d with wealth.” At present, “[f]ar distant lands consume” its manufactures and admire it as an beacon of industrial growth and progress:

The Indian wears around his brow  
The white webs of her loom.  
Her vessels sweep from East to West;  
Her merchants are like kings;  
While wonder in her walls attest  
The power that commerce brings.  
...  
Had I to guide a stranger’s eye  
Around our glorious land,  
Where yonder wondrous factories lie  
I’d bid that stranger stand.  
Let the wide city spread display’d  
Beneath the morning sun,  
And in it see for England’s trade  
What yonder town hath done.

Is there a character in these lines—one that emerges as a natural or logical consequence of the words? What do we make of the “I” who wants to show tourists a glorious view of

Manchester in the sunrise? Is the poem written for a single institution? for the public at large? for one sort of reader? Landon provides a footnote to the last-quoted stanza that helps us find answers:

In a speech last year, at the British Association, Mr Brand well advised the members to take the manufacturing districts of England on their way to the north, and to explore the wonders there accumulated. Manchester is the great miracle of modern progress. Science, devoted to utility and industry, have achieved the most wonderful results... all that can mark wealth, and a knowledge of its best purposes;—all this is the growth of a single century.

The footnote refers to William Thomas Brande (1788-1866), friend to Humphry Davy, prominent chemist and lecturer at the Royal Institution. The voice behind the note is of the same persuasion as the poetic speaker, and both voices echo the presumed attitude of William Brande. The “I” in each case ventriloquizes an improvised *mindset* rather than an improvised *mind*.

The pattern here—an “I,” both in the poetic illustration and in the footnote, that reproduces the values associated with a certain male specialist—is a Landonian trademark. The poem “Antioch” (*F37*, 38-89), for instance, has the same features. It emphasizes the presence of imperial Britain in foreign lands as bloodless, amiable and progressive. “Antioch” describes an “English band” that makes its way through “a wild and savage land [western Asia],” spreading “[f]aith and knowledge, light and hope,/ Empire with no other bound/ Than the wide horizon’s scope.” A note refers the reader to the 1829

voyage of Colonel Francis Rawdon Chesney (1789-1872) down the Euphrates river, and observes:

Conquest and commerce have been the two great principles of civilization. The expedition, whose advantages I have ventured above [in the poem] to prophesy, is in the noblest spirit of enlightened enterprise. We must...disturb, and eventually destroy the darkness, mental and moral, too long gathered on the East.

Who is the “We” here? Are we meant to believe that it includes Landon? that *she* is one with Chesney and perhaps the reader and others in an enthusiasm for “[c]onquest and commerce,” for the destruction of savage darkness, for what “must” be done? An anonymous writer in *The English Review* refers to Chesney as a man of “classical and mathematical reputation” and “patriotic zeal,” who traveled in Asia Minor “through regions infested by hordes of wandering Arabs, ready to plunder and slay any man, whether Christian, Moslem, or Infidel.” Chesney went on a scientific expedition—a survey of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers per order of the British government—but for the reviewer it was also a commercial and cultural cleanse of Asia Minor: it aided “the extension of mercantile operations” in the East and “the inculcation of the truths of...Divine Revelation” to “myriads of the human race...sunk in idolatry, or barbarized by a pernicious Deism.”<sup>22</sup> This reviewer and the speaker of “Antioch” appear to be of the

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<sup>22</sup> Anonymous, “Art. II.—*The Expedition for the Survey of the Rivers Euphrates and Tigris, Carried on by Order of the British Government, Preceded by Geographical and Historical Notices of the Regions Situated between the Rivers Nile and Indus; in Four Volumes, with Fourteen Maps and Charts, Embellished with Ninety-Seven Plates and Numerous Woodcuts. By Lieutenant-Colonel Chesney, R.A., Commander of the Expedition,*” *The English Review* 14.27 (1850): 13-15.

same mind: both champion the enlightenment of the East by the West. But what differentiates them is that the latter seems to appropriate rather than exude Britishness. “Antioch” underscores the status of patriotism and imperialism as supplements to art rather than felt realities. Or consider the poem “The Ganges” (F38, 33-34), which urges a diffusion of British culture across all of India (British “faith—commerce—knowledge—laws”) as sweeping and magnificent as the river Ganges: “Such, O my country! should be thy advancing—/ A glorious progress known/ As is that river’s.”

One of the most striking features of the *Scrap-Book* is that a speaker can reflect a seasoned critic of British commercialism and international trade as artfully and as often as she can an earnest advocate. “The Giant’s Causeway” (F32, 43) is a poem that accompanies a picture of the basaltic formation on the northern coast of Ireland, a series of rock structures so apparently methodical in their arrangement as to have been thought the work of giants according to popular myth. For three stanzas, Landon gives a dramatic voice to one of the mythological giants, excited at the prospect of fashioning a geological wonder out of formless rock. But then she interrupts the narrative as if having found it insufficient or aimless, and turns the rest of the poem into a loosely-related soapbox lecture in the first person:

Methinks that now too much we live to cold reality;  
The selfish and the trading world clips man so closely round,  
No bold or fair imaginings within our hearts are found.

So vortex-like doth wealth now draw, all other feelings in,  
Too much we calculate, and wealth, becomes almost a sin

In these lines, “cold reality” is associated with the spirit of capitalism, a relentless force that undermines human imagination. The innocent are caught in the “trading world,” and its obsession with the accumulation of capital and financial speculation tends to blast all that is non-utilitarian, all that is spontaneous and creative. We notice the ideological disparity between this and previous poems that valorize the “trading world” and all it stands for. The poem “Shuhur, Jeypore” (*F34*, 49) is a similar warning against the dangers of imperialism and mammonism. It is a sad reflection on European burying-grounds located in a small town in India. The speaker decries British involvement overseas, since English lives are lost and families divided all for the sake of national gain:

‘Tis the worst curse, on this our social world,  
Fortune’s perpetual presence—wealth, which now  
Is like life’s paramount necessity.  
For this, the household band is broken up,  
The hearth made desolate  
...

For this the earth  
Is covered with a thousand English graves  
...  
Alas! we do mistake, and vainly buy  
Our golden idols at too great a price.

It is now the British, not the Indian citizen, who is the idolater. He is barbarized by his own false gods—empire and the fortunes acquired from it. If mammonism threatens to strangle the British imagination, it is also responsible for the deaths of countless soldiers,

clerks, entrepreneurs and missionaries who sacrifice themselves to the “curse[d]” idols associated with the British empire.

Or take the poem “Oxford Street” (*F36*, 57-58), one of four poems in a series (“Scenes in London”) scattered throughout the pages of *Fisher’s* for 1836. It is a monologue spoken by a flâneur-figure who describes a midday walk along Oxford Street in London. She is startled at the contrast of rich and poor that line the street: “Wealth, with its waste, its pomp, and pride,/ Led forth its glittering train;/ And poverty’s pale face beside/ Ask’d aid, and ask’d in vain.” In spite of all the urban commercial activity, there is a sense of the wastefulness and human cost of empire and international trade: “The shops were fill’d from many lands—/ Toys, silks, and gems, and flowers;/ The patient work of many hands,/ The hope of many hours./ Yet ‘mid life’s myriad shapes around/ There was a sigh of death;/ There rose a melancholy sound,/ The bugle’s wailing breath.” The bugle plays for the funeral march of a soldier, presumably one of some distinction, who is carried ceremoniously to a churchyard grave and then left in a dead silence that clashes uncomfortably with the riot and life of Oxford Street. We are not sure where and how the soldier died, but the poem seems to treat his death as representative of all military casualties that serve in effect to keep the British empire alive, as well a home economy that flourishes in no small part due to merchandise acquired from colonial territories (“many lands”).

In light of these fluctuating, value-laden poems, it may not be enough to assume that, for Landon, British imperialism has its good and its bad points: that it civilizes and “spiritualizes” indigenous peoples in foreign lands but only at great cost to the sovereign nation. There is more to these ideologically scattered texts than an expression of ethical

conflict. The poems published throughout the eight volumes of *Fisher's* that Landon edited demonstrate how readily, how facilely, British values and subjectivities can yield to ad hoc artistic representation. They show the Wordsworthian self, unified, autonomous and transcendent, in a splintered state: like Frankenstein's monster, its stitches are showing. The contradictions in the poems brandish the reality that the self is supplied and organized by its sociocultural context. Landon's poetry as a whole lends itself surprisingly well to a hermeneutic of suspicion in spite of the fact—or perhaps because of it—that each individual poem appears so sure of itself.

CHAPTER IV. "TO PROVE HIMSELF TO BE HIMSELF": MECHANICAL AND  
DYNAMIC SINCERITY IN MARY SHELLY'S *FALKNER*

A good man, even in a panegyric, can now  
be good only as a result of a successful  
psychomachy.

- C. S. Lewis

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote two short stories published in the *Keepsake* for 1829. The plot of one of them, "Ferdinando Eboli: A Tale," revolves around a stolen identity. Count Ferdinando Eboli is an Italian noble and junior officer in the Italian regiments of Joachim Murat, French king of Naples from 1808 to 1815. He is betrothed to Adalinda, the only child of the Marchese Spina, a high-ranking government officer under Murat. One fateful night, having been dispatched on a secret mission across enemy territory—a country in northern Italy occupied by Austrian troops—Eboli is ambushed, "bound, gagged," "blinded" and deposited in a small hut. His captors strip him of his uniform and regalia, reclothe him in habiliments "of the plainest and meanest description" and leave him there to die. On the following day he is unexpectedly rescued by peasants. Nursed back to health, he hastens to the headquarters of the Neapolitan army but is imprisoned in a guard-house on his arrival. Much to his surprise, a scornful French officer informs him that Count Ferdinando Eboli arrived three hours ago. When he appears before Murat, Eboli is bewildered to find "his counterfeit" already present: a "pretender" "so like him whom he represented...that it would have been impossible to discern one from the other apart." Murat decides to exile the real Eboli (now slovenly in

appearance) as an imposter and credit the identity of his finely-dressed counterpart. Desperate, Eboli gains entrance to the Villa Spina to plead his case with his future father-in-law the Marchese. All of a sudden the pretender reappears on the scene before the Marchese has a chance to hear Eboli out. Spina “looked at [Eboli] fixedly and started as he marked his proud mien...[b]ut again he was perplexed when he turned and discerned, as in a mirror, the same countenance reflected by the new comer.” Impatient and contemptuous, the pretender

told the Marchese that this was a second attempt in the intruder [the real Eboli] to impose himself as Count Eboli; that the trick had failed before, and would again; adding, laughing, that it was hard to be brought to prove himself to be himself, against the assertion of a *briccone* [rascal], whose likeness to him, and matchless impudence, were his whole stock in trade.<sup>1</sup>

As it turns out, the fake count is really the disinherited and vengeful elder brother of Ferdinando. Resentful of having been denied his patrimonial inheritance, he set out to appropriate the home, military honors, fiancé, the very life and identity of his younger brother. In the end the story is wrapped up neatly and all works out for the best: the two brothers even become friends.

“Ferdinando Eboli” would probably mean little in the larger context of Shelley studies were its topic an isolated one. But the Shelley canon is full of conflicts between authentic selves and performers, identities and acts, interiors and exteriors. Although

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Shelley, “Ferdinando Eboli: A Tale,” in *The Keepsake (1829): A Facsimile Reproduction*, ed. Kathryn Ledbetter and Terence Hoagwood (Delmar: Scholars’ Facsimiles and Reprints, 1999), 200-03, 205.

these cases often demonstrate the “arbitrary nature of gender categories,”<sup>2</sup> as Arnold Markley has argued, they also illustrate the fraught ideas of the subject and of sincerity that concern me in this chapter. In “Ferdinando Eboli,” Adalinda escapes her domestic imprisonment at the hands of the elder Eboli by disguising herself in the “costume” of a page boy—hair tied up and rapier at her side.<sup>3</sup> In her other 1829 *Keepsake* story, “The Sisters of Albano,” Shelley has the Italian Anina escape a French encampment disguised in the religious habit of her sister Maria, a nun of the Sisters of Charity in Rome. Castruccio Castracani, the Italian military leader and anti-hero of the historical novel *Valperga* (1823), plummets from simple ambition to cruel Machiavellianism; and his corrupt political stratagems are often successful in proportion as he can perform a variety of roles: “fit[ting] himself for each scene in which he was to take a part” and “adapting himself to every character.”<sup>4</sup> The historical novel *Perkin Warbeck* (1830) is about a Flemish pretender to the English throne in the late fifteenth century, whom Shelley casts (against conventional histories) not as a counterfeit but as the legitimate prince of England. In the later novels—particularly *Lodore* (1835) and *Falkner* (1837)—Shelley dwells on the sincerity or insincerity of her characters as if narrativizing the human were a matter of measuring how “true” he is to himself.

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<sup>2</sup> Arnold Markley, “‘The Truth in Masquerade’: Cross-dressing and Disguise in Mary Shelley’s Short Stories,” in *Mary Shelley’s Fictions: From Frankenstein to Falkner*, ed. Michael Eberle-Sinatra (New York: St. Martin’s P, 2000), 123. Markley observes “the remarkable frequency with which [Shelley] experimented with the plot devices of identity switches, clothes changes, disguise, and cross-dressing,” and chooses to focus on “women altering their dress in order to pass as men” (“The Truth in Masquerade,” 109).

<sup>3</sup> Shelley, “Ferdinando Eboli: A Tale,” 214.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, *Valperga: Or, the Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, vol. 3 of *NSWS*, 68, 99.

The point is that Shelley organizes her characterization largely around the idea of sincerity. But what she means by sincerity is not always straightforward. A few of her characters (usually females) are described as immaculately authentic, antitheatrical, harmonious, dutiful: specimens of perfect integrity and propriety. At the opposite end are the splintered characters (usually males): unsure of themselves, delusional and often living life as if it were art. It can seem logical for us to esteem the first set at the expense of the second and presume that Shelley does as well. Since a person in civilized society (as Shelley herself portrays it) tends to know “little...of [his] fellow-creatures—each shrouded in the cloak of manner—that cloak of various dyes [that] displays little of the naked man within,”<sup>5</sup> it seems best that we should value the individuals who wear their hearts on their sleeves. But Shelley does not treat these categories as consistently clear and dichotomous. The late novels are not simple didactic stories that uphold sincere/good/pragmatic/antitheatrical people and expose, punish or correct insincere/bad/romantic/theatrical ones. Shelley is more interested in teasing these categories out and determining what they really mean, where they overlap and how feasible they are in the first place as categories. Her preoccupation with the essentialist versus the performative model of the self is investigative, speculative, open-ended—not an affair settled in advance and used to instruct.

Several criticisms, however, now dated but still very influential in the twenty-first century, have left the binary intact and seen the late Shelley as a relatively clear-cut moral teacher and foundationalist: as an author who promotes certain values associated in the nineteenth century with a female sexual character, especially propriety. Mary Poovey

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., *Falkner*, vol. 7 of *NSWS*, 276.

(1984) argues that after her first four (of seven) novels—*Frankenstein* (1818), *Matilda* (completed in 1820), *Valperga* and *The Last Man* (1826)—Shelley loses touch with her old radicalism and starts preaching socially conservative wisdom. Ashamed of the “crimes of her youth” (eloping with an atheist at seventeen and leading a peripatetic and sexually deviant life on the continent), she casts herself as a proper lady bent on “mak[ing] her behavior conform to conventional expectations of what a woman should be.” No longer are her novels “vehicle[s] for urging her audience to criticize conventions or even for exploring themselves,” but “a means of covering over whatever psychological complexities might challenge conventional propriety.”<sup>6</sup> In a word, for Poovey the late novels depart from reformist politics and settle comfortably in the “separate sphere” of the domestic.

It may be obvious today that this conservative move was not necessarily a disempowering one for nineteenth-century women writers. A female author of the time who seemed to promote received masculinist gender constructs could do so to her advantage: she might celebrate her strong moral “influence” in the home (culturally constructed as *her* domain) as a force that could radiate into the social and political world beyond. More, being mistress of the home often gave women an unprecedented sense of their own identity—a point Nancy Armstrong (1987) carries to a radical conclusion: that “the modern individual was first and foremost a woman.”<sup>7</sup> For Armstrong, the woman who ran the home was not merely a counterpart to the man who ran the economic and political

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984), 159, 116-17.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 8.

spheres. She stood for the modern counterpart to the aristocratic past. Whereas a woman before the eighteenth century (more or less) was held to be desirable based on her rank and fortune and family name, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries she grew desirable (thanks largely to domestic fiction) in proportion as she “possessed psychological depth.” The once-valued “aristocratic woman” came to represent “surface instead of depth, embodied material instead of moral value, and displayed ideal sensuality instead of constant vigilance and tireless concern for the well-being of others.”<sup>8</sup> The very idea of femaleness, in short, was redefined, and with this redefinition the modern individual was born. A “sexual contract” emerged that established the “middle-class ideal of love,” whereby “the female relinquishes political [and economic] control to the male in order to acquire exclusive authority over domestic life, emotions, taste, and morality.”<sup>9</sup>

In her seminal *Romanticism and Gender* (1993), Anne Mellor incorporated the notions of the proper lady (Poovey) and the domestic woman (Armstrong) into a broad systemized aesthetic called feminine romanticism: a programmatic interest (mostly on the part of women authors) in rational love, sexual equality, an ethic of care, a cooperative community and a domesticity extended to the public sphere. Mellor defines feminine romanticism as the counterpart of “masculine romanticism”—the preoccupation with the creative imagination, transcendence, the limits of language, the autonomous self and the overflow of powerful feelings.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>10</sup> For critics who apply the idea of feminine romanticism to the works of Mary Shelley (including both the early and the late novels), see Mary Jean Corbett, “Reading Mary Shelley’s Journals: Romantic Subjectivity and Feminist Criticism,” in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, ed. Audrey Fisch, Anne Mellor and Esther Schor (New

I find these critical frameworks (and the various twenty-first century criticisms that build on them) useful, but limiting for two reasons. The first is that they encourage us to think of the late Mary Shelley almost exclusively in terms of gender politics. The second is that the boundaries between so-called feminine and masculine romanticism are too arbitrarily fixed.<sup>11</sup> There needs to be more room for overlap. Shelley after 1830 is thoroughly invested in the sort of “psychological complexities” that induce a person to interrogate and interpret moral absolutes rather than uncritically accept them.

In this chapter I suggest that Shelley splits the notion of sincerity into two types—mechanical and dynamic sincerity—and examines the merits of each. While the mechanically sincere person is all but incapable of theatrical self-representations, the dynamically sincere person demands these identifications as necessary to psychological growth. Consider Elizabeth Raby of *Falkner*. She is not always a desirable alternative to the theatrical and extravagant romantic hero—her step-father Rupert John Falkner. Her sincerity is often portrayed as unreflective, necessitarian and mechanical. There seems to be no autonomy in it. In fact she is *born* grown: her mechanistic motives are immediately

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York: Oxford UP, 1993); Joseph Lew “God’s Sister: History and Ideology in *Valperga*,” in *The Other Mary Shelley*; Charlene Bunnell, “The Illusion of ‘Great Expectations’: Manners and Morals in Mary Shelley’s *Lodore* and *Falkner*,” in *Iconoclastic Departures: Mary Shelley after Frankenstein*, ed. Syndy Conger, Frederick Frank and Gregory O’Dea (Cranbury: Associated UP, 1997); David Vallins, “Mary Shelley and the Lake Poets: Negation and Transcendence in *Lodore*,” in *Mary Shelley’s Fictions*; Charlene Bunnell, “*All the World’s a Stage*: Dramatic Sensibility in Mary Shelley’s Novels (New York: Routledge, 2002); Yousef, *Isolated Cases*, chapter five, “Fantastic Form: *Frankenstein* and Philosophy.”

<sup>11</sup> Other critics have noted cases where the categories of masculine and feminine romanticism become insufficient to explain the lives and texts of certain exceptional female authors. See, for instance, Adriana Craciun, “The Subject of Violence: Mary Lamb, Femme Fatale,” in *Romanticism and Women Poets*; and Lootens, “Receiving the Legend.”

harmonized with a necessitarian universe that runs on cause and effect.<sup>12</sup> The character of Falkner is an altogether different case: as a “disharmonized” individual out of sync with the mechanical and necessitarian laws of the universe he is forced to grapple with, understand and *earn* the sincerity he comes to possess. His true-to-self-ness is the product of psychological work. It is dynamic in nature. When he experiments with performative models of the self it only humanizes him and enables him to understand and assume his identity in a manner unavailable to Elizabeth.

We can also think of these two figures in Blakean terms. Elizabeth may be said to reside in what Blake calls *Beulah*: lower or unorganized innocence, the “state we lived in as children, when that state was at its best,” a place associated with natural repose.<sup>13</sup> Falkner comes to arrive at a place analogous to *Eden*, or that state of organized and higher innocence associated with energetic creativity. This is not to say that Shelley has any deep investment in Blakean mythology and uses it to make her point. But she certainly seems to preserve a respect (although not an unqualified endorsement) for the high-romantic ethos, the ascension of the romantic spiral,<sup>14</sup> the energy of the autonomous

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<sup>12</sup> Shelley may be reacting to one of the famous ideals of her father William Godwin, who advocated for “a level of honesty according to which ‘the truth and the whole truth’ would be spoken arising out of the ‘uniform’ ‘commerce between...tongue and...heart’” (Timothy Milnes and Kerry Sinanan, eds., introduction to *Romanticism, Sincerity, and Authenticity* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010], 4). The quotation within the quotation is from the first volume of Godwin’s *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793).

<sup>13</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1971), 21. For a summary of the Blakean idea of “Beulah” see the first section of chapter two, “The Individual Vision.”

<sup>14</sup> The idea of the “romantic spiral” is a familiar one to students of romanticism, if now outdated as an hermeneutic. For the concept see the third chapter (“The Circuitous Journey: Pilgrims and Prodigals”) of M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Culture* (New York: Norton, 1971).

individual who would transcend social and cultural forces—even in the final novels that are supposed to have snuffed out or domesticated that ethos.

I want to make one disclaimer: all of this is not to say that Mary Shelley is a “masculine romantic” at heart who creatively conceals cherished masculinist ideologies in her late novels. It is rather to deemphasize the a priori categories of masculine and feminine romanticism: to avoid scholarly writing that “unthinkingly” views “women as a class” with common literary goals.<sup>15</sup> The following chapter studies the notions of sincerity and, to a lesser extent, identity in the novels after 1830. In the process the philosophical doctrine of Necessity and the Lucretian notion of simulacra are discussed.

I have said that Shelley has no definite plan in *Falkner* to invert the notion of separate spheres and uphold a masculinist ethos. Her last few novels are best thought of as ideologically ambivalent. Shelley remains wary of ideological absolutes to the end of her career: radicalism/conservatism, sincerity/insincerity, masculine/feminine, theatrical/antitheatrical. If she wants to avoid repeating the mistakes of her late husband, for her the solution is not an uncritical embrace of beliefs antithetical to his. The greatest danger for Shelley, I suggest, is an ideological extreme.

### **1. Necessity and Mechanical Sincerity in the Novels of Mary Shelley**

In most of her novels, Shelley introduces some variation of the philosophical doctrine of Necessity as the governing force of her fictional universe. But it is not entirely the radical and atheistic Necessity that Percy Shelley promotes in his poem *Queen Mab* (1813). The version of Necessity in that poem has little to do with a divine spirit or a felt

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<sup>15</sup> Craciun, “The Subject of Violence,” 46-47.

presence: the human being is rather alone (albeit with other human beings) and responsible for his own salvation. His motives determine his fate. If he can replace whatever selfish and hateful motives he has with ones that are selfless and loving and irreproachable, then the inevitable succession of cause and effect in the cosmos will see to it that the germ of moral perfection in him flourishes. In a note to *Queen Mab*, Percy calls Necessity “an immense and uninterrupted chain of causes and effects” that runs all existence. Both the moral and the material world are mechanical and predictable: “[m]otive is, to voluntary action in the human mind, what cause is to effect in the material universe.”<sup>16</sup> In the poem itself Necessity is called the “mother of the world” who controls everything. All living and nonliving things—“all that the wide world contains”—are its “passive instruments.” Only it is not a living God or what Coleridge, in the “Eolian Harp,” calls an “intellectual breeze.” It “[r]equire[s] no prayers or praises,” has no favorites and interposes itself at no point in human history because it *is* history, felt and spiritual though not metaphysical.<sup>17</sup>

Mary Shelley begins to emphasize the role of Necessity in her second novel, *Matilda*, completed in 1820 but not published until 1959. Its eponymous protagonist, who narrates her tragic history, regards Necessity as a cruel and tyrannical power poised to victimize her and others. In the course of the plot her father reveals his incestuous love for her and subsequently drowns himself. Afterward Matilda befriends a young poet named Woodville, but their relationship is powerless to prevent her despair and lonely death. In a morbid state of mind Matilda muses that her “fate has been governed by a

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<sup>16</sup> Percy Shelley, *Queen Mab; A Philosophical Poem*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 52.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 198, 214-15, 200.

hideous necessity.” Nor can there be any love and happiness between Woodville and his own beloved, Elinor: the “chain of necessity ever bringing misery” and “permit[ting] [no] breach of her eternal laws.”<sup>18</sup>

In *The Last Man*, the idea of Necessity assumes a much more sustained and controlling presence in the narrative. In the early portions of the novel it is cast as a relentless and faceless force: characters either reluctantly accept its power over them or work hard to resist it. Adrian describes it in a moment of despair: “[w]e go on, each thought linked to the one which was its parent, each act to a previous act. No joy or sorrow dies barren of progeny, which for ever generated and generating, weaves the chain that make[s] our life.”<sup>19</sup> Lionel Verney, the first-person narrator of the novel, is more hopeful and self-affirming at first. As someone who privileges free will over Necessity, he tells his friend Raymond that “there is an active principle in man which is capable of ruling fortune...till it in some mode conquers it.” Lionel goes on: “Who, when he makes a choice, says, Thus I choose, because I am necessitated? Does he not on the contrary feel a freedom of will within him, which...still actuates him as he decides?” His interlocutor Raymond is not convinced: “Exactly so,” replies Raymond—“another link of the breakless chain.”<sup>20</sup> As it turns out, Lionel loses his faith in the actualizing power of the human will at the close of the novel. After the plague has done its worst and he remains one of a few human beings left on earth, he learns to submit to a power greater than himself—the very power he once thought he could transcend:

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Shelley, *Matilda, Dramas, Reviews and Essays, Prefaces and Notes*, 6, 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Last Man*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

Sudden an internal voice, articulate and clear, seemed to say:—  
Thus from eternity, it was decreed: the steeds that bear Time  
onwards had this hour and this fulfilment enchained to them, since  
the void brought forth its burthen. Would you read backwards the  
unchangeable laws of Necessity?

Mother of the world! Servant of the Omnipotent! eternal,  
changeless Necessity! who with busy fingers sittest ever weaving  
the indissoluble chain of events! —I will not murmur at thy acts. If  
my human mind cannot acknowledge that all that is, is right; yet  
since what is, must be, I will sit amidst the ruins and smile. Truly  
we were not born to enjoy, but to submit, and to hope.<sup>21</sup>

Chastened by circumstances, Lionel learns to submit hopefully to the inflexible laws of the universe. But the Necessity that humbles him is not *strictly* an impersonal or nondescript force. It is suddenly cast as the helpmate or will of an omnipotent God. As the speaker of *Queen Mab* apostrophizes Necessity as “mother of the world!/ Unlike the God of human error,”<sup>22</sup> so Lionel refers to it as the “[m]other of the world”; only he replaces the second clause with “[s]ervant of the Omnipotent.” Necessity is now affixed to something else. It is subordinate to another discrete, all-powerful force—an “Omnipotent,” an implicit father-God. Later on Lionel describes it as “the visible laws of the invisible God.”<sup>23</sup> The point is that the concept becomes less absolute and more wrapped up in the idea of a deity: it has its “miracles” and “authority” and “decrees” (even

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>22</sup> Percy Shelley, *Queen Mab*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, lines 198-99.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, 360.

inspiring a despairing Lionel not to commit suicide). *The Last Man* initiates a gradual and subtle Christianization of the doctrine of Necessity.<sup>24</sup>

In the rest of the novels Necessity is blended with the idea of Providence—a Providence with predetermined *roles* for all of its creatures to play. The narrator of *Perkin Warbeck* makes a distinct didactic pronouncement: “[f]or good or ill, we are in the hands of a superior power: ‘There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will.’ We can only resolve, or rather endeavour, to act our parts well, such as they are allotted to us. Little choice have we to seek or eschew our several destinations.”<sup>25</sup> The ambiguity in this statement has important implications. On the one hand, a “superior power” runs the world (Hamlet calls it a “divinity”) and prepares our “several destinations” in advance. On the other hand, the inexorability of these destinations is a bit undermined by the theatrical metaphor—the idea that we have to try “to act our parts well.” In a sense or to an extent, destiny is performable: a person can choose to act his fated role well, or poorly, or perhaps not at all. And the same concept is reinforced in the last two novels: in *Lodore*, Henry Fitzhenry (Lord Lodore) feels that a “providence...conduct[s] the drama of [his] life,”<sup>26</sup> and in *Falkner* Alithea Neville lives by the creed that “we ought not to endeavor to form a destiny for ourselves, but to act well our part on the scene where

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<sup>24</sup> Morton Paley writes that Mary Shelley’s universe in this novel “has no sovereign God and no supernatural agency...any rational explanation of the destruction of humankind is conspicuously absent” (“*The Last Man: Apocalypse Without Millennium*,” in *The Other Mary Shelley*, 110). Shelley may not rationally explain the destruction of the world by a plague, but she does at least suggest the existence of a “supernatural agency.” Her characters debate over it and Lionel imagines that it prevents his suicide.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Shelley, *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck: A Romance*, vol. 5 of *NSWS*, 239.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, *Lodore*, 92.

Providence has placed us.”<sup>27</sup> So what is this Providence? A God? a formless abstraction to which we can have little access beyond a faint intuition (as in Percy Shelley’s poem *Mont Blanc*)? The narrator of *Falkner* suggests that it is a little of both: he calls it an “Almighty Power...who holds earth and all it contains in the hollow of his hand” and who issues “inevitable though unknown decree[s].”<sup>28</sup> There is something vaguely deistic in this description. In any case, the nature of this higher power is paradoxical: as a deterministic force it preconceives the parts that characters are to act, only it also leaves them some flexibility as to how soon, or how accurately, to act them (or so they fondly imagine).

While the malevolent characters in the novels are often the ones adept at dissembling and switching roles, we need not conclude that Shelley invalidates all individuals who flout their assigned parts and validates the ones who embrace them. In fact, she overturns the binary. A few of her characters—ones who are transparently sincere—yield to their predestined roles only to play these roles *all too well*. It is no longer even a question of their personal will, of their choosing to enact a role. A character of hers who is perfectly sincere, whose words and expressions are perfect transcriptions of the heart, seems to follow a script: exercising a sincerity that functions according to a necessitarian mechanism. As compared to that of her more psychologically complex characters, the cause-and-effect nature of this sort of sincerity is automatic, lifeless, mechanical, allegorical: unfit for human use. Whether or not she intends it, Shelley seems to acknowledge the untenability of perfect, Godwinian sincerity in the very act of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., *Falkner*, 96.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 279-80.

promoting it—or at least the impossibility of translating such a remote ideal into a living value.

To take a strong example of a mechanically sincere character, consider Lady Katherine Gordon in *Perkin Warbeck*, granddaughter of James I and wife to Richard/Warbeck until his death. The narrator observes that “by devoting herself to the happiness of him [Richard] to whom she was united, she was performing the part assigned to her on earth, and securing a portion of happiness, far beyond the common lot of those [who] require something beyond sympathy to constitute their misnamed felicity.”<sup>29</sup> Here the narrator seems to value how perfectly Katherine acts her “part” as the devoted wife: all desires outside of sympathetic attachment are said to be superfluous—“misnamed felicit[ies].” But at the same time the sincerity of Katherine is mechanically instinctive: “every word [she speaks] is but the genuine interpreter of the feelings of [her] heart, to which not only falsehood, but even the slightest disguise or affectation, is wholly foreign” (in its essence this is the doctrine of sensibility inherited from Mackenzie and Radcliffe). Katherine cannot choose but be perfectly sincere. The “essence of her being” is “serene content.”<sup>30</sup> Shelley’s King James is hardly less praiseful than the narrator. He calls Katherine “simple as a child,” and proclaims that to look on her is to see “the youngest and most innocent of the Graces read a page of Wisdom’s book, scarce understanding what it meant, but feeling that it was right.”<sup>31</sup> Can we conclude that Shelley valorizes Katherine as a model for human behavior? that she wants readers to emulate her or aspire to emulate her? that she finds strength and value in a will as

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, 291.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 235, 234.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 219-20.

inviolable as the mechanical laws of the universe? Lisa Hopkins claims that *Perkin Warbeck* is a novel “centrally structured by an ongoing tension between the self and its monstrous other”—not unlike *Frankenstein*—and that “there can be little doubt that, to Mary Shelley, Katherine is the self.”<sup>32</sup> I disagree. Not only is Katherine not *the* self but she is hardly *a* self at all. Her character is no less monstrous than the monster of *Frankenstein*, inasmuch as she is cast as a mechanical instrument in the service of an ethical ideal.

Or take a similar character: Ethel Fitzhenry, heroine of *Lodore*. She and her impoverished lover Edward Villiers dodge creditors in London until Edward is finally arrested and imprisoned for debt. Ethel chooses to remain by his side and embrace “the stage on which she played her part”— she and Edward as co-prisoners, “outcasts” and “wanderers from civilized existence.” This is no difficulty for Ethel. She sees “the fulfillment of her destiny” in “the interweaving of duty and affection.” She is “always ready to give her soul away: to please her father was the unsleeping law of all her actions.” Her mother, Lady Lodore, views Ethel as “a moving, speaking picture.”<sup>33</sup> To an extent both Katherine and Ethel are dehumanized and framed as allegorical portraits programmed to perform a role impeccably. As characters they are not so much larger than life as outside of life altogether.

The characters in the novels who are not mechanically sincere are positioned somewhere along a spectrum: at one end of which is *insincerity* or unconstructive theatricality, and at the other end dynamic sincerity or constructive theatricality. The

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<sup>32</sup> Lisa Hopkins, “The Self and the Monstrous: *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*,” in *Iconoclastic Departures*, 267, 271.

<sup>33</sup> Mary Shelley, *Lodore*, 230, 228, 159, 16, 252.

insincere characters are often one-dimensional villains modeled on figures from melodrama. In *Perkin Warbeck* there are Stephen Frion and Robin Clifford. Frion is a French spy and secretary to the English Tudor king Henry VII. He is a “serpent-spirited man” of “unparalleled artifice” who has the “power of being all things to all men.” He can “turn, and twist, and show more faces than a die.”<sup>34</sup> Robin Clifford, more or less his counterpart, reunites with Richard after having spent time in prison with him as a child. He is completely duplicitous, alternating as a spy for Henry VII and for Richard, whom he repeatedly betrays. Associated with “stage villains and gothic anti-heroes,” Clifford is both pure evil and pure theatricality.<sup>35</sup> He is “adept in every art” and can “moul[d] himself to every needful form” (not unlike Castruccio Castracani). As a character he is the evil *antithesis* of a Lady Katherine Gordon or an Ethel Fitzhenry—a “type and symbol of ingratitude and treason,” his name a “symbol of treachery.”<sup>36</sup> If Katherine and Ethel conform to the roles allotted to them by Providence as perfect (albeit involuntary) models of sincerity, Frion and Clifford earn their living by playing as many roles as possible. Theirs is a perfect *insincerity*.

I read these polarities as ends of an internal dialectic of which Rupert John Falkner, hero of the seventh and final novel, is the synthesis. He is a character who partakes of both sincerity and theatricality and can fuse them in way that is both profitable and practical. Because he wrestles with his providential role, he earns from Shelley, on some level, the same moral valuation as Jacob wrestling with the angel. His sincerity is dynamic instead of mechanical. The respect we have for his character has to

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, 66, 65, 319.

<sup>35</sup> Doucet Devin Fischer, ed., *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, by Mary Shelley, 143.

<sup>36</sup> Mary Shelley, *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, 156, 323, 369.

do with his refusal blindly to conform to the dictates of the vague Necessity-God that Mary Shelley stations at the head of her fictional universe. He may behave badly and Shelley may condemn and reform his behavior. He may be an actor who interrogates and challenges and errs from his providential part. But in the end whatever merit he has as a character is more legitimately *his* than is the case with, for instance, his adopted daughter Elizabeth Raby. My reading of *Falkner* is at odds with Mellor's reading of women romantic writers. Mellor claims that women authors reject masculine obsession with contraries in favor of a model based on "sympathy and likeness." In her mind, to understand feminine romanticism we have to "learn how to think *beyond* a dialectic based on polarities."<sup>37</sup> Perhaps this is true for some female writers and some texts, but in *Falkner* I feel that the dialectic based on polarities is a perfectly legitimate idea and one of the driving forces of the novel (although I realize that interpreting a novel is not the same as constructing a theoretical paradigm).

## **2. Elizabeth Raby and Mechanical Sincerity**

Elizabeth Raby of *Falkner* is the orphaned daughter of Edwin and Mrs. Raby. Edwin had started out as an English gentleman of promise but severed ties with his wealthy (and Catholic) family in order to enter the law and marry the unnamed mother of Elizabeth, a "portionless" servant-girl.<sup>38</sup> Both parents die of consumption before Elizabeth is six years old. As a young child she becomes the ward of Mrs. Baker and meets Rupert John Falkner, who assumes the role of step-father to Elizabeth for the remainder of the novel.

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<sup>37</sup> Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, 3-4.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Shelley, *Falkner*, 139.

As a character Elizabeth is similar to Katherine Gordon and Ethel Fitzhenry, only more extreme and arguably more one-dimensional. Her psychological economy is often described in terms of harmony. She is a “creature...with a character not to be disharmonized by any circumstances.” Falkner (all but a stranger to the six-year-old Elizabeth when he meets her) can remove her from her native Cornwall—“away from all the ties of blood...the manners and customs of her country...the discipline of regular education, and the society of others of her sex”—and she can bear his “fearful experiment” and “wild scheme” with equanimity. She becomes his helpmate as he wanders Europe in an effort to escape his sense of guilt, and in trying circumstances (such as “storms at sea”) she remains perfectly undisturbed: her “senses and sensibilities so delicately strung, as to be true to the slightest touch of harmony.”<sup>39</sup> In her case a rough and peripatetic journey across the continent only strengthens the “harmony and justness” of her “mind.” Elizabeth is “intelligent, warm-hearted, courageous, and sincere,” but her “lively sense of duty was perhaps her chief peculiarity. It was that which strung to such sweet harmony the other portions of her character.” Most readers probably find this portrait a little unreal. Even the narrator of *Falkner* refers to Elizabeth as a “type,” a person of “ideal and almost unnatural perfection.”<sup>40</sup> Perhaps Shelley—to some extent—wants readers to aspire to be like Elizabeth, an ideal, whose lofty personality seems to transcend that of the rest of the characters in the novel. But at the same time there is something stilted in her impeccably-ordered mind. It develops and matures as other minds do, but as if without any human

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 33, 31, 34.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 55.

effort. There is no work, no struggle, no irregularity in it to be overcome. Her harmonized mind functions as a passive apparatus.

Shelley creates Elizabeth as a creature calculated according to the immutable laws of Necessity. What Percy Shelley observes of the movement of heavenly bodies—that “[m]illions and millions of suns are ranged around us, all attended by innumerable worlds, yet calm, regular, and *harmonious*, all keeping the paths of immutable necessity” (emphasis mine)<sup>41</sup>—applies also to Elizabeth. In terms of psychological development she is as “calm, regular, and harmonious” as any one of the millions of suns in the universe. Percy also notes that “[w]hen the mind,” as much the subject of Necessity as the material cosmos, “observes its own operations, it feels no connection of motive and action.”<sup>42</sup> So it is with Elizabeth: her motives are instantaneously and uncritically translated into actions. She is truly a living microcosm of a mechanically-run universe.<sup>43</sup>

One thing we notice about Elizabeth is that she appears strangely alienated from or out of touch with her personal and mental growth, which Shelley repeatedly describes via botanical metaphors that sound paradoxically mechanical. Falkner “pitie[s] the mother who had been forced to desert so sweet a flower” as Elizabeth, “leaving to the bleak elements a blossom which it had been paradise for her to have cherished and sheltered in her own bosom for ever.” He personally takes over the job of cultivation when he and the

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<sup>41</sup> Percy Shelley, *Queen Mab*, in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 23.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, *Queen Mab* (London: R. Carlile, 1822), 119.

<sup>43</sup> Shelley's portrait of Elizabeth seems to reflect what Lionel Trilling calls the “anxiety about the machine,” a “commonplace in nineteenth-century moral and cultural thought.” For the nineteenth-century author, according to Trilling, “[t]he mind is not to be a machine, not even that part of it which we call reason. The universe is not to be a machine...It was the mechanical principle...which was felt to be the enemy of being, the source of inauthenticity” (*Sincerity and Authenticity*, 126-27).

orphaned Elizabeth set out on the open road—for a life of “restlessness” and “petty annoyances and fleeting pleasures.”<sup>44</sup> But she takes it all in stride. In fact she is perfectly happy to be itinerant:

She might be compared to an exotic, lately pinched, and drooping from the effects of the wintry air, transported back in the first opening of a balmy southern spring, to its native clime. The young and tender green leaves unfolded themselves in the pleasant air; blossoms appeared among the foliage, and sweet fruit might be anticipated.<sup>45</sup>

In this sense Elizabeth experiences new and pleasant emotions as necessarily and as naturally as a exotic plant flourishes when restored to its native environment. Consider also her solicitude for the mental health of Falkner. In the early stages of their travels together she develops a sort of cheering “power...over him,” but as a child she cannot yet understand or control this power. She remains “unconscious of the train of feeling” that attaches her to her benefactor:

It was the microcosm of a plant, folded up in its germ. Sometimes looking at a green, unformed bud, we wonder why a particular texture of leaves must inevitably spring from it, and why another sort of plant should not shoot out from the dark stem: but, as the tiny leaflet uncloses, it is there in all its peculiarity, and endowed with all the especial qualities of its kind. Thus with Elizabeth,

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<sup>44</sup> Mary Shelley, *Falkner*, 27, 32.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

however, in the thoughtlessness and inexperience of childhood, small outward show was made of the inner sense; yet in her heart tenderness, fidelity, and unshaken truth, were folded up, to be developed as her mind gained ideas, and sensation gradually verged into sentiment.<sup>46</sup>

Here “tenderness, fidelity, and unshaken truth” are presented as the irreducible germs of growth and development. Elizabeth seems immaculately conceived and as destined for a sinless existence as a particular bud is destined to blossom into a particular plant. All that is required is that she be germinated by other hands than her own. Her governess, Miss Jervis (along with Falkner), has a hand in this horticultural process. The narrator notes that as educator to Elizabeth Miss Jervis “might be compared to the rough-handed gardener, whose labours are without elegance, and yet to whose waterings and vigilance the fragrant carnation owes its peculiar tint, and the waxlike camellia its especial variety.”<sup>47</sup> Between Falkner and Miss Jervis Elizabeth is plucked, transplanted and cultivated. Perhaps all of this is simply a creative endorsement of a nontraditional, non-patriarchal and somewhat egalitarian domestic unit. But all the while Elizabeth is described as almost aloof from the developmental process. She is represented as a sort of community garden: born with the seeds of perfection for others to cultivate. And even if there *were* no others, or much less external assistance and attention than the novel presents, Shelley creates the impression that her perfect faculties would remain inviolable, incorruptible.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 55.

Eventually Elizabeth has an excellent opportunity to repay the debt she owes Falkner. Near the end of the novel he is accused of murder and imprisoned at Carlisle, in a cell with “strongly barred windows,” “confined air” and no “close contiguity with Nature...staunch frien[d] of unsophisticated man.”<sup>48</sup> Fortunately for Falkner, “contiguity with Nature” is still possible in his incarceration. Elizabeth brings Nature to him in her own person. She is its utter embodiment:

A philosopher not long ago remarked, when adverting to the principle of destruction latent in all works of art, and the overthrow of the most durable edifices; “but when they are destroyed, so as to produce only dust, Nature asserts an empire over them; and the vegetative world rises in constant youth, and in a period of annual successions, by the labours of man, providing food, vitality and beauty adorn[s] the wrecks of monuments, which were once raised for purposes of glory.” Thus when crime and woe attack and wreck an erring human being, the affections and virtues of one faithfully attached, decorate the ruin with alien beauty; and make that pleasant to the eye and heart, which otherwise we might turn from as a loathsome spectacle.<sup>49</sup>

The sense of this passage *seems* certain: that Elizabeth is upheld as a paragon of devotion and care. The language testifies to the idea. Falkner is after all an “erring human being” whom “crime and woe” have helped to weaken and deteriorate into a “loathsome

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 235. The quoted philosopher is not identified.

spectacle.” Elizabeth arrives to lend him some of her “alien beauty.” But there is something in all of this botanical rhetoric that undermines what may have been the original intention of this excerpt. The moral beauty of Elizabeth is *alien* not only to Falkner but to practically everyone else. Fidelity is one thing, but when cast as “adorn[ment]” or “decorat[ion]” it becomes another. The paradoxical effect of repeatedly identifying Elizabeth with the “vegetative world” is that her organic, spontaneous, inevitably surfacing devotion feels oddly mechanistic and inhuman. She may be called a creature of mechanical organicism: hardwired to please as a plant grows.

I also see subtle feminist undertones in this and similar passages. Mary Wollstonecraft, upset over the “ignoble comparison” of women with flowers in a poem by Anna Barbauld—who calls both organisms “SWEET, *and gay, and DELICATE*” (l. 4), “[e]mblems of innocence” (l. 5) whose “*empire is . . . TO PLEASE*” (l. 19)—writes that whatever virtue a woman or man has “must be acquired by rough toils, and useful struggles with worldly cares.”<sup>50</sup> A woman for Wollstonecraft is decidedly not a flower—a pretty object that flourishes into a state of salutary influence without the hard work of experience. Nor would I argue that Shelley disagrees on this point: Elizabeth *does* experience her fair share of misfortune in an effort to cling to Falkner in the worst of circumstances. But “toils” are never “rough” for her. She has no need for “struggles with worldly cares” because she is a creature beyond all selfishness and meanness, all

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<sup>50</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Deidre Shauna Lynch (New York: Norton, 2009), 58. Wollstonecraft quotes the entirety of Barbauld’s poem (“To a Lady, with Some Painted Flowers”) and critiques it in a footnote in the fourth chapter of the *Vindication*.

worldliness, “forgetfu[l] of every triviality which haunts the petty-minded.”<sup>51</sup> She does only what she seems programmed to do: uplift and ameliorate. In this sense Elizabeth comes across as a sort of ethical automaton whose mechanical devotions are perpetually obscured and romanticized by organic tropes.

The main conclusion here is that Elizabeth’s sincerity or true-to-selfness seems to have little freedom in it. It seems detached from the work of human experience and reflection. She is a character “animated only by the most disinterested feelings.” Her “whole mind” is “filled by duties and affection.” The adoration she has for her step-father is unselfish and inexhaustible: “a fresh spring of ever-flowing love...redundant with all the better portion of our nature—gratitude, admiration, and pity, for ever fed it, as from a perennial fountain.”<sup>52</sup> In these prose-poetic descriptions Elizabeth appears in part as a reincarnation (seventeen years later) of Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*, whom Percy Shelley associates with Love itself, or platonic transcendence, or a state of recovered innocence. In *Falkner* Mary tries to keep hold of the humanity of Elizabeth; to ground her in rational principle and plausible sentiment. But occasionally she gets turned into some sort of half-platonic, half-Christianized demigoddess come to earth. With “no touch of earth and its sordid woes about her,” she is like “a new Eve, watched over by angels” and “placed in the desecrated land” until “the very ground she trod grew into paradise.”<sup>53</sup> In such cases the didactic efficacy of this character comes to a halt, and I think on some level that Shelley knows it. Elizabeth is a domesticated and practicalized version of the sublime that ends up as neither quite practical nor quite sublime. She is a model for

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<sup>51</sup> Mary Shelley, *Falkner*, 68.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 43, 57, 224.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

behavior that strains to be in two worlds at once, the human and the divine. Her character impresses us with a sense that the only way a person can be like her is to have been born with an internal compass permanently fixed in the direction of perfection.

### **3. Identity, Theatricality and Dynamic Sincerity in Rupert John Falkner**

Elizabeth is presented as a character with little to no identity, or at best an uncomplex one: inside she is all principle and affection. On one level Shelley encourages readers to consider the absence of personal identity as the first step on the road to the good life—the life of happiness and virtue and love. The narrator tells us that “Love causes us to get more rid of our haunting identity, and to give ourselves more entirely away than any other emotion.”<sup>54</sup> The implication is that loss of self is in our best interests. Identity is seen as a specter that *haunts* us, and love alone can prevent its ghostlike interference in our interpersonal lives.

It comes as no surprise that Elizabeth alone is capable of perfect love and the only character who can lose her identity entirely. Other characters seem fated to retain a sense of self or personal identity even in the midst of deep love. When Gerard Neville looks on Elizabeth he is

unmindful, while he gazed, of that emanation, that shadow of the shape, which the Latin poet tells us flows from every object, that impalpable impress of her form and being, which the air took and then folded round him, so that all he saw entered, as it were, into

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 292.

his own substance, and became mingled up for evermore with his identity.<sup>55</sup>

This passage takes some liberties with Lucretius. It tends to spiritualize or romanticize his materialism. His concept of the *simulacra* in book four of *De Rerum Natura* is mainly presented as a means to explain sense perception. The simulacra are “tiny bodies” on the surfaces of all objects “that can be/ Cast forth in their former pattern and preserve the object’s shape.” They are the “husks or shells of things,” “subtle as filaments, fluttering everywhere,/ So thin that you can’t see them one by one.”<sup>56</sup> Although literally striking the human eye and enabling vision, the simulacra cannot be perceived *qua* simulacra. Only the original images of which they are the copies are seen. More, Lucretius says nothing about the possibility that these semblances can linger in the body and become commingled in our identity. Even the concept of *identity* in Lucretius is different from how it appears in Shelley. For Lucretius the soul is anatomically constructed: a blend of the types of atoms constitutive of air, wind and fire, along with a fourth, ultra-fine type unique to soul. It is corporeal and unalterable. He *does* mention at one point that the “image” of a beloved person who is absent can remain “around” her lover, and that her “sweet name” can “ech[o] in [his] ears” when she is far away.<sup>57</sup> But in the end the semblances have no power to alter or assimilate themselves into the anatomic constitution of the soul. In the above passage Shelley imagines the simulacra emanating from one person as capable of being interwoven in the spiritual fabric of another—especially in the

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>56</sup> Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Anthony M. Esolen (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), 124.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

case of lovers. But if this is an ideal Gerard Neville cannot fully realize it. His identity can go as far as mixing itself with that of his beloved. It cannot undergo the sort of personal annihilation of which Elizabeth is capable.

Rupert John Falkner is unlike both Elizabeth and Gerard in his morbid but therapeutic fascination with his own subjectivity. Responsible in part for the death of the only woman he ever loved, Alithea Neville (née Rivers), he spends his time indulging in his own narrative—examining his past actions, wallowing in guilt and nursing a sense of what might have been. Love, in his view, is not the absence of personal identity (Elizabeth) or the commingling of two identities (Gerard). Instead it “seems to assure us of a double existence; not only in our own identity—which we bear perpetually about with us—but in the heart... which has thought of us—lived for us.” Falkner may sometimes “exist” in the other—the heart that loves him—but he also and primarily exists in himself. There is little suggestion that he privileges the idea of an intersubjective love that can lead to the homogenization of two minds. At one point in his narrative epistle to Elizabeth he writes that “through years of absence...[Alithea] was the wife of my reveries, my hopes, my heart. I could no more part with the thought of her, as such, than with a consciousness of my own identity.”<sup>58</sup> He may be the only decent character in the novel whom Shelley allows to prize self-consciousness as much as fellow-feeling. Both are comforts of equal value to Falkner, but in his case the loving self flourishes with the help of but always at an unbridgeable metaphysical distance from the beloved other.

Falkner often compares himself—his behavior and fortunes and life—to literary/dramatic characters. They enable him to explore and test the boundaries of his

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<sup>58</sup> Mary Shelley, *Falkner*, 184.

identity (a habit that sets him apart from Elizabeth, whose identity is more or less inflexible). The narrator associates Falkner with King Lear, Lady Macbeth and Romeo, among others. Prepared to die as a soldier in the Greek War of Independence, he identifies with the thane of Cawdor, the Scottish traitor executed early on in *Macbeth*: “Let me...make my own the praise, that nothing graced my life more than the leaving it.” Throughout the novel destiny exhorts him to confess his long-hidden role in the drowning of Alitheia. As, in the *Iliad*, Athena seizes Achilles by the hair and prevents his murder of Agamemnon before the Achaean war council, so “[f]ierce, hurrying destiny seize[s] [Falkner] by the hair of his head—crying aloud, Murderer, offer up thy blood—shade of Alitheia, take thy victim!” To such demands—the “slow grinding of the iron wheels of destiny...pas[sing] over him, crushing him in the dust”—Falkner has no choice but to listen. He is infected with a *guilt* that forces his story out: a “consciousness of the willfulness of the act deplored,” the most “torturing” of “all the scourges wielded by the dread Eumenides,” “eat[s] into his soul.” As a modern Orestes-figure, he imagines himself hounded by the furies until he can redress a wrongful death (albeit with his personal confession instead of another murder). In prison Falkner “might have served for a model of Prometheus—the vulture at his heart producing pangs and spasms of physical suffering; but his will unconquered.” At one point he longs for the punishment of Mazeppa, the aged Cossack warrior who, in the poem *Mazeppa* (1819) by Lord Byron, is bound to the back of a wild horse that gallops until it reaches its native Ukraine: “If even, like Mazeppa, I might seek the wilds, and career along, though death was the bourn in view, I were happy!”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 145-46, 197-98, 243-44.

When we first meet Falkner he seems engaged in a living drama. At the commencement of the novel, Cornwall (where he arrives a stranger) is his stage and he a bona fide Byronic Hero on it: bronzed, "sinewy," "restless," "fierce," full of "a thousand contending emotions," "inwardly torn by the throes of the most tempestuous and agonizing feelings." When he lands at Treby he neither eats nor drinks at the inn. At midnight he wanders to the beach, "thr[ows] himself upon the sands" and remains there until dawn. The following day, having eaten a little, he returns to the coast with two pistols. As "drops of agony" descend along his forehead he soliloquizes in his mind, venting pain and self-loathing and concluding that suicide is the only reasonable course of action for someone so villainous as he. Eventually he leaves the shore and scales a retired cliff as the sun sets over the ocean. "[H]unted by his own thoughts" as "Actæon by his own hounds," he proceeds to a churchyard situated on the cliff-top, withdraws into a dark corner by one of its walls, hurls himself to the ground and prepares to fire a pistol into his head (but is miraculously saved at the last moment by the six-year-old Elizabeth).<sup>60</sup>

Such dramatic set-pieces, along with his theatrical-literary consciousness, prompt some critics to read Falkner as inexcusably melodramatic and self-indulgent: an unfavorable complement to Elizabeth, an example to readers of how *not* to act. Bunnell reads much of his behavior as "illusory romantic role-playing." She sees his view of "life [as] a stage on which to play...desired role[s]" as responsible for the drowning of Alithea: "[a]cting the part of a rescuing sentimental hero, he inadvertently causes the death of the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 16-18.

woman he loves.”<sup>61</sup> There may be some truth in this. Falkner *does* get carried away in his literary self-identifications. Yet we need not conclude from this habit of his that Shelley condemns dramatic sensibilities—even excessive ones—as intrinsically destructive. Nor do we *know* that, as Bunnell argues, Falkner is really trying to “construct, or reconstruct, reality according to a literary representation of life.”<sup>62</sup> He may court melancholy and dramatize experience, but these traits are not necessarily the culprits, the murder-weapons. There are plenty of incidents in his life that can explain his obsessive behavior—his abduction of Alithea—and be said to drive it: the early loss of his mother, for instance, or a father who often (whether drunk or sober) insulted and beat him severely. These circumstances should be weighed in the balance before we assess how much of the antitheatrical prejudice Mary Shelley really has.

I would suggest that, for Shelley, to be theatrical is not to be misguided. Performativity is not the hopeless confusion of reality with art. As critics we have to recognize that romantic writers who profess an allegiance to sincerity do not necessarily suspect any and all instances of theatricality. According to Lynn Voskuil, a variety of poststructuralist critics—Jerome McGann, Clifford Siskin, Andrea Henderson, Catherine Burroughs, Julie Carlson and others—“often reach a similar conclusion: that Romantic subjectivity and literature are irretrievably antitheatrical.” Her revisionist approach is to show that “theatricality functioned for many nineteenth-century Victorians [sic] not as an epistemological obstacle but as a crucial key to knowledge of themselves and others.” Voskuil studies the theater criticism of William Hazlitt and George Henry Lewes, for

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<sup>61</sup> Charlene Bunnell, “The Illusion of ‘Great Expectations,’” 276, 285.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

whom there is no categorical distinction between authenticity and theatricality. We can be authentic even and especially when we act theatrically. For Hazlitt, “natural” acting occurs when an actor rediscovers himself in another person. It “connotes the self’s absorption in something beyond itself, a form of identification that asserts the self in the very act of seeking the other.” In this sense the actor is not simply being himself on stage (“authenticity”), nor losing himself and his native passions altogether in an effort to embody some other being (“theatricality”). He is rather projecting himself on and realizing himself in a dramatic character. Said differently: he “project[s] [his] own passion into the situation of another.” *This* is what Hazlitt means by “natural” acting: when a person on stage uses his “own passions to make a new thing”—a renovated self or a self catalyzed into new existence by its interaction with an other.<sup>63</sup>

In light of the idea of natural acting as conceived by Hazlitt, Falkner reimagines, reshapes, asserts, actualizes himself when he identifies with a fictional other. He is what Morse Peckham calls a dynamically organic character: an organism that becomes, grows, creates and transcends itself rather than one that is static or mechanical in its

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<sup>63</sup> Lynn Voskuil, *Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2004), 24, 26, 31-32, 36. All of this needs to be squared with Hazlitt’s problematic “essentialism” as discussed in the Introduction. In that segment I discussed how Hazlitt confounds his own theory of the “internal bias,” which he advances in the essays on character, by self-consciously constructing subjectivities for his beloved Sarah Walker. In this case, his theory of “natural acting” only further undermines his earlier pretensions to essentialism. For how can the “internal bias” he claims is fixed at birth be found in an acted role? How can the actor actually “find himself” in a role in a way that is not theatrical but natural? At this stage it is enough to point out that Hazlitt wrestles with the notion of subjectivity, which he alternatively “contains” (in the essays on character) and “releases” (here and in the *Liber Amoris*).

development.<sup>64</sup> As such his imperfections are *positive* values: they inspire and incite personal growth. Falkner enters Treby in a condition of “negative romanticism,” a stagnant and liminal state situated after spiritual death but before spiritual rebirth. When the novel opens he is in the throes of his satanic fall from grace, and the course of the novel is coterminous with the course of his spiritual regeneration. In this process his theatricality has use-value. It is not a matter of “confus[ing]...boundaries between the dichotomous spheres of illusion/reality, self/other, and public/private, a confusion that often results in a skewed vision of reality, an oppression of others, and a destruction of domestic life.” Nor is Falkner a case study in “egocentric individualism and ambition,” an example of how “excessive self-reflexivity can result in...perceiving life as a theatrical production to satisfy that subjectivity.”<sup>65</sup>

This seems too narrow an interpretation for a character so complex as Falkner. I read him as someone who needs to embrace, not resist, the idea that identity is mutable. From an early age he was unloved and learned self-loathing and rage. His childhood was one of “blows and stripes, cold neglect, reprehension, and debasing slavery.” As a result he conceives of himself as a “savage” with an “untameable nature,” a “fiery spirit” of “ruinous powers,” a man of “satanic cunning” whose “irresistible bent of character” is evil.<sup>66</sup> In short: he has learned that his behavior is evil and that he *is* his behavior. This is a problematic essentialism that his literary self-identifications help him to unlearn. His

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<sup>64</sup> See Morse Peckham, “Toward a Theory of Romanticism,” in *Romanticism: Points of View*, ed. Robert Gleckner and Gerald Enscoe (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1970). The concept of “negative romanticism” is also Peckham’s.

<sup>65</sup> Charlene Bunnell, “*All the World’s a Stage*,” 2, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Mary Shelley, *Falkner*, 162, 164, 171, 174-75, 178, 278.

theatricality is not a problem that Shelley wants to showcase for readers and fix. It is *itself* a remedy.

Falkner certainly has his frailties, but as a character he learns to humble himself and become exalted. On the contrary, Elizabeth begins and ends exalted. She is relatively motionless in her development: there is nothing for her to learn. She is a figure who *is* and Falkner a figure who *becomes*. As a man of “wild and fierce passions, joined to extreme sensibility, beneficence, and generosity,” he has more psychological breadth than his adopted daughter. The passions in him antagonistic to the good only enhance the moral worth of whatever upright actions he performs (a Kantian notion). The narrator states that “[i]n the human heart—and...more particularly in the heart of man, the passions exert their influence fitfully.”<sup>67</sup> As critics we may recognize this statement as a bit of early-Victorian “separate spheres” ideology. Falkner is a male and so susceptible to corruption and selfishness owing to his role as breadwinner and worldly competitor. Someone like the inviolable Elizabeth can soften him, calm him, soothe his fever and fret with her innate domestic gentleness. But the statement also implies that there is a special nobility in the good that Falkner does: “[h]is very faults and passions made his sacrifice [to the orphaned Elizabeth] the greater, and his generosity the more conspicuous.”<sup>68</sup> At the end of the novel, when his “heart” is finally “true to itself”—a Shelleyan catchphrase for sincerity—it is only because he has worked for it: his “enlightened mind” and “elevated tone of moral feeling” are “the result of his sufferings.”<sup>69</sup> In a word, sincerity or true-to-selfness is earned. Falkner ascends the romantic spiral and the result is a sincerity

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 300.

that is dynamic. Elizabeth knows only how to walk along a straight path. Hers is a valuable but considerably more mechanical sort of true-to-selfness.

*Falkner* is best read as a work of synthesis (in the Hegelian sense). It is neither the familiar romantic ideology valorized in disguise nor a vehicle for some complementary ethos (“propriety” or “domesticity” or “feminine romanticism”) designed to point out the flaws of the old system. It both retains and recasts the romantic ideology in the character of Falkner. The narrative seems to end precisely at the moment of his redemption: after he “had repented; and was forgiven...in heaven, as well as on earth.”<sup>70</sup> But he is *not* categorically transformed so as to become another Elizabeth Raby. Shelley makes a point of mentioning that the seeds of the old Falkner remain inside him—as if his mind “contains all the earlier stages within itself.”<sup>71</sup> The narrator refers to his “unhealing wound of a culpable act,” the “one shadow [that] remained upon his lot” and “could not be got rid of.”<sup>72</sup> I see his lingering, near-conquered guilt not as an unfortunate reminder of who he was and the sort of person he can never be, but as evidence of his autonomous and active role in the process of psychological development. David Vallins claims that Shelley “decisively takes control of the male Romantics in her fiction, and re-presents them in allegories informed and moralized by her own experience of loss and disappointment.” For Vallins, she “seems...to invert the Romantics’ celebrations of transcendence and individual freedom, and implicitly associates them with...destructive forms of self-indulgence.”<sup>73</sup> This is a helpful argument, but perhaps misleading insofar as it makes

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>71</sup> Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, 82.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Shelley, *Falkner*, 299.

<sup>73</sup> David Vallins, “Mary Shelley and the Lake Poets,” 173, 176.

Shelley out to be a black-and-white thinker who keeps binaries intact—old/new, masculine/feminine, romantic/anti-romantic, theatricality/sincerity, selfish/selfless. *Falkner* tests these binaries rather than strengthens them.

I should note that Elizabeth Raby is not a character without at least ostensibly admirable qualities. The narrator describes her as “intelligent, warm-hearted, courageous, and sincere.” She is also a “singularly practical” human being who in times of crisis can remain “[s]elf-possessed and vigilant.” The only problem is that these virtues are exclusively exercised on behalf of others, and that, as much as her governess Miss Jervis tries to “perfectionize” and “methodize” her throughout the course of her education, as an adult Elizabeth is more or less the same person she was as a child: affectionate, attentive to the needs of others, self-effacing and requiring little moral direction—in a word, a machine programmed with the correct motives.<sup>74</sup> The doctrine of Necessity declares that if everyone only assumed the right motives there would be universal felicity on earth. Elizabeth is therefore the human embodiment of the principle of Necessity. She is a mortal Asia whose perfect motives render all self-consciousness and self-reflection unnecessary. Percy Shelley may have found this sort of behavior an ideal, but for Mary it is problematic. Elizabeth can be read as a character who performs what Hegel calls “the heroism of dumb service.”<sup>75</sup> She functions as an “honest soul [who] takes each moment as a permanent and essential fact.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Mary Shelley, *Falkner*, 56, 62, 55.

<sup>75</sup> Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind: Volume II*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Cosimo, 2005), 533.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 543.

Falkner, on the other hand, is born with no such seminal perfection. As a “distraught and disintegrated soul” who “brings together into a single unity the thoughts that lie far apart in the case of the honest soul,”<sup>77</sup> he has to think and brood. But his brooding is not simply obsessive or self-indulgent or without its benefits. Shelley writes as someone who respects his self-examination and finds it indispensable: as someone who “wish[es] to license the fullest mimetic exploration of our own condition—for self-understanding, delight, and self-mastery.”<sup>78</sup> At one point Falkner reflects that it is “vain...to analyse motive! Each man has the same motives; but it is the materials of each mind—the plastic or rocky nature, the mild or the burning temperament, that rejects the alien influence or receives it into its own essence, and causes the act.”<sup>79</sup> We can accuse Falkner of being fatalistic here. Perhaps he is too full of self-pity: upset at having been essentially fashioned so as to be immune or resistant to the energizing properties of the purest motives. But the passage is also evidence that he speculates and interrogates as Elizabeth does not—as she *cannot*. It may be she who helps cleanse Falkner and adorns the soulish wreck he becomes with the fruit of her immaculate motives. But it is Falkner who rebuilds a wreck. He is no Katherine Gordon, reading a “page of Wisdom’s book, scarce understanding what it meant, but feeling that it was right.” His wisdom is comprehensive. He not only feels that something is right but learns why it is right. He is able to put to the test what Elizabeth and the other paragons of propriety are born convinced of. In this sense Falkner is another Teufelsdröckh, despondency corrected, an admirable instantiation of best parts of “masculine” and “feminine” romanticism.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981), 349.

<sup>79</sup> Mary Shelley, *Falkner*, 156.

## CONCLUSION. *CORINNE*: BEYOND IMPROVISATION

When I consider turning this dissertation into a book, I anticipate, among others, one major avenue of expansion and clarification. I may need to stick to the notion of “character” and not “essence” or “identity” or anything of that sort. It is fairly clear to me at this point that I am interested in character in the popular sense—as Hazlitt and Lamb and Emerson defined it in their essays, and as Wordsworth and Coleridge understood its influence on the work of writing poems.

Throughout this dissertation, “identity” in a strictly philosophical sense, as in the Aristotelian notion of a substance distinct from its predicates, has been somewhat important but mostly relegated to the background. Locke claimed that identity means continuity in consciousness (and had to tackle with the problem of what happens when a person gets a blow to the head and is rendered unconscious). Hume considered the self a fluctuating “bundle of perceptions.” Kant claimed that the human understanding cannot know the ego as a substance, as a thing-in-itself, because our understanding is incapable of representing in the mind an absolute subject; it can only represent predicates. Schelling agreed with Hazlitt that humans are born with a sort of “bias,” except that for Schelling the bias is not fixed at birth, as Hazlitt thought, but in eternity: “The act, whereby [man’s] life is determined in time, does not itself belong to time but rather to eternity: it also does not temporally precede life but goes through time (unhampered by it) as an act which is

eternal by nature.”<sup>1</sup> Schelling is *almost* more optimistic than Hazlitt in terms of whether or not people can change fundamental parts of themselves (recall that, for Hazlitt, a drunkard is always essentially a drunkard). He says that there may be moral converts, but the wonderfully interesting rub is that the extent and strength of one’s capacity for moral change is, itself, something already determined in eternity: “But suppose now that human or divine assistance...may destine an individual to convert to the good, then, that he grants the good spirit this influence and does not positively shut himself off from it, lies likewise already in the initial action whereby he is this individual and no other.”<sup>2</sup>

The point is that I have tended not to investigate, in this dissertation, the direct interaction of late romantics with such purely philosophical discourses as these. I have not looked at a text to see how much, say, Kant or Schlegel there is in it, so much as compared the “sewn-together” qualities of a variety of texts and ideas emerging in the same time period and theorizing what “historical mood” seems to be responsible for these qualities. But where does this historical mood come from? From the economic and political situation of the post-Waterloo period? from literary texts? from other kinds of texts? Are all these phenomena reliable manifestations of a “Spirit of the Age”? If so, what is that Spirit’s First Cause? And do I ultimately even want to write “Spirit-of-the-Age” criticism? These are only a few questions I will need to address at some point at greater length.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt (Albany: State U of New York P, 2006), 51.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

I want to close this dissertation with a fresh examination of the influence of Madame de Staël's novel *Corinne; or Italy* (1807) on the nineteenth-century British imagination, which I feel serves to illustrate or encapsulate the "historical mood" I have been tracing. Critics agree that this novel was enormously popular in nineteenth-century Britain. Clarissa Campbell Orr writes of a nineteenth-century "Corinne Complex," a widespread obsession with the novel's heroine, the Florentine poet-improviser Corinne, as "the embodiment of the passionately expressive, artistic female genius."<sup>3</sup> But many romanticists have tended to focus only on what the novel does to revitalize and reshape British poetics. Their main concern is to explore how British poets try to make their own verse compositions sound like and *be* like the extemporized stage performances of Corinne and other improvisatori. Erik Simpson argues that *Corinne* "gave Britain its first major theory of improvisation," and that Landon and others wrote texts that "ac[ted] out improvisation."<sup>4</sup> Gioia Angeletti studies the "proliferating influence" of improvisation "in relation to its...application within Romantic poetics and aesthetics."<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Robinson agrees that "ever since the Romantic period, poets [have] found ways of 'translating' that essential ephemerality [of improvisatori] into written equivalents."<sup>6</sup> I want to change the essential critical focus on this important novel, and suggest that it resonated with late

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<sup>3</sup> Clarissa Campbell Orr, "The Corrine Complex: Gender, Genius and National Culture," in *Women in the Victorian Art World*, ed. Clarissa Campbell Orr (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995), 91.

<sup>4</sup> Erik Simpson, "'The Minstrels of Modern Italy': Improvisation Comes to Britain," *European Romantic Review* 14 (2003): 345, 358.

<sup>5</sup> Gioia Angeletti, "'I Feel the Improvisatore': Byron, Improvisation, and Romantic Poetics," in *British Romanticism and Italian Literature: Translating, Reviewing, Rewriting*, ed. Laura Bandiera and Diego Saglia (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 167.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Robinson, "Romantic Poetry: The Possibilities for Improvisation," *The Wordsworth Circle* 38 (2007): 94.

romantic British authors not only because of the improvisational art that made its heroine famous and gave insular poets a new way to write, but also because of what it reveals about the tenuous, the arbitrary, the “improvised” nature of personal character.

What happens to the novel’s heroine throughout the course of the plot is an affair that only reinforces the troubled existence of character. According to Esterhammer, Landon used the figure of Corinne as a means to express her own disillusionment as a late romantic artist: she read Corinne (and herself) as someone who “implicitly grants the spectators power over the construction of her identity, and commits herself to a performer-audience relationship that inevitably slides from reciprocity into dependence.”<sup>7</sup> But the novel does not have to represent Corinne’s psychological disempowerment, her regression or relapse from “individual” power or authority. I suggest that, for Landon and others, the novel was not an early nineteenth-century tale of loss, a cautionary tale in the Renaissance *Mirror for Magistrates* vein, but a tale of cautious revelation; that its heroine was read as a prescient stand-in for any bourgeois subject, artist or not—a mishmash of ideologies—not as the portrait of an alienated female artist who might have achieved greatness and independence but for her singular misfortunes in a patriarchal society.<sup>8</sup>

An English translation of the novel was published in 1833 “with metrical versions of the odes” provided by Landon.<sup>9</sup> The editor and translator, Isabel Hill, interpolates four

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<sup>7</sup> Esterhammer, *Romanticism and Improvisation*, 91.

<sup>8</sup> Aside from its influence on British poetics, critics often see the novel in terms of gender—as a celebration of female creativity in a patriarchal world, and British women writers in particular as latching on to it as a source of inspiration. See Campbell Orr, “The Corrine Complex,” 90, 92; and Erik Simpson, “The Minstrels of Modern Italy,” 351.

<sup>9</sup> *Corinne: or, Italy, Translated Expressly for This Edition by Isabel Hill; with Metrical Versions of the Odes by L. E. Landon; and a Memoir of the Authoress* (London: Richard Bentley, 1833).

strings of English iambic pentameter verse written by Landon into the 1833 text, each one meant to be a translation of something either spoken or written by Corinne as represented in the original French prose of Staël's novel.<sup>10</sup> As it happens, the sections of the novel that Landon translates and versifies are not all songs sung by Corinne: two of them are based on poems that Corinne spontaneously creates-recites before an audience, one on a few thoughts she chooses to write down and the last on a death-song she writes in advance but leaves for someone else to recite on stage.<sup>11</sup> I propose that Landon—having poured over the language of these moments in the novel and isolated them as a sort of self-contained narrative—saw them not quite as stages in the decline of Corinne's subjectivity, but as a gradual deconstruction of the idea of the character, which in the end is exposed as the fiction it is and has been.

The first portion or "ode" from the novel that Landon translates is the poem Corinne improvises at the Capitol in Rome before a massive audience, which includes her soon-to-be-lover the English Oswald. It is a paean to Italian history and culture—the glory of ancient Rome; the celebrated Italian writers, painters, explorers and scientists of antiquity, the late middle ages and the Renaissance; and the beautiful Italian climate and landscape (which tends to produce these geniuses). Suddenly Corinne is interrupted by

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<sup>10</sup> Vincent Whitman points out that Staël's French prose renditions of Corinne's songs are (imaginatively) meant to be "translations" from an original Italian, which can help explain why critics find them somewhat aesthetically deficient. For Whitman, Staël adds a certain mystique to the Italian originals by barring our access to them—their grandeur is inevitably obscured, left to the reader's imagination, "lost in translation." See his "Remember My Verse Sometimes": Corinne's Three Songs," in *The Novel's Seductions: Staël's Corinne in Critical Inquiry*, ed. Karyna Szmurlo (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1999), 55-68.

<sup>11</sup> Staël's novel was originally divided into books and chapters. The "odes" Landon translates occur (in order) in Book I, Chapter 3; Book XIII, Chapter 4; Book XVIII, Chapter 5; and Book XX, Chapter 5.

the admiring presence of Oswald in the audience, and out of an interest in playing to his northern and melancholy demeanor she begins singing about Italy as a ruined and deserted place, full of the irrevocable glories of the dead and gone. The second ode that Landon translates is similar to the first. In this case Corinne sings before a crowd of Neapolitans instead of Romans. She sees lake Avernus and imagines the hell beneath it visited by Æneas, and the town of Cumae, where the sibyl lived and the Trojan Misenus was drowned by a Triton. She recalls a host of famous ancient Romans associated with the area of Naples and their misfortunes—Cicero, Scipio, Marius, Tiberius, Nero and others. Then, noticing Oswald and fearing a separation from him, she begins to sing of women of old isolated by the absence or death of their loved ones—Portia, Cornelia, Agrippina. At this point she is fearful and heartsick with the uncertain course of her relationship with Oswald, and her words show it: “our enthusiastic outbursts have no power, our hopes are illusory. The passions control us with a tumultuous tyranny that leaves us with neither liberty nor peace.”<sup>12</sup> At the end of the song she grows pale and faint, and almost collapses but for the timely intervention of Oswald.

The third improvised effusion in the novel is not oral but indited: the language is taken from “some of the meditations” written down in Corinne’s “papers.” In these recorded thoughts Corinne mourns the death of her poetic genius and what seems like the inevitable loss of Oswald forever. Life has given her no reward for her superior mind and talent: “I shall die without people knowing anything about me, although I am famous.”<sup>13</sup> She curses love and the poets who celebrate it. The fourth and final interpolated poem is

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<sup>12</sup> Madame de Staël, *Corinne; or Italy*, trans. Sylvia Raphael (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 238. All passages from the novel are taken from this edition.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

based on a song composed by Corinne but read by a sort of servant girl or protégé. Near the end of the novel, Corinne is too worn and sick to read her own poetry, a shadow of her old self who “ha[s] to be supported to enable her to move forward.” She reclines, “veiled,” on a sofa placed in “a very dark corner” of a large hall “in one of the Florence Academy rooms.” In the meantime a

young girl, dressed in white and crowned with flowers, appeared on a kind of amphitheatre that had been prepared. It was she who was to sing Corinne's lines. There was a touching contrast between her face, so calm and sweet, a face not yet marked by life's troubles, and the words she was about to utter, but Corinne liked this very contrast. It spread a kind of serenity on the extremely gloomy thoughts of her dejected soul...The unhappy Oswald could not take his eyes off Corinne, off that shadow, which seemed to him a cruel apparition in a night of delirium. Through his sobs, he heard the swan-song...

Oswald and his English wife Lucile are present for this farewell performance, although Corinne takes pains that Oswald should not see her up close, even “turning away her face, like Dido when she met Aeneas in another world, impervious to human passions.”<sup>14</sup>

In the first two pieces Corinne performs to and for a group of spectators. Her energy and technique are her own, but her sentiments are designed to stir her auditors. She is somewhat in control and knows that what she produces is for something out there, a crowd, the origin and end of her art. Her poem is a thing or service consciously shaped

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 399-400.

and rendered. But when she is alone and without an audience she still generates thoughts as if one were present. Her language in solitude is essentially the same as her language on stage: effusive, expressive, inseparable from Italian culture. She writes that she has “learned about life by reading the poets” but that real life “is not like that,” an idea that suggests the onset of disillusionment and personal growth. And yet, her thoughts remain structured and patterned after the familiar sort of literary constructs her audiences want and expect. She has no interest in resisting them. In her private notes she compares her suffering to that of Domenichino, the seventeenth-century Italian painter who, refusing to hand his *Diana and Her Nymphs* (1616-17) over to Cardinal Borghese, was imprisoned in a monastery. She wonders if “grief [is] the natural order of things” in this life, and answers herself in the words of Petrarch’s *canzone* 323—“*Ahi! null’ altro che pianto al mondo dura* [Ah! in the world, only tears last!].” She reflects on the nature of immortality “in Dante’s words,” and then anticipates the end of worldly grief in “*Tanquillo varco/ A piu tranquilla vita* [A tranquil passage towards a more tranquil life],” a few lines adapted from the fourth act of *Il Pastor Fido* (1590) by Giovanni Battista Guarini. Her thoughts end with an expression of her readiness to die—“It is high time for [my soul] to take a rest”—garnished with a line by the romantic poet Ippolito Pindemonte: “*Fermossi al fin il cor che balzo tanto* [This heart which beat so fast has stopped at last].”<sup>15</sup>

It may seem normal for Corinne to inflate her private meditations with language from famous Italian poets. That she can cycle through these poets so effortlessly may (for Staël) be evidence of her “natural” Italianate spontaneity. But one can look at it differently. Corinne performs even when no one is watching, as if she has little choice in

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 357, 359-60. All translations of the Italian are Staël’s.

the matter. She *thinks* performatively, having internalized the literary discourses demanded by her art. Landon's own texts, on the other hand, suggest that she has internalized nothing: that she has avoided the long process of disillusionment and despair undergone by Corinne, simply because she never considered herself quite an autonomous "character" in the first place.

*Corinne* can be read—when the heroine is ill and fading in a corner of the stage and her poem is recited by a sort of lieutenant—as a tableau of civilized life, or things as they are. For here we see an image of the human mind as it actually operates in the social world, not as it ideally operates. Throughout the novel culture and ideology mediate what Corinne thinks and speaks, only her dazzling presence and extemporized art tend to conceal the reality and work of this mediation. Now it is suddenly revealed for spectators (and the reader) in clear, visual form. The romantic notion of the a priori self, perverted and shortchanged by the performative social mask it is obliged to wear in the world, is exposed as a fantastic construct; the social mask is revealed as constitutive of the "self." In this sense, the final scene in the Florence Academy hall is a carefully wrought validation of that

mood we all fall into sometimes, when we deliberately pour scorn on all the things we normally profess to stand for and respect, when in a moment of truth we admit to ourselves that all we have done and appeared to believe in has been nothing but a smokescreen, an official attitude worn like a mask in order to earn a living.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Leonard Tancock, introduction to *Rameau's Nephew*, 16-17.

Corinne the person, the sovereign subject, the “character,” is re-presented on stage as a construct, literally obscured and in the process of disintegrating. She is made into an abstraction, an idea, a fading image whom the narrator associates with a fictional character (Dido) and Oswald perceives as a “cruel apparition in a night of delirium.” The girl on stage, on the other hand, a nameless mediatrix through whom Corinne now speaks and has her being, is what everyone sees, the thing itself, the reality: not a screen for but the substance of “Corinne” in the form of the “other.”

As I turn this dissertation into a book, I want to establish a critical reading of *Corinne* that decenters its treatment of improvisation as an infectious aesthetic, and instead focuses on its “visible” dissolution of character, which ultimately applies to more than just women poets and poetics. I want to suggest that many late romantic authors saw this novel not only as a lesson in the dangers of author-audience relationships (Esterhammer’s view with respect to Landon), but also as evidence of the failing integrity of the idea of personal character. Perhaps there was so much writing on “Character” in the 1820s and 1830s because of the current of disbelief and doubt in its existence that I have tried to trace throughout this dissertation. And perhaps *Corinne* is the first work that actually validates “stitched-together-ness” as a way of looking at art and the human person. Stitched-together-ness may not be present in the novel simply as a necessary part of the extemporizing process (insofar as the improviser has to know and have at the ready a miscellany of nationally-centered cultural/historical/political facts), but as something constitutive of all art, all authors, all entities that we still expect and prefer, to this day, to contain a certain “character.”

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## VITA

Jonas Seth Cope was born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1981. He was never a particularly promising high school student of English literature. In 1999, he matriculated at Northeastern University in Boston as a computer science major—much to his grave dissatisfaction. Sick at heart, he withdrew within one trimester, returned home and tried to come to terms with the burden of a vocation. Jonas spent a year as a logger in central Massachusetts, clearing land and stacking high walls of firewood—which turned out not only to be backbreaking work, but also immensely rewarding and revelatory. Slowly, tentatively, he attended Worcester State University (then Worcester State College) to tackle his general education requirements. His dream school was the College of the Holy Cross, a small Jesuit institution in Worcester with a national reputation for academic excellence. He won admission. At the College of the Holy Cross he studied Latin and Greek, but ultimately chose to major in English and graduated *Magna cum laude* and at the top of his class. Next came desultory, mindless work in a small-town office, work so acutely disappointing and soul-crushing as to induce him to get a Master's Degree in English at a local institution—Fitchburg State University (then Fitchburg State College)—while working. During the completion of his Master's Degree he applied to several doctoral programs all over the United States, and ended up accepting admission to the University of Missouri, after which the rest is history. In a word, his is a true intellectual rags-to-riches story, for the wonderful and altogether unexpected climax of which, he thanks his God.