THE POLITICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY: THE OTHER BEING AND THE RUINATION OF
SUBJECTIVITY IN BYRON’S CHILDE HAROLD’S PILGRIMAGE III & IV

‘Tis to create, and in creating live
A being more intense, that we endow
With form our fancy, gaining as we give
The life we image, even as I do now.
(Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage III 6.46-9)

In The Rhetoric of Romanticism, Paul de Man explores the possibilities of the
autobiographical voice, explaining that through the rhetorical devise of prosopopoeia a face, and
eventually a voice, can substitute tropologically for “an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity,”
usually that of the author (RR 75). Narrative voices with autobiographical connections are no
anomaly in poetry. Often William Wordsworth is distinguished as exemplary in his use of
autobiography. Conversely, Lord Byron’s use is often criticized as pompous, artistically inferior,
and employed for self-promotion or for other narcissistic ends. In an attempt to vindicate
Byron’s textual talent, I turned to Neil Hertz’s “Wordsworth and the Tears of Adam” to
articulate how autobiography and subjectivity are paramount in Byron’s poetry. With temporal,
linguistic, and subjective incompatibilities inherent in language generally, the autobiographical
poet relies on a mediating figure, as Hertz argues—“some other Being”—or a third-person
narrative voice that functions as a “guide” through autobiographical texts. This voice allows the
author to embody a linguistic abstraction: a referent linked to the writer acting as a “guide”
through the landscape of the poem.

In addition to the trope of authorial voices, imagined or marketed, the ruin often finds
itself forever crumbling within the margins of Romantic texts. I believe that the presence of ruin
mirrors the “other Being’s” existence in the poet’s language. Physical ruins often mark the
decline or failure of man’s domain over Nature. The ruin is always already deprived of
permanence, subject to Nature and time, but maintains its significance in its status as “a ruin.” Similarly, the autobiographical voice is upheld within the margins of the text, as a poetic image that will remain long after the poet himself is gone—significant in its status as autobiography. My interest in examining the image of the physical ruin is to look at how landscapes, through which the “other Being” guides us—poet and reader—mirror the breakdown, or “gaps,” in signification: the fragmented buildings or monuments reflect the fragmented self just as the mediation of the “other Being” always points back to the splitting of the self that Hertz identifies. Both the image and the poet rely on some “other Being” to narrate these relationships and breakdowns—the histories of the declaration of “self” in language. Of course, the question arises of how any writer can express let alone embody a “true” self constructed by language. This is the struggle of the autobiographical poet.

In a letter to Richard Woodhouse, John Keats explains that the poet has “no Identity”; “he is continually in for—and filling some other Body.” Keats continues, noting the disjunction between himself—the writer—and the character on the page: “I am perhaps not speaking from myself; but from some character in whose soul I now live.” Keats’s articulation of the non-identity of the poet, who can occupy and live in various textual souls, provides a distinguishing characteristic in my understanding of autobiography and the project of the Romantic poet. As Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* suggests, the poet must capture the fancies of his imagination and solidify his own “truth” in poetry: “A Poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth.” However, as a result of the medium through which the poet represents his truth, this task of occupying souls and turning “truths” to “images” proves more complex than simply “filling” a narrative body and “expressing” “fancies.” Keats, more than most, makes this struggle the focus of his work. Lord Byron, on the other hand, may not be the first poet that comes to mind when
thinking of figures to embody Keats’s understanding of the poet or even Shelley’s definition of poetry. However, reading Byron’s work purely with attention to his historical and cultural magnetism, the lens through which he is most often critiqued, reduces and distracts from what is happening in the language of the texts that created and perpetuated the image of “Lord Byron”—the most famous “other Body” he filled. I find that bringing in Keats’s notion of the poet in addition to Wordsworth’s “other Being” illuminates some of the most powerful and interesting aspects of Lord Byron’s own poetic project, stemming from the same anxieties about language, mediation, and representation. It is with this understanding of both non-Identity and the possibility of embodying a linguistically constructed identity, that I examine what I am calling Byron’s “politics of autobiography.”

Throughout Lord Byron’s work, the association between the poet and his characters created and sustained his success. Nowhere is this connection between poet and character more apparent than in Byron’s poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. However, the association between Byron and Harold was not purely a “filling” to express “truth” but rather an elaborate cultural and poetic construction to establish an image. Nicholas Mason explores the branding of “Lord Byron” in anticipation of Byron’s poetic and cultural success that arrived with the publication of *Cantos I* and *II*. Mason pays particular attention to the extensive advertising and self-promotion that occurred prior to the poem’s release arguing that the “real story” of Byron’s fame was a result of intricate collaborations between the poet and his publisher John Murray (425). Through his artistic and political reintroduction to the public, Byron “made himself a distinctive figure on the social scene” “[t]wo weeks before he supposedly awoke one morning and found himself famous” (Mason 431, 429). After the publication of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, which highlighted the “flaws in all existing poetic products,” Byron called for “a new
voice in the world of poetry,” which he filled with the voice of Childe Harold (Mason 429). By both “disavowing any link between Lord Byron and Childe Harold” and simultaneously emphasizing Byron’s name in the advertising of the poem, the cumulative success of both poem and the “Lord Byron” brand name created “the most consciously autobiographical ‘nonautobiographical’ poem of the nineteenth century” (Mason 438). Once the first two cantos were published, the association between Harold and Byron was inevitable. Consequently, in order for Byron to maintain his poetic success, he had to be linked to “some character” with whose “soul” he could live. If Harold gained “life” through Byron’s “creating,” “Lord Byron” was contiguously born.

Byron may have initially created *Childe Harold* as an autobiographic exploration for the perpetuation of a persona, but his project proves more complex than a man’s desire for fame. While Mason’s work invaluably uncovers the historical complexities surrounding the poem’s publication, purely focusing on the historical link between “Lord Byron” and the poet George Gordon can detract from the equally complex layering of linguistic tropes that defined “Lord Byron” and his poetic voices. In writing characters like Harold, Byron is able to ruminate on articulations of his cultural image and subjectivity through a mediating “other Being.” Like Wordsworth’s search for “a figure who will mediate to him a truer sense of his poetic identity” (Hertz 115), Byron initially identifies with Harold who acts as his guide through the lines of his first epic poem. However, this relationship is distinct from Wordsworth’s embodiment of “other Beings,” like the Pedlar or Armytage, because the souls Byron occupies are constituted by the cultural identification or link between his image—“Lord Byron”—and the voice of his poem. By looking closely at specific instances in the poem that self-consciously highlight the multiplying
and fragmenting effects of language, we can see how Byron explores ways to both build and break down his connection to his mediating “other Being.”

When in 1816 Byron returned to *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,* the poet’s relationship to Harold became the focus of his poetic exploration. Rather than depict sublime bullfights or Oriental mythologies, the journeys of *Cantos III* and *IV* are prominently linguistic ones. As a result of the success of *Cantos I* and *II,* the “other Being” identified with Byron became “more intense,” not only in relation to Wordsworth’s “other Beings,” but came to surpass Byron himself in image and in agency (*III.6.47*). In *Canto III,* Byron turns toward some “other Being,” distinct from Harold, who is able to more successfully “mediate to him a truer sense of his poetic identity” after his association with Harold proved to be so complicated (Hertz 115). However, because Byron’s success is contingent upon his association with Harold, the opening stanzas of *Canto III* seek to reinscribe the troubled relationship. In order for Byron to leave Harold behind and turn toward the embodiment of another “soul,” he must introduce the speaker as paramount. For example, in stanza 6, the speaker not only mediates Byron’s relationship to the self-exiled Harold, but is the active participant in both Harold’s and the poem’s creation: “we give,” “we endow,” “we image,” “even as I do now” (emphasis added 48-9). Consequently, with this shift in identification to the voice of the speaker, the instability of Byron’s poetic subjectivity is foregrounded in the linguistic sign that unites the poet with his speaker: the “I.” Here, the equation of Byron with his speaker is both highlighted and challenged by the text’s attention to the “Nothing-ness” of the “I”s:

> What am I? Nothing: but not so art thou,  
> Soul of my thought! with whom I traverse earth,  
> Invisible but gazing, as I glow  
> Mix’d with thy spirit, blended with thy birth,  
> And feeling still with thee in my crush’d feelings’ dearth. (*III.6.50-4*)
Byron draws our attention to the emptiness of his “I” and both the “mix” and separation with the “soul” of his “thought.” Unlike Harold, who will now remain “invisible,” the speaker of *Cantos III* and *IV* only exists as the “I.” In the act of writing, Byron gives textual “form” to his “fancy” and “blends” the “birth” of his new “other Being” in the “I.” But, because the “I” that should signify Byron’s own subjectivity is questioned and revealed to be “nothing,” rather than capitalize on the equation between the speaker and “Lord Byron,” he emphasizes the split and consequently the need for mediation.

As G. Wilson Knight’s reading of Lord Byron suggests, even though Byron’s work is “out-distanced by [his] importance as a man,” Byron nonetheless represents a “man in whom poetry has become incarnate” (803). The incarnation of Byron’s poetry however is problematic. The shift in identification in *Canto III* illuminates complications of Byron’s embodiment of poet and poetry. Like Keats’s non-identity of the poet, Lord Byron was forced to occupy and “live” in some other character, Harold. Likewise, the image of Harold was upheld by the cultural image of Lord Byron. Here, the “soul” of this “other Being” is upheld and represented textually in the “I”: “nothing.” The non-identity of “Lord Byron” occupies the non-identity of the “other Being”; Byron’s new occupation of the speaker is an empty embodiment. Because of the inevitable autobiographical connections between Byron and the voices of his characters, the significance of the “nothing-ness” of the “I” illustrates the instability of the conception of “Lord Byron.” Knight’s proclamation proves useful in considering Byron’s exploration of linguistic representations that link the bodiless poet to his poetic incarnation in the “other Being.” Byron and the “other Being” can only be incarnate in the text.

In *Cantos I* and *II*, Byron’s autobiographical presence was found through the narration of Harold’s journey. Presence in *Cantos III* and *IV* is tied to the position of the “I.” His incarnation
happens through prosopopoeia as Byron gives a voice to the “nothingness” of the “I.” The prosopopoeic reproductions in Byron’s work emphasize the instability of Byron’s subjectivity and the mutability of his autobiographical incarnations. Inherent in linguistic mediation, the poet can never seamlessly speak through the “I” of the text. Like Wordsworth’s turn to the “other Being” of The Pedlar and The Ruined Cottage, the relationship between Byron and the “other Being” makes prosopopoeia essential for articulation and for the continuation of his poetic image. Byron’s “other Being”—the soul of his thought—functions as a pneuma, essential for his textual and cultural life while continuing to highlight his distance or absence from physical embodiment of “some character in whose soul I now live” (Keats 295). Like the “broken mirror” making a “thousand images of one that was,” Byron’s subjectivity is a textual “shatter’d guise” (III.33.289, 291). Through the positing of a “face” or “voice,” the image of the absent, bodiless, Byron can continue to be found and heard in the various mediations of the “other Being” as he acts as the guide through the “fragments” of the text (290).

Like the poet, the images of Byron’s poetry are notable for what they are not, for what is absent, and the distance—physical or representational—between the text and poet. For example, in the opening stanzas of Canto III Byron establishes not only his distance from an “I” but from a specific being who should possess some portion of his true self: his daughter. However, the stanza focuses on Byron’s separation from Augusta Ada, both in physical distance and in physiognomy. Beginning with a question—“Is thy face like thy mother’s, my fair child!”—and ending with Byron’s—not Harold’s—departure from England, Canto III situates the historical reference in the uncertainty and separation of the speaker’s language. Through the autobiographical link to his personal life, if we can refer to it as such, Byron sets the project of Canto III apart from Harold’s journeys of Cantos I and II by bracketing this canto with reference
to Ada. As the second stanza begins—“Once more upon the waters! yet once more!”—the reader is called upon to remember the journeys of Harold in *Canto I* and *II* but as the lines progress we not only move further away from Ada and England but depart from the fancies of the poet’s youth:

In my youth’s summer I did sing of One,
The wandering outlaw of his own dark mind;
Again I seize the theme, then but begun,
And bear it with me, as the rushing wind
Bears the cloud onwards: in that Tale I find
The furrows of long thought, and dried-up tears,
Which, ebbing, leave the sterile track behind,
O’er which all heavily the journeying years
Plod the last sands of life,—where not a flower appears. (*III.*3.19-27)

The “ever-shifting surface” of Byron’s poetic subjectivity turns to emphasize the poem’s speaker as the guide through the progression of the poem (Stabler 866). The “One” of the youth’s summer, who is neither an “I” nor named as “Harold,” is afforded a physical power—he must be borne “with me”—as well as an imaginative and generative agency: “The wandering outlaw of his own dark mind” (emphasis added). Seizing the “theme” of Harold’s adventures, not Harold himself, the speaker sets out to carry this “Tale” with him as he plods through the sands of his narrative life.

The mediating voice of the narrator, guides the progress of the poem through meditations on the creation and undoing of subjectivity. Drawing attention to the fragments or “sands” of the narrative, the referential absences of the poem can only be imagined through the mediation of the “other Being” as he attempts to turn the pieces into a coherent image of a past whole. By calling up themes of the previous cantos—“Tales” only “begun” in *Canto I* and *II*—the “other Being” marks the disjunction between these fragments in the form of linguistic subjects: Harold, Byron, I. Physicality, although a significant aspect of Lord Byron’s persona, is distinctly complicated by
his text. As the narrative progresses, the prosopopoeic faces and voices become even less substantial as the “other Being” wrestles with his incarnation of language and thoughts:

Could I embody and unbosom now
That which is most within me,—could I wreak
My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
Soul, heart, mind, passion, feelings, strong or weak,
All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe—into one word,
And that one word were Lightning, I would speak;
But at it is, I live and die unheard,
With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword.

(Original emphasis III.97.905-913)

What is “most within me” is the “voiceless thought” that “lives” and “dies” with the “I.” The “I” “sheaths” the “thought,” covering it in the structure and writing of the text. Because of the poet’s necessary reliance on language for expression, the failed attempts to either merge with, or completely withdraw from, the “other Being” or the “I,” complicate the poet’s subjectivity. If the “I” could both embody and unbosom what is “most within me,” the “I” would be able to give voice to the “thought.” However, the “I” too remains unheard.

Rather than collect bone and battlement fragments as he does in other episodes of Canto III, Byron complicates the collection of words themselves. The words “sheath” or cover instead of illuminate or electrify thoughts. Desirous of finding the “one word” to encompass all feeling and thought, Byron calls up “Lightning,”\textsuperscript{xi} to unite experience and voice in an electrifying blast. Unfortunately, because of the impossibility of turning words to lightning, Byron ruminates on this linguistic impossibility by composing hundreds of stanzas that illustrate the inadequacies of such piles of empty words and images. The lightning of experience cannot be confined to language, just as the “I” of “Lord Byron” cannot be confined to one referent or “other Being.” However, all can be illuminated in the collection of their fragments; the words as well as representational absences build the monument of the epic poem. The poem is the only access
Byron has to making the “I” heard, even if what is heard is precisely its absence: the “sheath” of experiences whose “I” “lives” and “dies.” Even if words fail to electrify, they remain fixed in the lines of the poem.

As Canto III draws to its close, Byron returns to illustrate the necessity of mediation in poetic representations. Reflecting on the project of Canto III, the speaker summarizes:

Thus far have I proceeded in a theme
Renew’d with no kind auspices:—to feel
We are not what we have been, and to deem
We are not what we should be,—and to steel
The heart against itself; and to conceal,
With a proud caution, love, or hate, or aught,—
Passion or feeling, purpose, grief, or zeal,—
Which is the tyrant spirit of our thought,
Is a stern task of soul:—No matter,—it is taught. (III.111.1031-39)

As he “seized” the “theme” in stanza 3, the speaker has “proceeded” to this stanza, “bearing” it along with him and mediating between the poet and the reader. Guiding us through the journey of the narrative, and pausing occasionally to call our attention to the split within the linguistically created subject, the “other Being” here directly addresses the failures in mediation. Now, the speaker “feels” that “we” are neither “what we have been,” like Byron and Harold in Canto I and II, nor “what we should be” at this point in the canto. Illustrated as early as stanza 6, Byron’s struggle in uniting himself with his “other Being” reaches back to the foundations of the figure of the “I.” The “form” that the “we” endowed in stanza 6 has not yet reached the desired representation Canto III set out to achieve. Unable to “conceal” the “tyrant thought” of “No matter,” the “other Being” struggles to negotiate between what was the “voiceless thought” of the “I” in stanza 97 and what has now become the “tyrant spirit of our thought” (emphasis added). While thoughts often cunningly escape linguistic enunciation, Byron still maintains a hope for the possibility of finding words that function as things: “I do believe, / Though I have
found them not, that there may be / Words which are things” (III.114 ll.1059-61). However, Byron not only emphasizes the difficulty of pinning down the transitory “tyrant spirit,” but challenges the truthfulness of the words themselves:

And for these words, thus woven into song,
It may be that they are harmless wile,—
The colouring of the scenes which fleet along,
Which I would seize, in passing, to beguile
My breast, or that of others, for a while. (III.112.1040-44)

The emphasis on the devious quality of poetic language, the “wiling” and “beguiling” of the “song,” challenges not only the truthfulness of narrative representations, but also the mediation between the poet and the “I.” The wily words of the “tyrant spirit” are the only place for the “I” to remain, and Byron only gains expressive access through these “words” that have been “woven into song.” As he turns to Canto IV, Byron’s project becomes more self-conscious of the mediation between his self and the “other Being.” Uncertain of the future of the “I” and the image of “Lord Byron,” Canto III leaves the “I” to await its fate: “I stood and stand alone,—remember’d or forgot” (112.1048).

Canto IV begins with the “I” who stands on a bridge. Instead of calling attention to the “nothingness,” here the focus is on instability. Appearing to begin with a strong declaration, “I stood,” the surface on which the “I” stands is the Bridge of Sighs, used to convey prisoners toward either trial or death (Byron’s note). Words, upholding the “I” on a bridge-like surface, maintain the link between Byron and his “other Being” as well as convey both onwards. In order to articulate his poetic subjectivity, Byron’s relationship to the “I” must be mediated and bridged. As the “I” gazes over the image of Venice, the bridge functions as a mirror for the gap in autobiographical poetic mediation. As Hertz explains, the gap is a result of the splitting of the self “into a poet existing in the present and ‘some other Being’,” and he continues: the gap “may
be bridged but is not thereby removed” (111). As the canto progresses, where the bridges lead the “I” affect its ability to “stand.” The “I” is upheld by a surface that will lead towards an uncertain final fate and, like stanza 112, the dichotomous future of the “I” is subject to the fate of the poem.

In Canto IV, Byron’s poetic images become more concerned with gaps and absences. Rather than attempt to build images out of fragments, Canto IV breaks them down; ruination becomes the focus of the project. Like Wordsworth’s turn in The Ruined Cottage, the “other Being” of Canto IV functions as the guide through ruined landscapes. However, as Byron’s relationship to his “other Being” is already founded on breakdowns and shortcoming in representation, his textual “shatter’d guise” further emphasizes the significance of ruin. Rather than point to the breakdown in linguistic representation, as Wordsworth’s mediator does, the “other Being” of Canto IV exposes the strong monument that stands as “Lord Byron” to be nothing but an unstable linguistic creation upheld in the margins of the text. As the unstable subjectivity of the poet is highlighted by mediation, the placement of the poetic voice in relation to images of physical ruin draws attention to the connection between these two figures; the ruin becomes the illustration of poetic subjectivity for Byron. Ruins, fragments or debris, are the simulacra of subjectivity in language. Whether it is through fragments of images, the accumulation of empty words, or the identification with physical ruin in Canto IV, Byron’s “other Being” navigates the poetic ruination of subjectivity.

The only way for Byron’s subjectivity to be visualized is in his text. Because his “tyrant spirit” evades accurate articulation, Byron immortalizes the silent voice of the “I,” with which he could never truly merge, through prosopopoeia. Solidifying one “I” is better than having the
whole self disappear completely. In the ruin, Byron finds an image that will illustrate his
representational predicament allowing him to explore his own self as ruin:

But my soul wanders; I demand it back
To meditate amongst decay, and stand
A ruin amidst ruins; there to track
Fall’n states and buried greatness [. . .] (IV.25.217-9)

As the soul of Byron’s thought has been wandering for over 330 stanzas, here the speaker calls it back to “meditate” “amongst” the decay. In the act of recalling the soul, the speaker “demands” that “it” return to “stand” as a “ruin.” Like the Wordsworthian call for a “guide” for mediation, here the “I” asks for the “soul” to “track” the processes and remains of ruination.

Jacques Khalip’s account of The Ruined Cottage, in which he explores the experience and state of “disaster,” is helpful in reading ruins and rubble presented here. As Khalip himself tracked the “Fall’n states” of Wordsworth’s poetic landscape, arguing that “to look upon disaster is to see and meditate on the deviant mutability of persons and things,” the “other Being’s” meditation on ruin here compliments Armytage’s “looking” at the remains of disaster (par. 2). Finding the self and its surroundings “disastered”—“a ruin amidst ruins”—the “soul” is commanded to “stand”—as the “I” “stood and stands”—and “track” the “buried greatness” and “Fall’n states” of its self (Khalip par. 6).

The “guiding” or “tracking” of the “other Being” through landscapes of ruin is more directly articulated as the canto progresses. For example, in stanzas 137 and 138 of Canto IV the “other Being” walks in the shadow of the physically ruined Colosseum. There, his identification with the monument gains him access to a vision of future immortality: while his body will lose its force, the memory of his text will remain as a trace of his existence:

But I have lived, and have not lived in vain:
My mind may lose its force, my blood its fire,
And my frame perish even in conquering pain;
But there is that within me which shall tire
Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire;
Something unearthly, which they deem not of,
Like the remember’d tone of a mute lyre, (137.1225-31)

Like the piles of thoughts that turned into a “tyrant spirit,” “Something unearthly” will be remembered when the “I” expires and is silent. Even more transitory than Harold, the “tyrant spirit” typifies poetry’s struggle with confining the “intensity and shapeliness” of life into words (Barton 818). Consequently, as Byron searches for the “buried greatness” of “Fall’n states,” his “other Being” guides him to and “tracks” the image that gives shape to his predicament of articulation and signification:

Thy haunts are ever where the dead walls rear
Their ivy mantles, and the solemn scene
Derives from thee a sense so deep and clear
That we become a part of what has been,
And grow unto the spot, all-seeing but unseen. (138.1238-42)

In places where “dead walls rear / Their ivy mantles,” the “other Being” is at last able to find an image that unites his feelings and struggles with expression in a figure that is born from the memory of its absence. In the shadow of the ruined Colosseum, the “other Being” becomes “all-seeing but unseen,” growing unto the spot of the text even after Byron’s physical body is gone. The body will die, but the presence of its memory will “tire / Torture and Time,” the “tyrant spirit” of the page.

In narrating the journey of some “other Being,” Byron illuminates the inevitability of dwelling not just in the rubble of disaster but in the “disastered” state of his project, leaving him “doubly curst.” As the speaker proclaims:

We wither from our youth, we gasp away—
Sick—sick; unfound the boon—unslaked the thirst,
Though to the last, in verge of our decay,
Some phantom lures, such as we sought at first—
But all too late,—so are we doubly curst.
Love, fame, ambition, avarice—’tis the same,
Each idle—and all ill—and none the worst—
For all are meteors with a different name,
And Death the sable smoke where vanishes the flame. (IV.124.1108-16)

The “unfound” “boon” and “unslaked” “thirst” have left the we not just on the border of decay but “in verge of our decay” (emphasis added). While the last cantos set out to redirect the “Tale” only “begun” in the first cantos, the project has found itself “withered” and taunted by the same desires that “curst” the ambitious poet in his youth. There remains “Some phantom,” reminiscent of youth’s desire for immortality, and like the “Something unearthly” of stanza 137, that which “they deem not of” will be found in the text. Byron’s textual phantom is restored with each reading of his words, “lingering” and “desiring” even here in the “sable smoke” of “Death.” The “other Being” leads Byron into the borders of “decay” and in the “luring” “smoke” of desire and “Death,” turns the “tyrant spirit” of his thought into his textual autobiographical phantom that will be heard “Like the remember’d tone of a mute lyre.”

In the final stanza’s “farewell,” Byron’s autobiographical phantom haunts the last lines of the poem:

Farewell! a word that must be, and hath been—
A sound which makes us linger;—yet—farewell!
Ye! who have traced the Pilgrim to the scene
Which is his last, if in your memories dwell
A thought which once was his, if on ye swell
A single recollection not in vain
He wore his sandal-shoon, and scalloped-shell;
Farewell! with him alone may rest the pain,
If such there were—with you, the moral of his strain!

(Original emphasis IV.186.1666-74)

Here the spirit does not “burst” to “illumine our tempestuous day,” like Shelley’s phantoms do for instance, but through the “tracing” of the reader, the “recollection” of Byron’s “other Being” rises out of the “sable smoke” of his inky words and ascends to “dwell” in the “memories” of the
one who read them. The “tyrant spirit” of Byron’s “thought” becomes the “thought” of the one who reads. Consequently, while the “other Being” may not have been able to precisely pin down Byron’s “tyrant spirits,” he has established an image that will remain immortalized in the text and will be reborn with each new reading guiding us through the journey of his pilgrimage.

Byron hoped to find “words” that were “things” themselves, but his maturing understanding of the function of his poetry comes to fruition in *Canto IV* as the “other Being” guides him through the breakdown of physical and linguistic creations. While his contemporaries turned to images such as the sky-lark or the nightingale to represent their desire for the transport of their poetry and poetic visions, Byron turned toward images that emphasized the non-transcendent aspects of language and highlighted the importance of the text itself. Unlike Shelley, who for example calls on the wind as he desires his words to be scattered as “ashes and sparks” “among mankind,” Byron remains intent on his words being firmly fixed to the page of the poem (*Ode to the West Wind* V.67). While the “tyrant spirit” will rise as “Something unearthly,” it can only do so through its connection to the text like the “I” that “stood and stands” in the poem. Byron uses the text itself to “track,” “trace,” and “record” evidence of his existence and experience:

But in this page a record will I seek,  
Not in the air shall these my words disperse,  
Though I be ashes; a far hour shall wreak  
The deep prophetic fullness of this verse,  
And pile on human heads the mountain of my curse! (*IV*.134.1202-6)

Denying even the ashes of his body to disperse in the air, physical images are emphasized to illustrate the tangible “traces” found in the text. While “tyrant spirit” may seem to be allowed to “burst” into the air, like Shelley’s, the image of the phantom-like “other Being” can only exist in the text itself. Through his various explorations of the building-up and breaking-down images of
his self and persona, Byron finds ways to mirror his struggles with linguistic representation through his phantom-like haunting of spaces of ruin and autobiographical language.

As language can only represent and solidify a past experience in the absence of the actual event, Byron concentrates on gaps, losses, and lacks as well as on his own notion of self, as he fuses and transforms the musings of his imagination into his epic monumentalizing of a linguistic predicament. Perhaps, Byron’s strength may even begin to be understood as something more akin to Keats’s Negative Capability, dying into the immortal life of absence. Like Hertz’s explanation of the splitting of the self, the poet that existed in the “present” of the poem’s creation, is immortalized through the self that remains in his words (111). Byron’s difficulty with this split, or at least with sustaining his mediation with Harold, has always been present in the text: “The clumsiness of the split between the poet and his character Harold, which has fueled commentary on the poem since its publication, should not be dismissed as failed artistry; it is the symptom of a misbegotten project of reference fatal to poetic strength” (Christensen 14). The pompous, strong, and self-sustaining “Lord Byron” may therefore be more artistically complex than some critics assume. What is often passed-off as fragmented and ineffectual musings about fantastic adventures are in fact explorations of both the impossibilities of merging the image with the referent and the possibility of finding poetic reference in something like a “tyrant spirit.” While his phantom appears “too late,” the “sable smoke” in which the physical life of Byron may vanish will leave an autobiographical mark for his textual life.
This piece comes from a larger project that focuses on the use of both William Wordsworth’s and Lord Byron’s autobiographical poetry. In “Some Other Being: The Autobiographical Phantom in Wordsworth and Byron,” I argued that through the self-fragmentation or ruination embodied by Wordsworth and Byron’s “other Beings,” each poet moves further away from being able to link any word he utters with a personal or autobiographical referent. In the poetry of Wordsworth and Byron, to exist in language is to have a disembodied or “annihilated” nature. The identities surrounding the poet, “other Beings” or otherwise, afford him the ability to occupy various souls, but in so doing, he risks becoming less like “himself.” However, if as de Man enigmatically asserted, “Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography . . . deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores,” then the significance of Wordsworth and Byron’s aesthetics of ruin, not only the appearance of images of ruin and ruination but in their specific employment, pushes discussions of autobiographical poetry far beyond traditional understandings of historical personae and replication (RR 81). What are considered to be examples of the poets’ autobiographical works may even become monuments to their self-ruin and annihilation. Without falling victim to the habit of focusing on Wordsworth or Byron’s strength as cultural figures in order to understand their works as the poeticization of subjectivity, the problem of poetic subjectivity comes to the forefront in the ruins of The Ruined Cottage, and Childe Harold III and IV, illuminating the significance of the poet’s struggle in representation.

The OED defines “prosopopoieia” thus: “A figure of speech by which an inanimate or abstract thing is represented as a person, or as having personal characteristics, esp. the power to think or speak; a person or thing in which some quality or abstraction is embodied.”

All quotations from John Keats are from Keats’s Poetry and Prose. Hereafter they will be referenced with the appropriate page number. This letter is on page 295.

In “Building Brand Byron: Early-Nineteenth-Century Advertising and the Marketing of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,” Mason explains how Lord Byron and John Murray “reintroduced” “Lord Byron” to the public sphere through Byron consciously assuming “the pose of the eccentric poet,” and delivering his first speech in the House of Lords (Mason 431, 429).

As Alice Levine explains in her introduction to Canto III in Byron’s Poetry and Prose, Byron left England for Belgium in April 1816, “in the wake of scandal over his marital separation” (195). After traveling through Germany, Byron “arrived at Lake Geneva on May 24, and only a few days later began his important relationship with Percy Shelley” (ibid.). During this time, Byron was not only greatly influenced by Shelley himself, but “read Wordsworth more sympathetically than at any other time in his life” (ibid.). Canto III marks Byron’s poetic maturation during a time that was both artistically influential and personally detrimental as he was estranged from his wife, cut-off from his daughter Augusta Ada, and separated half-sister Augusta Leigh.
While *Canto III* follows the “other Being” through famous battlefields, Lake Geneva, narrations of Napoleon and Rousseau, and *Canto IV* focuses on journeys through Italy and Greece, the Friulian Alps, and the Colosseum, the progression of the narrative is one of subjective exploration, rather than chasing after Harold like the narrator of *Cantos I* and *II* tends to do.

In his chapter “The Speculative Stage” in *Lord Byron’s Strength*, Jerome Christensen most comprehensively explores the commodification of “Lord Byron,” as a space for the poet to become his own image while simultaneously losing and fragmenting his “I”:

*Lord Byron* is the name for the “I” to which reflection refers as well as for the propulsive structuration of self-reflection itself. Whatever else has been lost, the “I” retains its privileged capacity to “bear” *Childe Harold* as the poet had earlier borne Childe Harold: the poem has become Lord Byron’s “child of imagination” . . . bred out of its own barrenness and ruefully substituted for the child of his “house and heart.” (153)

The OED defines “pneuma” thus: “spirit, soul, or life force.”

In “Byron, Postmodernism and Intertextuality” Jane Stabler understands Byron’s textual attention to his poetic form to both create the effect of a linguistic sublimity and break from formal norms:

Byron’s poetry draws attention to the mystery of an ever-shifting surface and involves the reader in the formation of that surface. . . . Byron’s sudden poetic breaks and gulfs were a form of sublimity, but they also violated the law of genre and the expectation that sublime poetic boundlessness would disturb its readers only within certain acceptable parameters. (866)

For example, stanza 32 of *CHP III* illustrates images living as portions of a whole or a “shatter’d guise”: smiles conceal mourning, ruined walls stand as markers for battlements long since destroyed, natural things attempt to conceal their death by standing as skeletons before their final fall, and the heart lives on as a broken piece of the remembered but lost whole.

As Christensen notes, the significance of lightning links back to Byron’s marked position as Lord, highlighting the aristocratic “privilege to confound reference” (3). Drawing attention to the relationship between performative action and Nietzschean “deeds,” Christensen focuses on the use of “lightening” in Nietzsche to help explain Byron’s difficulty with expression in relation to poetic strength (13-14).

*Canto I* has 93 stanzas; *Canto II* has 98 stanzas; *Canto III* has 118 stanzas.

In addition to Khalip’s invaluable argument about ruin, not only is the presence of ruin in Byron’s poetic landscape significant, but some of the critiques of Byron’s poetic style link to images of ruin. In the “Preface” to “Studies in the History of the Renaissance,” Walter Pater criticizes Byron for his inability to cast off his “debris,” or leave his reader “only what the heat of [his] imagination has wholly fused and transformed” (643). However, I would argue that it is
precisely through Byron’s use of, and identification with, this debris that the significance of physical ruin comes to the foreground and his work becomes so interesting.

xiv In “Byron ad the Mythology of Fact,” Anne Barton argues that Byron turned to poetry to escape the difficulties of expressing himself in life, struggling for adequate ways to comprehend his personal turmoil and lived experiences, in addition to having to overcome his ethical aversion to poetic vocation. However, while poetry may have provided momentary solace for the writer, I read his poetry as continuing to be filled with too many meditations on the inadequacy of language to allow for such conclusive or alleviative expressions to take place purely through the act of writing.

 xv As Christensen explains, “The ruin of Lord Byron’s name . . . does not any more than the ruin of Italy mean extinction but allegorization: Byron becomes the name of ruin” (original emphasis 1191). The image and linguistic sustention of “Lord Byron” is synonymous with ruin. While the page affords Byron a version of autobiographical immortality, his text provides a further complication with linguistic permanence. For example, Christensen highlights the disembodiment of Byron’s self through his words as in stanza 9 of Canto IV, when the speaker contemplates his travels and distance from England: “In this peculiar act of self-reflection, Lord Byron imagines himself burying himself (or the ashy fragments of himself) so that he may be phantomized and, a revenant, ‘resume’ England” (211). While Christensen claims that “ashes cannot be stitched into even a monstrous facsimile of the human body” (referring to the stitching that created Victor Frankenstein’s Creature) the words that Byron wrote play a significant, if not the most significant, role in stitching—or weaving together—the image of “Lord Byron” (210). Turning to the historical body of Byron, which was not burned, Christensen hints at the significance of Byron’s burnt memoirs: “the disfiguration of his body assured that he could not be fully re-membered, even by Hobhouse” (note 42, 401). By burning the memoirs, the words that sought a record on the page turn to ash. Even though this burning did not spread to the pages of Childe Harold, the ceremonial act of killing the “other Being” that lives in any text of Byron’s is helpful in understanding how seriously Byron strove to both embody and unbosom his own creation: “Byron” is the spirit of ruin (Christensen 191).


xvii In Shelley’s Ode to the West Wind, he pleads for the wind to scatter his leaves, the leaves of his poetry, like it scatters the autumn leaves. As the “spirit” of the wind is the “fierce” “Destroyer and preserver,” the speaker asks for it to become his spirit and thus afford him the same power of creation: “Be thou me” (V.61, 14, 62). Through poetry, the speaker hopes the wind will reinvigorate his words as they are scattered and given a voice: “Make me thy lyre”; “Be through my lips to unawakened earth / The trumpeter of a prophesy!” (V.57, 68-69).

xviii Keats defines his understanding of Negative Capability in his Letter to George and Tom Keats, December 21, 27?, 1817:
that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason. . . . This pursued through Volumes would perhaps
take us no further that this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every
other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration. (109)
While Byron is less interested in “Beauty,” I find that his exploration and establishment of poetic
subjectivity effectively “obliterates” everything else about his “self.” Consequently, while Keats
and Byron are usually understood to be diametrically opposed, their anxieties about their
strengths and weaknesses begin to look more similar the more they are read together.
References Cited


