Short poems can condense all things into themselves, drops of dew that fold in on themselves but mirror the cosmos. Brief in one sense, they are immense in others, making one little stanzaic room an everywhere. Keats’s hauntingly tuned “In drear nighted December,” with its dancing, troubled lilt, contrasts nature’s indifference to its changes with the human experience of loss. The poem trips, in both senses of the word, as it concludes by pointing out how “The feel of not to feel it, / When there is none to heal it, / Nor numbèd sense to steel it, / Was never said in rhyme” (ll. 21–4). The passage moves fleetly, but, as it turns from song to speech in the last line, a line that catches up the close of the previous two stanzas in its rhyming wake, it mimes the effect of slowing, even half-stumbling. The poem’s end suggests the huge tracts of human experience never caught in “rhyme” and hints at its own success in netting a strange, uncomfortable sensation, the “feel of not to feel it,” when “passed joy” (l. 20) is re-experienced like a phantom limb.

Keats’s poem shows how Romantic brief lyrics turn into metapoetry (poetry about poetry) with startling rapidity. The short lyric is poetry at its most exposed; each short lyric performs an implicit work of poetics, bearing out a poet’s essential idea of poetry, and this is partly because it must “sing,” or at least be “A Sort of a Song,” to borrow the title of a poem by William Carlos Williams. Brief lyric and song, my two concerns, blend and intermingle as subgenres: “lyric,” for my purposes, draws attention to the expression of feeling, “song” to the imperatives of the rhythmic movement of words, a movement rooted in traditional airs and measures.

The long, withdrawing roar of historicist and ideologically theorized reaction against aestheticism in its varied shapes and guises has meant a relative indifference to the gift of song which Romantic poetry extends to its readers. At times one may feel that the loss is ours; and one does not have to be a follower of Theodor Adorno, with his view that, through its very autonomy, art might offer a revealing “negative” image of social and political realities, to see that supposedly “pure lyric,” in obeying its own formal laws, has
much to say about a very impure bundle of realities. In the hands of Romantic practitioners, the short lyric and song represent a major generic breakthrough. If the Romantic short lyric and song draw on the eighteenth-century revival of ballad and minstrelsy, they imbue their forms with a new personal note, even as they encourage the personal to communicate with the impersonal (often embodied in the form of poetry). The chapter argues that, in their dramatization of the relationship between form and feeling, the Romantic short lyric and song explore their own cultural purpose and value.

I

My title comes from a poem by Shelley, entitled, like so many ventures in the lyric mode, “Song,” and, like many of Shelley’s briefer pieces, it uses its lyricism to lament an absence, but it does so in such a way that it converts absence into musical presence. From its beginning, “Rarely, rarely comest thou, / Spirit of Delight!” (ll. 1–2), a trochaic lilt moves in sympathy with the coming and going of the “Spirit of Delight,” whose visitations are “rare,” in the dual sense of being very infrequent and being valuable. In “Song,” Shelley expressly shapes lyric into a dimension which “may be / Untainted by man’s misery” (ll. 35–6), yet the “taint” of “man’s misery” refuses to be eradicated. It reappears in the poet’s own refusal to sentimentalize: “Let me set my mournful ditty / To a merry measure. / Thou wilt never come for pity – / Thou wilt come for pleasure” (ll.19–22). The poem notes the disjunction between form and content, even as the “merry measure” bears witness to Shelley’s refusal simply to intone “mournful” commonplaces. Lyric art heightens, so the lines suggest, our awareness of the “mournful” by bringing into play awareness of art as always art, always obedient to rules governing “measure.”

In fact, Shelley’s lyric self-positioning, as in “To a Skylark,” is relatively intricate. In that poem the trill of the clever stanzaic form, its long last alexandrine floating and running “Like an unbodied joy whose race is just begun” (l. 15), imitates the poet’s admiration for the skylark’s world of “clear keen joyance” (l. 76); at the same time, Shelley recognizes his distance from such a world. “Our sweetest songs,” as he notes reflexively, “are those that tell of saddest thought” (l. 90), and “saddest thought” discovers its nature most profoundly and finds “sweetest” expression when contemplating its opposite. “Song,” too, both surrenders to and offers a critique of pure lyric, if one identifies such a thing with the “Spirit of Delight,” a Spirit sought after with a restrained, disciplined longing that is affecting. It is as though the lyric poet’s fate were to devise beautiful forms that articulate his distance from the beauty they embody. The close of the poem composes a chastened music out of its sense of such a distance:

I love Love – though he has wings,
And like light can flee –
But above all other things,
Spirit, I love thee –
Thou art Love and Life! O come,  
Make once more my heart thy home.  
(ll. 43–8)

The metre here, as elsewhere in the poem, plays with and against the cadences of the speaking voice, which is allowed to assert itself in unostentatious ways at moments such as “though” (l. 43), “all” (l. 45), “love” (l. 46), and “my” in the last line. The emotion is one of longing, as is betokened by the final apostrophe. Yet “once more” in the final line indicates that the invoked Spirit has, in the past, made the poet’s “heart” its “home,” where the alliterative bond suggests, tantalizingly, the appropriateness of such a domiciling, just as the previous line has briefly married “Love and Life.”

Shelley’s “Song” suggests that many Romantic lyrics carry their burdens of significance lightly. Appropriately, my word “burdens” can have a musical meaning, too, and Romantic lyrics are frequently within calling distance of literal music. As often, they anticipate Verlaine’s nuanced injunction in his “Ars poétique” “De la musique avant toute chose” (Music above everything; Verlaine 1999): an injunction which allows for things, even as it sets music in a superior position to them. Byron wrote the poems in Hebrew Melodies to be set to music by Isaac Nathan; Shelley’s lyrics have often been set to music, too. Moore’s Irish Melodies provide a preeminent example of poems written to be sung, even if, in the words of one entranced listener, the American poet Nathaniel Parker Willis, Moore “makes no attempt at music” in his singing of his poems. Willis continues: “It is a kind of admirable recitative, in which every shade of thought is syllabled and dwelt upon, and the sentiment of the song goes through your blood, warming you to the very eyelids, and starting you to tears, if you have soul or sense in you” (Vail 2001: 85). Such a “recitative” serves as a means of reflecting on the purpose and role of poetic lyric, as Moore’s “Oh! Blame not the Bard” (1810) brings out. Participating in sophisticated ways in that recovery of the bard as impassioned champion and chronicler of a culture typical of the eighteenth-century revival of medieval minstrelsy, the poem’s galloping anapaests may lack the subtlety of rhythm and suggestion which Verlaine urges in “Art poétique”; they may even threaten to descend to the status of that “littérature” which is the final scornful word of Verlaine’s poem. But nuance re-enters via a syntax which hints at failed possibilities, so many sharp stones on which to cut one’s feet beneath the limpid flow of the rhythms. Indeed, the poem acts as a lament for what the lyric poet might have done with his art: were Ireland’s “spirit” not “broken” (l. 10), then

The string that now languishes loose o’er the lyre  
Might have bent a proud bow to the warrior’s dart,  
And the lip which now breathes but the song of desire  
Might have poured the full tide of a patriot’s heart.  
(ll. 5–8; quoted from Wordsworth and Wordsworth 2003)

The image of the lyre-string which have might strung a longbow suggests that the hand is mightier than the pen, but it is only the bardic effusion which makes possible
“the song of desire”: a desire for the “mights” of patriotic engagement. And in its final stanza the poem throws off its veils of self-abasement and recovers its lyric nerve:

But though glory be gone, and though hope fade away.
Thy name, loved Erin, shall live in his songs:
Not e’en in the hour when his heart is most gay
Will he lose the remembrance of thee and his wrongs!
(ll. 25–8)

True, this sentiment might play into the hands of those who would see Moore as an ineffectually anglicized Irish bard, wailing tunefully and noncontroversially of his nation’s injuries. But the writing links lyric to processes of “remembrance” in ways that are complicated. The poem may be learned by heart, remembered as though a song of some long-distant historical event; yet its capacity to work on the conscience of Ireland’s rulers is suggested, too, a suggestion made overt at the end when Moore sings to “loved Erin” (l. 26) of a time when “thy masters themselves, as they rivet thy chains, / Shall pause at the song of thy captive and weep” (ll. 31–2). This complicated state of affective embroilment by both “masters” and “captive” in the pity induced by Ireland’s “wrongs” means that the word with which that noun rhymes, “songs,” draws powerful attention to itself. “Songs” point up “wrongs,” a rhyme that hints at Moore’s apologia for his career as a poet.

II

Romantic brief poems often reflect, implicitly or explicitly, on their own reasons for existence and mode of being, and do so through their musical intensity. Leigh Hunt praises Coleridge for writing poems “so perfect in the sentiment of music, so varied with it, and yet leaving on the ear so unbroken and single an effect,” and in doing so comes close to formulating an ad hoc Romantic poetics of the lyric. For him, Coleridge’s is a poetry “quietly content with its beauty”: furthermore, “Of pure poetry, strictly so called, that is to say, consisting of nothing but its essential self, without conventional and perishing helps, he was the greatest master of his time.” There are substantial objections to the idea of a “pure poetry,” just as there are to the notion of “music” in poetry. Rhythm, sound-effects: these cannot be isolated from semantic considerations. Yet we can grant the force of these objections, and still believe that Hunt has captured a quality without which poems such as Coleridge’s “Love” would make only half their impact on us. That quality is a sense in which the lyric mastery of the poet, consubstantial as it is with the poem, is also felt as a contributing and overriding presence. Hunt notes of “Love,” a poem of great narratorial sophistication, that “one of the charms of it consists in the numerous repetitions and revolvings of the words, one on the other, as if taking delight in their own beauty” (Hunt 1891: 251, 250, 259). Such
“revolvings” slyly and affectionately link to the poem’s hints that its scenario serves as a mask for an unspoken autobiographical endeavor of the poet’s, one running parallel to the sophisticated self-awareness of the lyric. Mirrors start to mirror mirrors in a stanza such as this, singled out by Hunt: “I told her how he pined: and ah! / The deep, the low, the pleading tone / With which I sang another’s love, / Interpreted my own” (ll. 33–6). As the singer of a song, the “I” has stepped inside the lyric space; as the writer who draws attention to the singer who has so stepped, Coleridge invites us to suppose that we might interpret his own extra-poetic feelings.

Self-consciousness about lyric reaches an extravagant extreme in Edgar Allen Poe’s bravura post-Romantic manifesto, “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846). It is post-Romantic in that Poe has, it would seem, studied the effects of the best Romantic lyrics and sought to elicit from them a formula for the archetypal short, perfect poem. Poe has this to say:

What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones – that is to say, of brief poetical effects. … For this reason, at least, one half of the “Paradise Lost” is essentially prose – a succession of poetical excitements interspersed, inevitably, with corresponding depressions – the whole being deprived, through the extremeness of its length, of the vastly important artistic element, totality, or unity of effect. (Poe 1846: 164)

Poe may exaggerate. Yet he isolates a central feature of, and source of power in, Romantic poetry. Shelley, for all his grasp of Dante’s Commedia as an epic poem, anticipates Poe in his sense of the Italian poet’s work as burning with a many-faceted, highly localized brilliance: “His very words are instinct with spirit; each is as a spark, a burning atom of inextinguishable thought” (Shelley 2003: 693). Is it not the case that Shelley’s famous or notorious difficulty connects closely with the jostling coursework, in poems such as the “Ode to the West Wind,” of many “burning atoms of inextinguishable thought”? Were figures of speech ever so vividly heaped, one upon another, as at that poem’s close, as we move from imagined “incantation” (l. 65) of the poem we are reading to “Ashes and sparks” (l. 67) “scattered” (see l. 66) as from “an unextinguished hearth” (l. 66), to the “trumpet of a prophecy” (l. 69)? Each word burns with its own connected, if atomized, mini-drama; thus the command to “Scatter” (l. 66) imbues the verse with a sense of the poet’s authority so to command; in the same breath, it hints, too, at the notion of dispersal, even at an Orphic sacrificial ritual that links with the eruption into the second terza rima sonnet, by way of a simile, of “some fierce Maenad” (l. 21). The terza rima mimes, among other things, a continual interplay between concentration and scattering.

The idea of poetry struggling to aspire to the condition of a single word may have its origins in Christianity’s trust in the Logos. The poet of Byron’s Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, canto III, true to that canto’s shadowy, alternative life as an extended sequence of connected short lyrics, expresses the wish to
wreak
My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,
All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe – into one word
(97, ll. 906–10)

The longing comes and goes, and defeats itself in the act of utterance. The trailing sentence speaks of conditionality, unassailability. Even details such as the repetition of “feel” after “feelings” tell us that the dream of encapsulating the self into “one word” cannot be realized. But many Romantic poems believe that brevity is the soul of poetic achievement, as the following very short poem bears witness:

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

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees,
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course
With rocks and stones and trees.

Wordsworth’s enigmatic poem continues to haunt. Coleridge spoke of it as a “sublime Epitaph” and went on: “Whether it had any reality, I cannot say. Most probably, in some gloomier moments he had fancied the moment in which his sister might die” (Wu 2006: 478). Coleridge poses a possibility, that of the lines having “any reality,” that the poem outlaws and prompts. Its lyric autonomy seems absolute. Yet its urgency shocks us into the wish to find a biographical key. Even in his glissade to “the moment in which his sister might die” after “in some gloomier moments he had fancied,” Coleridge slides from lyric to life in a way that suggests the power of the fiction is to suggest in some way that it is not a fiction.

The poem itself fuses brevity with intensity. It wrongfoots the reader, operating with unknowing, knowing, sly straightforwardness. It is the poem’s art to be piercingly direct and endlessly productive of doubt and interrogation. “A slumber did my spirit seal,” then, but, ironically, now – though the right inflection of any irony is hard fully to register – a slumber does her spirit (and body) seal. “I had no human fears”; did I have superhuman fears? Did I suppose she was beyond “human fears.” And is “She,” as has been argued, not another person but a reference to “my spirit” (see the discussion in Rzepka 2008)? This possibility flickers and troubles, even as most readers are surely right instinctively to see the poem as reaching out to someone beyond the poet in that “She.” If she was a woman or girl who then “seemed a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years,” she is now, most definitely, a thing “Rolled round” with other things, whose thinginess could not be more thingy, “rocks and stone and trees.” Is this
a bad outcome? Has she been reduced? Is it a good one, in that she can now be thought of as having been absorbed back into “earth’s diurnal course,” rather as the Pedlar tells us of Margaret in *The Ruined Cottage* that “She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here” (l. 512)? To mention that narrative poem, inwardly emotional as its mode and effects often are, is to recognize that brief Romantic lyric offers few reliable handholds, yet many tempting prospects, for the story-hungry imagination.

In the poem, the conditions of meaning seem visibly to stage themselves. Wordsworth emphasizes a syntactical continuity between the stanzas. Each stanza begins with two declarative assertions, then concludes with a two-line expansion. The effect is of a confirmation in the second stanza of the first stanza’s retrospective inklings. At the same time, we travel a long way from the opening’s endorsement of subjectivity. If at the start all is internalized, at the close we are taken into a world of things beyond the self. The dead Lucy belongs to a Newtonian universe, at once august and cold, in which she is deprived of individual “motion” and “force” and yet participates in the universe’s ceaseless “motion and force” as she is “Rolled round … / With rocks and stones and trees.” Those “rocks and stones and trees” are particulars obdurately indifferent to the self; “trees” is a rhyme-word insistent on the object-world.

If *esse est percipi* in most lyrics, that is, “to be is to be perceived,” the poem mocks such Berkeleyan idealism as self-regard; Lucy “neither hears nor sees,” but, the poem tells us, there is a world beyond our sense-impressions. Thus, Wordsworth’s lyric acts as the vehicle for an affirmation yet questioning of subjective feeling. We might wrest significances that are positive and negative from this fact: the poem can still our anxieties as well as exacerbate them. In recalling Milton’s cosmology in *Paradise Lost* in which he stands “on earth,” ready to sing of that which is “narrower bound / Within the visible diurnal sphere” (vii. 23, 21–2), the poem draws our attention to a “diurnal course” that wheels its stable, ordered way, even as it refuses to extend its gaze beyond such a “sphere” (there is no mention of a transcendent heaven, for example, as there is in Milton).

As already intimated, a question of wider relevance to Romantic lyric bequeathed by the poem arises from its seemingly biographical pathos. I take “pathos” from Frederic Myers, who argues in connection with Wordsworth’s Lucy poems that “One can, indeed, well imagine that there may be poems which a man may willing to give to the world only in the hope that their pathos will be, as it were, protected by its own intensity” (quoted in Beer 1998: 175). Myers assumes that Wordsworth seeks to protect the personal “pathos” of the Lucy poems by means of their very “intensity.” Beer himself argues that “factuality does make a difference,” and, indeed, contends that “What the Lucy poems are about, it has to be urged again, is the effect of actual loss” (1998: 38, 60). Despite Beer’s persuasive speculations, it is hard to know how one might prove his assertion, yet this Romantic short lyric thrives on the tension between its formal self-sufficiency and an urgency that might lead us to believe the poem is expressive of pre-poetic experience. But such an urgency is known most surely as an effect of the language itself.

The Lucy poem which, arguably, brings a new and peculiarly original form of affective force into English lyric is entitled “Song.” What is groundbreaking about this
short poem of three quatrains in standard ballad-metre is not that it is so powerful — lyric power and intensity are there in abundance in poems by classical Greek and Roman poets such as Sappho and Catullus — but that its power threatens to overwhelm language:

She dwelt among th’untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love.

(ll. 1–4)

The opening quatrain mingles the clear and the hauntingly ungraspable. If it is reassuring to know that “She dwelt,” where the iambic pulse beats with healthy solidity, it is slightly unreassuring to know she did so among “th’untrodden ways,” where the elision stumbles just a fraction, almost as though tracking the wake and gait of a ghost. If it is sad that she was “A Maid whom there were none to praise,” it is also strange that, despite this absence of praise, she was one whom there “very few to love.” How many people need to love you for you to be loved? And was the poet of their number? And, as in so many short Romantic lyrics, we are made to look intently at microlinguistic events: empires of feeling fall and rise as we meditate the “difference” (l. 12) — that word of near-incommunicable importance in the poem — between “praise” and “love.” Wordsworth’s second stanza daringly dispenses with any main verb, offering two beautifully complementary yet contrasting images that share a love of the single (“A Violet” (l. 5), “a star” (l. 7)), but flow across the boundary between what is secret and what is shown, “Half-hidden” (l. 6) and “shining in the sky” (8). The stanza acts an imagistic interlude, as we return in the third stanza, one that uses fully the resources of synthesis, resolution, and onwardness offered by a triadic structure, to the syntactical shape of the first stanza. Or, at any rate, in the first two lines, we seem to do so:

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be …

(ll. 9–10)

“She lived unknown” pairs up with “She dwelt among,” but “lived unknown,” with its italicized emphasis, tilts the song decisively in an elegiac direction; it now seems as though “dwelt” was serving, all along, as a tactful euphemism for “lived” and that “lived” is itself holding at arm’s length the deep, barely speakable recognition that Lucy has died. Or, as the poet prefers to put it, “ceased to be” where the cessation of being sounds paradoxically like another way of existence, as though Lucy had entered another dwelling-place: the realm of words, of the commemorative song. That “few could know / When Lucy ceased to be” not only replays earlier tricks of nonlogical connection (after all, she lived “unknown”), it also brings to the poem’s surface the
stirring, profoundly disturbed need to confront a knowledge that arrests like trauma: “She” turns into a nameable person “Lucy” and is locked into an internal rhyme, “cessed to be.” But, then, as though the poem had aroused a countercurrent of feeling, the idea that anyone could really “know” what Lucy’s passing means to the poet is repudiated in the final, magnificent, language-challenging exclamation: “But she is in her Grave, and Oh! / The difference to me” (ll. 11–12). Wordsworth draws on Shakespearean effects of tragic simplicity and outcry to shape a lyrical insistence on the primacy of personal feeling: feeling that refuses to be articulated even in the act of being dramatically emphasized. The rhyme of “Oh” with “know” suggests that the heart has its reasons which reason cannot grasp, while “difference” confirms what has been dimly, emergently communicated to us by the poem’s brief, lyric voyage: that the poem is itself the means by which we experience a “difference,” a “difference” that can be thought of as a distinction between what we sensed at the outset and are stirred into feeling on our pulses by the close, and as a gap between what happened, so to speak (and this is an effect communicated by the poem’s words), the other side of language and what is happening in the very words that are speaking, implicitly, of the final inadequacy of language.

Coleridge’s own version of a Lucy poem, his “Constancy to an Ideal Object,” declares a rueful allegiance to a spectral ideal. The poem, thirty-two lines long, uses the couplets into which it soon settles to dramatize a friction between constancy and the fact that “all that beat about in Nature’s range, / Or veer or vanish” (ll. 1–2). From the start, constancy questions itself, even as it refuses to abandon its commitment: “why shouldst thou remain,” the poet asks, “The only constant in a world of change, / Oh yearning thought! that liv’st but in the brain?” (ll. 2–4). The question might seem to be voiced skeptically, yet the skepticism is inseparable from “yearning.” The fact that the “thou” is both itself and one with “yearning thought” makes it appear to be a product of the “brain”; Coleridge’s phrasing, “that liv’st but in the brain,” however, holds back from wholly identifying the ideal object with a false coinage of the brain; it “liv’st but in the brain,” and yet, as though confronting the subjectivity at the heart of lyric, the poem might also be asking, where else “but in the brain” do our feelings and ideals live?

The poem keeps a double time. It is short enough to strike to the heart of the emotional matters it addresses from the beginning; it does not “beat about” the bush in its opening assertion about “all that beat about in Nature’s range.” What in a more meditative lyric or ode might be apprehended by degrees, as in Coleridge’s “Dejection: An Ode,” is here stated with pulse-quickening compellingness. It is long enough for complex developments to occur. They include the capacity to look ahead to the poet’s dying moment, and the recognition that his “yearning thought” will never take on embodied form until then – though even then, in a deft switch into allegory, it will do so only “when, like strangers shel’t ring from a storm, / Hope and Despair meet in the porch of Death!” (ll. 9–10); that is, the possible realization of the poet’s ideal gives way to a further spectral scenario. It is long enough for the poet to articulate, with wry,
heartbreaking clear-sightedness, his awareness that the “yearning thought” both is and is not identifiable with “some dear embodied good” (l. 13).

This Romantic lyric thrives on riddles, “She is not thou, and only thou art she” (l. 12), that collapse longing into tongue-twisting puzzle. But it also has space to elaborate in its final eight lines a multi-toned retort to its deepest fear, expressed in the question, “And art thou nothing?” (l. 25). The long simile that follows allows for the ideal object to be something, yet for that something to be substanceless and wholly inseparable from illusion, which in a further twist seems at one with poetry’s own offerings. Like the Brocken spectre glimpsed by the “enamoured rustic” (l. 31), the poet sees “An image with a glory round its head” (l. 30). The use of “its” lends a temporary otherness to the “image,” and if the close tilts toward exposure of projection, it does not wholly annul the idea that something exists beyond the self: “The enamoured rustic worships its fair hues, / Nor knows he makes the shadow he pursues!” (ll. 31–2). Enamoured rustic and yearning poet differ in that the latter “knows” and the former does not know that both make the shadows they pursue. The phrasing tilts tantalizingly away from the merely disenchanted and negative.

III

Lyric’s participation in illusion is the theme of many Romantic short poems, conscious of themselves as wearing “An image like a glory round their heads.” Felicia Hemans’s double-edged lament “The Lost Pleiad” seems to elegize a still-living Byron, for all the gender reversal such a reading involves (all seven of the Pleiades were the daughters of Atlas and Pleione). “Like a lost Pleiad seen no more below,” the poem’s epigraph from Byron’s Beppo (l. 112), prepares us for the mingling of tones in Hemans’s poem. Byron is characteristically both mock-elegiac and genuinely affecting in the passage from Beppo. Hemans grieves, if she grieves, for the fact that “yon majestic heaven / Shines not the less for that one vanish’d star!” (ll. 24–5). The poem’s five-line stanzas, rhyming abbab, all pentameters except the shortened trimeter of the third line, move with a majestic slowness, the triple b rhyme suspending and slowing feeling rather than encouraging forward movement. If read as about sibling rivalry between female and male Romantic poets, the lyric can seem to articulate a muted satisfaction that “thy sisters of the sky / Still hold their place on high” (ll. 2–3). Yet any such feeling seems muted by a feeling that all has changed utterly, even though there is no palpable change at all.

The lyric offers itself as a gorgeous rehearsal of poetry’s resources. Cadences and rhymes say to us that verse’s machinery is perfectly oiled, that its keyboard awaits the next dancing set of fingers: like “the regal night” (l. 6), the poem’s subtext seems to say, poetry “wears her crown of old magnificence” (l. 7); like the constellations, the lines “rise in joy, the starry myriads burning” (l. 11). Indeed, at moments such as this third stanza, the desolate beauty of Hemans’s lyric arises from its deep insight into the
element of heartlessness at the very center of autonomy: whether that autonomy belongs to natural cycles or to the poetic wheelings that mimic them:

They rise in joy, the starry myriads burning –
   The shepherd greets them on his mountains free;
   And from the silvery sea
To them the sailor’s wakeful eye is turning –
   Unchang’d they rise, they have not mourn’d for thee.
(ll. 11–15)

The lyric is the more affecting for never quite taking on the role of mourning for “thee.” If anything, it suggests a sublimity of sorrow that transcends mourning. The poem’s reserve betokens respect, as though the addressee has a greatness that forbids elegy: “Bow’d be our hearts to think on what we are, / When from its heights afar / A world sinks thus” (ll. 22–4).

It was a fine revisionary decision to change “It is too sad,” the reading in the poem’s first printed appearance (in the New Monthly Magazine) to “Bow’d be our hearts.” The change allows for a more steadfast contemplation of “what we are” in the act of bowing, by way of the rhyme, to “heights afar.” Shelley’s concluding rhyme in Adonais sets the feeling of being borne “darkly, fearfully, afar” (l. 492) against the knowledge that “The soul of Adonais, like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are” (ll. 494–5): “are” proclaims a plenitude of undisturbed being against the storm-tossed voyage of the wanderer driven “afar.” Hemans reverses the order of the rhymes and adds her own complicating inflection to the meaning that Shelley finds in the rhyme between “afar” and “are.” For Hemans, “what we are” is by no means clear when placed in the context of what is occurring in “heights afar.”

Elsewhere, lyric’s doubleness takes the form of seeming to offer a single emotion. Shelley’s “When the lamp is shattered,” paradigmatic lyric of loss though it seems to be, turns into a poem of survival, living on. It behaves as though it were describing emotional catastrophe, but we are alerted in various near-subliminal ways, including the alternation of feminine and masculine rhymes, to the fact that not everything is over, even though we appear to be told that it is. The proliferation of analogies implies a brooding obsession and, as is the way with analogies, difference is introduced under the guise of repetition and sameness. Thus, the lines, “When the lute is broken / Sweet tones are remembered not – / When the lips have spoken / Loved accents are soon forgot” (ll. 5–8), work to reintroduce the very idea – of remembrance – which is overtly denied. Partly this is the consequence of the cunning use of inversion: “remembered not” is not quite the same thing as “not remembered.” Partly it is to do with a temporal modifier – “soon” – that contains a world of ambiguity; how soon is “soon,” especially after the strong initial stress on “Loved accents,” which suggest their abiding presence? Stanza 3 brings into the open the fact that the poem is dealing less with cancellation of feeling than with its painful continuation: “When hearts have once mingled / Love first leaves the well-built nest – / The weak one is singled / To endure
what it once possessed” (ll. 17–20). As is so often the case with Romantic short poems, hovering possibilities inhere in the decisive swiftness of the lyric sketch. The idea of the “well-built nest” might imply that the padding of egotistical self-concern insulates some people when “cold winds come” (l. 32). And if the reader wonders by whom is the solitary “weak one” “singled,” the answer might be by whatever it is in life that seems to give some people a raw deal, or even by a predisposition, in some people, to play the part of a selfless victim, as in Blake’s “The Clod and the Pebble.”

Subsequent lines illustrate how much work Shelley’s category disruptions can perform: “O Love! who bewailest / The frailty of all things here / Why choose you the frailest / For your cradle, your home and your bier?” (ll. 21–4). Here Love is both personification and feeling. Judith Chernaik helpfully comments: “In the voice of reason, the poet questions a perverse and self-destructive deity” (1972: 158). But the “perverse and self-destructive deity” is also a lamenting poet-philosopher, condemned to see that the assonantal link between bewailing and frailty offers an insight into the human condition. Shelley speaks to “Love” as though to a lyrical alter ego, true to lyric’s shadowy sense of hospitality to voices beyond the voice of the poet. In the poem’s microcosmic world, “frailty” clings to any notion of stable semantic significance. Not only does the poem’s appositional phrasing allow “cradle,” “home,” and “bier” to become one another, but also the word “frailty,” including in its meanings something like untrustworthiness, passes into “the frailest,” meaning the most vulnerable: a slide which shows how Romantic lyrics wring from repeated use of the same words concentrations and duplicities of meaning. Love chooses “the frailest” precisely because frailty is not the name of the frailest: the “frailest” may turn out, in the eyes of some, to be foolishly loyal. Again, the show of reason points up lyric’s knowledge of all that disrupts reason’s careful, encoded patternings.

IV

Great Romantic short lyrics have something in common with the caricaturist’s eye for the telling detail (this is the age of Gillray, after all), but they turn away from savage critique toward an empathy with pain. In “When we two parted,” it is as though Byron were rehearsing for an audience his need to keep feeling from the prying eyes of a public. The poem’s mingled feelings correspond to its metrical cunning. Clipped yet lilting in its rhythm, the poem employs a cunning blend of two- and three-syllable feet to convey both a driving forward to emotional finalities and a circling back to memories impossible to forego. From the opening,

When we two parted
In silence and tears,
Half broken-hearted
To sever for years
(ll. 1–4),
the word choice seems almost a formulaic compound of Regency favorites, with their accompanying familiar rhymes, “parted” (l. 1) and “broken-hearted” (l. 3), “years” and “tears” (ll. 2–4), for instance. Yet Byron never settles for the obvious or banal. On the one hand, the poem wishes to assert that the former parting served as “the warning / Of what I feel now” (ll. 10–11); on the other hand, the poem is preoccupied with the problem of defining “what I feel now,” the adverb “now” always a tell-tale sign of emotional disturbance and breakthrough in Byron.

In fact, the lyric’s dialectical dance between now and then, pointed up by the return at the close to the opening’s “silence and tears” (l. 32), makes the reader aware that past and present are equally enigmatic for the poet. Odd surprises in the diction suggest that the former scenario is still one that makes the speaker’s nerves jump: the apparent pleonasm of “we two,” for instance, implies that the couple formed a secret society, or still do form one in the poet’s memory, even that Byron feels an ongoing sense of alliance with the woman he seems to be, in some sense casting off. “Half broken-hearted” will not allow the former parting to be thought of merely in tritely sentimental terms. Arguably it is among those moments of “grammatical freedom” (see Hopps) that allow Byron to say a number of things: that each lover was only half broken-hearted; that their half broken-heartedness turned into whole broken-heartedness as they severed for years, as though severing were itself an ironic version of living, growing’s shadow. The feelings of coldness and chill experienced by the lovers seem to come less from broken-heartedness than from a foreboding sense that the future would twist the emotional knife in some as yet unformulated way.

The bite of this lyric, with its drummingly syncopated tune of loss and surviving regret, lies in the way Byron is at once near-accuser and closest ally of the woman. “I hear thy name spoken, / And share in its shame” (ll. 15–16) is how the second stanza closes. “And share in its shame,” there, equivocates between vicariously experiencing the woman’s shame and feeling shame on her behalf. The “They” (l. 17) to the fore in the third stanza have insinuated “their” social norms inside his mind, and yet the “shudder” (l. 19) that he experiences, with its accompanying question, “Why wert thou so dear?” (l. 20), cannot be dismissed only as revulsion at her or himself. Much in “When we two parted” riddles itself in and out of a surprised contact with unexpected depths of feeling: “They know not I knew thee, / Who knew thee too well; – / Long, long shall I rue thee, / Too deeply to tell” (ll. 21–4). In various ways, the writing keeps its options open, but with the openness of an open wound: he “knew her too well,” in that his knowledge transcends “theirs” both through its intimacy and its awareness of possible shortcomings, shortcomings which may reflect his own imperfections; to “rué” can mean, and here does mean, to feel regret on another’s and one’s own account, while “Too deeply to tell” turns its topos of inexpressibility into a strong conviction that the poet’s feelings defy articulation. Things clarify or seem to clarify in the end, as Byron assumes the role of the let-down ex-lover, forgotten and deceived, but the two uses of “silence” in the final stanza (ll. 26, 32) have the effect of taking the edge off his impulse to recriminate, as does the achingly obsessive presence of “thee” in the penultimate rhyme position of both the last two stanzas (ll. 21, 23, 29, 31).
Forms and Genres

Romantic short poems look before and after, their grace both a torch shining into the future and a frail stay against a tide of pressures lapping against their verbal shores. Beguiling us with glad rhythms and a series of “ands” that declare an apparently joyful disregard for causes, the close of Blake’s Introduction to *Songs of Innocence* is representative: “And I pluck’d a hollow reed” (l. 16), with its hint in “hollow” of something hollowed out in the act of writing, modulates into these lines: “And I made a rural pen, / And I stain’d the water clear, / And I wrote my happy songs / Every child may joy to hear” (ll. 17–20). The reader is left to wonder just how deeply these still or stained waters might be running. When Blake chooses “may” rather than “will” he leaves us certain of this one thing: that our response, our mediation of his meanings, will be crucial to his poetry’s effect.

Lyric looks self-sufficient; Romantic lyric is constantly intent on dialogue, often signaling its intent through an interplay between meaning and mode. Burns is a central precursor or founding father here. In his “Song” (“Oh my love’s like the red, red rose”), he treats the hyperbole of love poetry with a mixture of witty vigor and emotional power. The love is ever-renewing and fresh “like the red, red rose, / That’s newly sprung in June” (ll. 1–2), rather as Burns’s lyric reasserts the freshness of traditional material, “newly sprung” in his lines. Indeed, hyperbole intensifies in order to convey its underlying urgency. An example is the extravagant “And I can love thee still, my dear, / Till a’ the seas gang dry –” (ll. 7–8), where Duncan Wu, basing his text on a manuscript, revealingly reads “can” as opposed to “will,” the received published reading. This head-in-the-clouds boast of unfettered capacity passes, by way of an enjambment across a stanza break, into a repetition and extension of the idea that stretch it nearly to breaking point:

Till a’ the seas gang dry, my dear,
   And the rocks melt wi’ the sun;
I will love thee still, my dear,
   While the sands o’ life shall run.

(ll. 9–12)

The image of the “sands o’ life” evokes human limitedness and transience. Without questioning the lover’s sincerity, it exposes, affectingly, his rhetoric as just that: a rhetoric of protestation. That dynamic familiar to lyric – one in which subjective feeling chafes against objective constraints – finds its way into the poem’s nooks and crannies. The poet’s protestations speak to us, in an unvoiced, eloquent subtext, of the human need for hyperbole. Appropriately the final stanza sustains both its tonal buoyancy and its subtextual hints, concluding with a line which imagines overcoming another obstacle in the way of the lovers:

And fare thee weel, my only love,
   And fare thee weel, awhile!
And I will come again, my love,
   Though ‘twere ten thousand mile!

(ll. 13–16)
At the other end of the Romantic era, the work of Landon, Beddoes, and Clare reveals a sophistication about song that is inseparable from the implications of preceding decades of practice. The alliance and gap between art and life, “song” and “wrong,” is thematized, for instance, in Landon’s 1824 lyric excerpted from *The Improvisatrice* as “[Sappho’s Song]” (see Wu 2006). Sappho, archetypal female poet and lyrical alter ego for poets such as Mary Robinson in her sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon*, speaks with reflexive accents in Landon’s five octosyllabic quatrains. Her initial rejection of poetry, “Farewell, my lute, and would that I / Had never waked thy burning chords!” (ll. 1–2; line numbers adapted from Wu), settles into a more reflective acceptance:

> It was my evil star above,  
> Not my sweet lute that wrought me wrong;  
> It was not song that taught me love,  
> But it was love that taught me song.  
> (ll. 9–12)

This stanza gets cart and horse in the right order, but trying to ensure that “song” and “wrong” maintain a decorous relationship is, despite the elegant movement of the verse, difficult. “Song” is the place where “wrong” finds itself named; the chances of rhyme seem almost tyrannies as they demand song thrives on wrong. And the very conclusion, with its sense that “lute” and “wreath” (l. 17) will ensure her fame cannot dispel the impression that the poet lives to write, rather than writes about living.

Poetry, “*The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty,*” in Poe’s suggestive phrase from his “The Poetic Principle” (Poe 1982: 894), may demand a heavy price, it sometimes seems, from Romantic makers of short poems, but the continual drive in these poems is toward a tenacious sense of artistic recompense. Clare’s “I Am” converts harrowing, existential chaos into a song of the self, however bereft. In “Dream-Pedlary” Beddoes subjects the relationship between poet and reader to lyrical scrutiny. The poem uses an entrancing measure to lure us into wishing to fulfill its initial “if,” even as the language tacitly warns against thinking we can buy dreams: “If there were dreams to sell, / What would you buy? / Some cost a passing bell; / Some a light sigh” (ll. 1–4). Those dreams may be discernible through the measures of lyric poetry; they may be fulfillable, the lyric suggests, only in death. What is typical of Romantic brief lyrics about the poem is the way in which they rehearse both the attractiveness and danger of seeking to realize, through art, the longing embodied in song.

**See Also**

Chapter 3 “The Temptations of Tercets”; chapter 12 “‘Other voices speak’: The Poetic Conversations of Byron and Shelley”; chapter 26 “‘The feel of not to feel it,’ or the Pleasures of Enduring Form”; chapter 27 “Romantic Poetry and Literary Theory: The Case of ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’”; chapter 34 “The Persistence of Romanticism”
References and Further Reading


