



## Hemans' Response to the Romantic Uni-verse

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In *Aporias*, a meditation on the grammar of dying, Jacques Derrida notes that death names 'the very irreplaceability of absolute singularity (no one can die in my place or in the place of the other)', while eluding determinacy: 'one knows perhaps neither the meaning nor the referent of this word [death] [...]. if there is one word that remains absolutely unassignable or unassigning with respect to its concept and to its thingness, it is the word "death"'.<sup>1</sup> He goes on to argue that animals 'perish' instead of 'die' since to die, one must be able to form a concept of death (p. 35). Such a concept, he proposes, is not merely determined by culture but is the essence of culture: 'The very concept of culture may seem to be synonymous with the culture of death, as if the expression "culture of death" were ultimately a pleonasm or a tautology' (p. 43).

Derrida has a partial sympathizer in Felicia Hemans, who, in a number of her poems, encapsulates a culture by describing how it prescribes death. Though the recurring theme of death in Hemans' poetry may suggest a morbid obsession, a closer reading of her works reveals her preoccupation with the paradox of how in dying, one fails to die. She navigates this paradox not only through rhetorical maneuvers in the poems themselves but also by constructing works that include extra-poetic material. The ways in which artists deconstruct the life/death binary is particularly interesting, as Hemans reveals in her tributes to Mozart and the Italian sculptor Properzia Rossi. In those works, as I will presently show, the paratexts collaborate with the main poems to show death to be, in Derrida's terms, simultaneously singular yet unassignable.

Paratexts in the form of historical summaries, poetic epigraphs, and supplemental notes augment many of Hemans' poems in ways that on the surface seem familiar. The prose statements and notes usually provide historical or biographical contexts for the main poem while the epigraphs typically offer proverbial wisdom that speaks to the main sentiments of the poems. These supplements may seem like friendly amendments to the poetry, but their presence has a potential downside. Though Hemans sometimes writes the paratexts for her poems, often she borrows the writing of others so that the first voice we hear in her work is not her own. When she prefaces her poetry with the words of historians, philosophers, scientists, novelists, and/or fellow poets, she allows them to step in front of her and set the agenda for what follows. The presence of other voices in her works naturally raises questions of authority and appropriation.

Gary Kelly has observed the thematic unity between the central poems and the accompanying texts, but he sees formal tension in the structure of Hemans' compositions, which invert the gender priority of conventional verse:

The effect of this textual structure is complex [...]. The verse romance is framed by prose fact and literary parallels or sources. The verse narrative and the feminized experience it represents and valorizes are at the centre; the supposedly

authoritatively and authorizing discourses of fact and literature (here, mostly by male writers) are marginalized.<sup>2</sup>

Kelly's point is well taken. The supplementary material, with all of its cultural authority, is literally pushed to the outside so that it has the logistical function of framing the poem. In Hemans' works, masculine experience, presented through paratexts, has, as Kelly suggests, an auxiliary function while feminine experience, presented as the central poem, is the main literary event. In a discussion of performativity in Hemans' poetry, Anne Hartman provides incidental support for Kelly's argument. Borrowing a phrase from Isobel Armstrong, she contends that some of Hemans' poems are 'double poem[s]' in that they embody 'expression and critique [...], mimesis and mimicry'.<sup>3</sup> To illustrate, Hartman turns to Hemans' poem 'Our Daily Paths' and shows how the epigraph by William Wordsworth ('Nought shall prevail against us, or disturb/ Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold/ Is full of blessings') is subtly undercut by themes of loss, denial, and absence in the poem itself (p. 485).<sup>4</sup>

Though Kelly's argument and Hartman's poetic analysis are persuasive, there is a case to be made for seeing the authority tip toward the paratexts instead of the main poems in Hemans' multi-literary works. Because a frame exists to draw attention to what it frames, it outlines the boundaries of the work of art. But its function is even deeper. In the act of placing limits around an artwork, it defines that work and, from a phenomenological perspective, authorizes it to come into being. As Heidegger observes, 'A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*'.<sup>5</sup> In language resonant of Heidegger's, Gérard Genette writes:

although we do not always know whether [paratexts] are to be regarded as belonging to the text, in any case they surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world.<sup>6</sup>

Though Genette includes in his definition of paratexts mundane accompaniments to a poem, like the author's name or the title of the poem, when paratexts consist of previously published texts, their stature is even greater than that of picture frames since by republishing those texts, a poet declares them worthy of veneration.

However one perceives the power dynamic between the paratexts in Hemans' works and the poems they accompany, Hemans orchestrates the distinct literary units in a way that creates a middle ground between rational thought and feeling, and, at a metaphysical level, between the material and the mystical. Those literary units, as Kelly has noted, separate into three layers: a prose biographical or historical statement, one or more epigraphs, and the central poem. In those works the sequence of literary units silhouettes William Wordsworth's description of the poetic process, famously described in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:

poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of re-action, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.<sup>7</sup>

In Hemans' multi-literary works, the prose statement quietly recollects an historical circumstance; the tranquility typically falls away in the epigraph, which articulates the emotions the circumstance provoked as universal emotions; and finally

the main poem brings those emotions into close focus by presenting them as they were felt by the person referred to in the prose statement. In his perceptive discussion of passion in Hemans' poetry, Jason Rudy argues, 'The key issues for Hemans' developing aesthetic turn around balance: how to assert one's mind without forfeiting lyrical "storms of passion"; how to write passionately and yet maintain a coherent story [...].'<sup>8</sup> To Rudy, however, Hemans' balancing act reveals the 'ultimate impotence of passion' since by 'Embedding passion within form [...] [she] recuperate[s] extreme feeling from excessive self-indulgence' (pp. 555, 561). Though Rudy is spot-on in articulating Hemans' attempt to balance reason and emotion, I will contend that in the end she does not, as he argues, 'bind passionate feeling within noble structure' (p. 562) but provides a safe structure for those feelings to be expressed at full tilt. The personal emotions in the main poem register at a higher pitch when juxtaposed to the calm prose statement and even when placed next to the epigraph, which portrays emotions that are somewhat diffused by their universality.

Hemans' regard for Wordsworth was no secret. In her poem 'To Wordsworth' she asks him, 'let thy thoughts be with me' (11),<sup>9</sup> and in her dedication to him of the poetry volume, *Scenes and Hymns of Life*, she expresses 'fervent gratitude for moral and intellectual benefit derived from reverential communion with the spirit of his poetry'.<sup>10</sup> The admiration Hemans had for Wordsworth is not immediately apparent in her poetry, however. Though she shares his interest in the lives and sentiments of common people, the emotional tenor of her poetry, with its frequent outbursts, suggests any desire to learn from him may have stopped at the door to his Preface. Nevertheless, she and Wordsworth do share common ground. In spite of the dissimilar affect in their poems, both trade in powerful emotions, the difference lying in how they enable readers to assimilate those emotions. Wordsworth addresses the challenge from within the poems, Hemans from the outside. By straining emotions through the filters of memory and imagination in his verse, Wordsworth creates poems that are emotionally refined. Hemans, alternatively, places filters outside of her poems in the form of paratexts, which readers pass through before arriving at the unrestrained personal emotions in the main poems.

Wordsworth's and Hemans' different ways of handling emotions in their poetry are not merely stylistic moves; they manifest their distinct theological views. Since Wordsworth finds a correspondence between the natural universe and spirit, it is fitting that in his poems the spirit is mediated by nature. Conversely, Hemans' view of spirit as a force independent of the natural world is reflected in her attempts to present spirit without mediation. The three-part structure mentioned above allows her to move from the empirical facts of the prose statement to the emotional truth of the epigraph, and then on to what she believes is the spiritual force lying beneath those emotions. This progression is important since the veracity of the history/biography in the prose statement and the authenticity of the emotions in the epigraph prepare the reader to view her unorthodox theology as credible.

Hemans' exposure to various religious traditions, which included, as Emma Mason notes, 'a politicized Anglicanism in Liverpool; Low Church nonconformism at Rhyllon [...] ; and Roman Catholicism during her residence in Ireland', produced views that positioned her outside mainstream religious traditions.<sup>11</sup> In a frank and uninhibited manner she proposes, for example, an alternative to the Pauline duality of body and spirit by suggesting that artists can create immortal vessels for their spirit through artistic media, which enable their spirit to linger on earth after their death. On the surface this sounds like a familiar and longstanding sentimental argument for living on in one's art. Hemans' poetic arguments reveal, however, that she believes

quite literally that one's spirit can relocate to and animate another body, the corpus of art.

Hemans' conception of human ontology, which strays from both orthodox science as well as orthodox Christianity, accentuates the problematic in the life/death binary. If there is a fixed border between life and death, then death (having a boundary) is finite. Logically, if death is finite, then death is not death; that is, it does not mark finality but will itself come to an end. And yet if there is not a fixed border between life and death, and one can freely cross from one state to the other, then life and death are not oppositional states. This presents a rudimental problem for both mainstream religion and mainstream science since each is predicated on the concept of death as a horizon of life. Hemans exploits this problematic in several poems by presenting spirit as an agent that eludes both death and mortal life. As noted earlier, two poems about artists – 'Mozart's Requiem' and 'Properzia Rossi' – are compelling examples of her response to the life/death binary. In both works Hemans follows the paratextual pattern described above, which enables her to present bold and occasionally deviant assertions about the spirit.

The ominous circumstances that purportedly inspired Mozart's final composition are briefly summarized by Hemans in the narrative statement that precedes her poem:

A short time before the death of Mozart, a stranger of remarkable appearance, and dressed in deep mourning, called at his house, and requested him to prepare a requiem, in his best style, for the funeral of a distinguished person. The sensitive imagination of the composer immediately seized upon the circumstance as an omen of his own fate; and the nervous anxiety with which he laboured to fulfill the task, had the effect of realizing his impression. He died within a few days after completing this magnificent piece of music, which was performed at his interment. (p. 154)

The grim stranger, the command to write a requiem, Mozart's impending death – it would appear the incident did not require any augmentation on Hemans' part to make it dramatic. She dares, however, to reach beyond the eerie account by suggesting that Mozart himself was the ominous visitor. Following her brief account of Mozart's strange encounter she offers an epigraph from Byron's *Prophecy of Dante*: 'These birds of Paradise but long to flee/ Back to their native mansion' (p. 155). In this work the paratexts are not required to provide context to the main poem since the strange circumstances of Mozart's final composition are well known. They serve, rather, as character witnesses of the poem that follows. The accuracy of the narrative statement, together with the wisdom of the epigraph, lends credibility to Hemans' representation of Mozart's response to the ominous visitor. By introducing the main poem through the solemnity of the prose statement and the wistful tone of the epigraph, she authorizes its emotional intensity.

The main poem in 'Mozart's Requiem' begins with a start:

A requiem! – and for whom?  
     For beauty in its bloom?  
 For valour fall'n – a broken rose or sword?  
     A dirge for king or chief,  
     With pomp of stately grief,  
 Banner, and torch, and waving plume deplor'd? (1-6)

After a brisk dismissal of those typically honored with a requiem ('Not so, it is not so!' [7]), Mozart realizes he has been called upon as a composer to commemorate his own death:

The warning voice I know,  
From other worlds a strange mysterious tone;  
A solemn funeral air  
It call'd me to prepare,  
And my heart answer'd secretly – my own! (8-12)

Mozart's own requiem, for sure, but also Mozart's own voice. The 'strange mysterious tone' that is 'From other worlds' belongs to him. Wishing to linger behind in his art, Mozart invokes his spirit to 'let me breathe my dower/ Of passion and of power/ Full into that deep lay' (16-18). In Pentecostal imagery he then writes of his spirit trying to get loose from his body:

Too restless and too strong  
Within this clay hath been th' o'ermastering flame;  
Swift thoughts, that came and went,  
Like torrents o'er me sent,  
Have shaken, as a reed, my thrilling frame. (26-30)

As a 'reed' and 'thrilling frame', Mozart discovers he is the musical instrument as well as the musician, the object as well as the subject.

Mozart follows this image of a deconstructed artistic self with a wistful comment on the evanescence of the 'beautiful [which] comes floating thro' my soul,' likening it to 'perfumes on the wind' (31-33). Next to this floating (and fleeting) beauty, the soul (spirit) seems solid, grounded. He further shows the soul/spirit to be a palpable force in his life: as 'Something far more divine/ Than may on earth be mine', it 'Haunts my worn heart, and will not let me rest' (40-42). When he poses the question in the next stanza, 'Shall I then *fear* the tone/ That breathes from worlds unknown?', it is once again unclear whether he is referring to the voice of the stranger who requested the requiem or the voice of his own spirit that seems to have its agency elsewhere (43-44). The ambiguity allows for the possibility that the stranger is an incarnation of his own spirit, a force that can exist within himself and outside of himself, all at once. The dissolution of ontological boundaries is furthered in the next line where in remarkable economy Hemans closes the gap between the worldly and the otherworldly: 'these feverish aspirations *there*/ Shall grasp their full desire' (45-46, Hemans' italics). Mozart may be musing that in an unknown world his aspirations will be consummated; but since an otherworldly tone has visited him on earth, the otherworldly is no longer outside of this world. The adverb in the poetic line 'these feverish aspirations *there*' disrupts spatial logic since 'these' are no longer here but there. Thus, Mozart suggests in his artistic proclamation that the distance between the here and hereafter has been evaporated. In a word, there is no *here* here.

In his final breath, Mozart expresses a desire that his spirit will fill his music and thereby animate him after his death: 'I pour each fervent thought/ With fear, hope, trembling, fraught,/ Into the notes that o'er my dust shall swell' (52-54). The confluence of mind, music, and the mortal self in these culminating lines suggests that Mozart circumvents death, which is of course in keeping with the proleptic circumstances of his final composition. Since a requiem is written in memory of someone, this strange incident does not merely convey that Mozart has a strong intimation of his mortality but that he has imaginatively returned from the grave to write his own requiem – a thoroughly arational act, which does not escape Hemans'

notice. In this final stanza Mozart refers to the requiem as a 'farewell', a term that underscores the indeterminacy of his composition. Since the requiem will be heard after his death, it will mark the return of Mozart as well as his departure. The difficulty in situating Mozart vis-à-vis life and death overshadows the entire poem since Mozart is placed in the position of those who write their own obituary: the one event they cannot report is the defining event in their composition.

Hemans' tribute to Mozart resonates with the encounter that precipitated his composition of the Requiem. The paratexts, which assume the role of the stranger who prompted the actual requiem, are a warning voice to Hemans, impelling her to write her own poetic requiem. Like Mozart, she shows how an artist fails to die when s/he dies. The rational prose account of the bizarre incident and the epigraph, in its expression of familiar sorrow, actually fortify the poem whose presentation of the event generates unresolved ontological problems, as noted above. The historical incident surrounding Mozart's composition seems more mystical than explicable, and, as a result, Hemans' poem, when juxtaposed to the prose account and proverbial wisdom of the epigraph, seems more believable, notwithstanding the dissolution of rational boundaries. A segue between human history and artistic expression, the poem links the earthly realm (represented in the prose statement and epigraph) and the otherworldly realm (expressed in the musical composition) by showing how they are inextricably connected.

Properzia Rossi, like Mozart, shared Hemans' professional circumstance as a creative artist as well as her personal sorrow as an abandoned woman. Not surprisingly, Hemans' poetic tribute reveals her strong affinity with the sculptor. 'Properzia Rossi', which stands as one of Hemans' most ambitious poems, includes two prefatory paratexts. Hemans sets the scene with an historical/biographical statement, which is followed by an epigraph, a private musing in which Rossi expresses her emotional predicament. Both the prose statement and the epigraph clear a path for Rossi to speak openly of her unusual scheme. The biographical statement reads:

Properzia Rossi, a celebrated female sculptor of Bologna, possessed also of talents for poetry and music, died in consequence of an unrequited attachment. – A painting by Ducas, represents her showing her last work, a basso-relievo of Ariadne, to a Roman Knight, the object of her affection, who regards it with indifference. (p. 29)

The epigraph previews the unrestrained emotions of the poem:

-----Tell me no more, no more  
 Of my soul's lofty gifts! Are they not vain  
 To quench its haunting thirst for happiness?  
 Have I not lov'd, and striven, and fail'd to bind  
 One true heart unto me, whereon my own  
 Might find a resting-place, a home for all  
 Its burden of affections? I depart,  
 Unknown, tho' Fame goes with me; I must leave  
 The earth unknown. Yet it may be that death  
 Shall give my name a power to win such tears  
 As would have made life precious. (p. 29)

As in 'Mozart's Requiem', the narrative statement and the main poem identify the central character and situate that character in a particular period and place while the

epigraph includes no such references but presents the sentiments of the poem as universal. The lack of specificity in Hemans' epigraphs allows her to inhabit her own work in the anticipatory space preceding the main poem, suturing a link between Hemans and the central character of a poem, which carries over into the poem that follows. In the process of unfolding Rossi's plot to exact revenge on the man who wronged her by leaving herself in her sculpture, Hemans reenacts Rossi's strategy by constructing a piece of verbal sculpture – a poem she can inhabit upon her death. As in 'Mozart's Requiem' Hemans creates a rhetorical double exposure.

At the outset, the main poem of 'Properzia Rossi' picks up where the epigraph left off, with one exception: while in the epigraph the sculptor addresses those who laud her artistic excellence, in the poem she initially appears to cry out to herself:

One dream of passion and of beauty more!  
 And in its bright fulfilment let me pour  
 My soul away! Let earth retain a trace  
 Of that which lit my being, tho' its race  
 Might have been loftier far. – Yet one more dream!  
 From my deep spirit one victorious gleam  
 Ere I depart! (1-7)

The poem has the same tone as the epigraph, but it presents a radically different view of the self. In the epigraph the sculptor speaks as a subject addressing an object (the reader); in the poem she swings between the positions of subject and object, as if she were trying to dislodge herself from that long established binary.

Throughout the poem the sculptor's movements from subjective to objective self-representation are sudden and unselfconscious. Early on she speaks out to the indifferent man in a manner that seems to position her in a subject/object relationship with him:

I would leave enshrined  
 Something immortal of my heart and mind,  
 That yet may speak to thee when I am gone,  
 Shaking thine inmost bosom with a tone  
 Of lost affection; – something that may prove  
 What she hath been. (9-14)

Her desire to 'enshrine[...]/ Something immortal' reveals an inherent problem in her scheme and the larger problem in orthodox theology: immortality cannot be circumscribed. The problem lingers when she contemplates her deceased self in the third person, as if the subject/object relationship her mortal self currently has with her spirit will be inverted upon her death. Though the poem describes Rossi's imaginative attempt to speak when she is dead to the man who abandoned her, her confrontation with her own spirit proves to be even more complicated. In an apostrophe to her ex-lover she reflects sorrowfully on her unrequited love when, without warning, she interrupts her reverie and shifts from addressing him ('thou') to addressing her own spirit ('Awake!'):

While thou – Awake! Not yet within me die,  
 Under the burden and the agony  
 Of this vain tenderness, – my spirit, wake!  
 Ev'n for thy sorrowful affection's sake,  
 Live! in thy work breathe out! – that he may yet,  
 Feeling sad mastery there, perchance regret

## Thine unrequited gift. (19-25)

Notably, Rossi does not refer to ‘my work’ but to ‘thy work,’ suggesting that as she awakens her spirit, it morphs from subject to object. Through this shift, Hemans raises the question, who or what is the self that can command its own spirit as though the spirit were separate from the self? Whoever it is, it successfully invokes the spirit: ‘It comes, – the power/ Within me born, flows back’ (26-27). In a moment of sublime reciprocity, the self that resurrects the spirit will be resurrected by the spirit: ‘I shall not perish all!’ (32).

When Rossi moves into a description of the emerging sculpture, she shifts from spirit-object to art-object, which creates an uncanny sense that she is giving her spirit concrete identity. Though the marble is inanimate, ‘The bright work grows/ Beneath [her] hand’ (33-34); in effect, the sculpted form seems to incarnate her spirit, giving her an immortal life – not as a relic but as living art. Her fantasy of infusing the objective sculpture with her subjective spirit promises to extinguish the Platonic binary altogether. In an apostrophe to the sculpted form, she declares, ‘Thou art the mould/ Wherein I pour the fervent thoughts, th’ untold,/ The self-consuming!’ and then implores it to be her proxy upon her death (45-46). Her request to the sculpture, ‘Speak to him of me’, is a skewed echo of her earlier wish that ‘Something immortal of [her] heart and mind’ speak to him upon her death (47, 10). Her earlier command is to her spirit, however, while her later command is to the sculpture.<sup>12</sup> Spirit and sculpture collapse into one. Just as Mozart, at the end of Hemans’ poem, perceives himself to be the music and the musician, Rossi allows her creative spirit and her sculpture to merge, which enables her, like Mozart, to escape the subject/object paradigm of identity.

Or at least that is the plan. In what is simultaneously the climax and anticlimax of the poem, the ontological problem regarding her spirit and its relationship to her human self remains unresolved. Rossi says to the sculpture: ‘Now fair thou art,/ Thou form, whose life is of my burning heart!/ Yet all the vision that within me wrought,/ I cannot make thee!’ (62-65). She cannot realize her conception of an idealized self – an immortal artwork that is infused with her spirit – because a third party, her human self, gets in the way. The spirit, she indicates, is at the mercy of the self in which it dwells, and thus cannot surpass that self, even if allowed to inhabit an immortal art form.

Though Hemans does not resolve the ontological dilemma at the heart of the poem, she shifts the debate to another arena. In the closing lines, Rossi declares, ‘I leave my name’ and twice repeats ‘I leave it’ (125-132). Since language, more conspicuously than marble or music, is stymied between medium and idea, Rossi’s name leaves her in the predicament Derrida describes in his musing on the term ‘death’. The phrase *my name*, like the phrase *my death*, has ‘absolute singularity’, even if the actual name is shared by others, and yet *my name*, like *my death*, is unassignable because it *is* assigned. That is to say, a person’s name is an arbitrary signifier rather than a natural signifier (like onomanopoeia), and as such it is independent of the person to whom it is assigned; at the same time, it is the final and permanent (non-arbitrary) referent for that person. Since Rossi’s name is simultaneously arbitrary and non-arbitrary, she leaves her name in both senses of the word: she leaves it behind as a remembrance of herself, and she leaves (relinquishes) it for something else. Though Rossi is stuck in ontological limbo, in her fantasy, her name rather than her art compels speech from the man who betrayed her.

Unexpectedly, the final words of the poem belong neither to Rossi’s mortal self, her spirit, or the sculpture, but to her ex-lover, who she fantasizes will say of her



famous name, '*Twas hers who lov'd me well!*' (132, Hemans' italics). The surprise of hearing the voice, albeit imagined, of her betrayer draws us nearer to the motivation behind Rossi's fantasy. She wishes to infuse the silent sculpture with her spirit, not to achieve a metaphysical or an artistic objective, but because only such a proxy could animate a man who himself became a cold, silent form when he shut down his feelings for her.

The three-part structure of 'Mozart's Requiem' and 'Properzia Rossi' allows Hemans to explore unorthodox metaphysics in a safe way. In both works, the history of the prose statement and the proverbial wisdom of the epigraph give the main poem and its deviations from conventional theology a measure of institutional protection. By standing beside the main poem, the paratexts transfer their legitimacy to the poem and, by extension, to its deviant religious views.

There is an additional advantage to the three-part structure of these works, which also contributes to Hemans' philosophical pursuits: the paratexts allow the main poem to be heard as an extended performative. By constructing her works in separate literary units, Hemans is able to move from narrative time in the prose statement to universal timelessness in the epigraph, and finally to real time in the main poem. The temporal shift from past to present, from retrospection to spontaneity, suggests she can literally invoke the past – raise the dead, in effect – through her poetry. All language, poststructurally speaking, simultaneously marks absence and presence; notwithstanding, Hemans creates the illusion that those functions have been separated in her multi-literary works, the paratexts marking absence and the main poems marking presence.

Hemans' use of paratextual material to create the impression of an unmediated voice in the main poems is pronounced in the epigraphs. Many of Hemans' poems are, in essence, eulogies, and in a quasi-ekphrastic gesture, the epigraphs to those poems calcify as epitaphs.<sup>13</sup> Next to the newly minted poems that follow, the epigraph takes on the character of a second-hand (even deceased) text. Though stately and established, they make Hemans' poems, by contrast, seem spontaneous, unpremeditated, youthful, and current. Both the epigraphs to 'Mozart's Requiem' and 'Properzia Rossi' are fitting *epitaphs* to their ontological subject matter, but epigraphs in Hemans' works that do not venture into the other worldly realm also function as epitaphs. For example, the epigraph to 'Joan of Arc, in Rheims', which Hemans borrows from her own poem 'Woman and Fame', expresses sentiments that at one time were common to read on a tombstone:

*Thou has a charmed cup, O Fame!  
A draught that mantles high,  
And seems to lift this earth-born frame  
Above mortality:  
Away! to me - a woman - bring  
Sweet waters from affection's spring.* (p. 59)

The main poem, which describes Joan's emotional reunion with her father and brothers upon her triumphal return to Rheims, includes no hint of what lies ahead for her. Though there is no mention in the epigraph of the horrific death to which Joan will be subjected, it is impossible to read the epigraph outside of that context. Readers know that fame will put Joan in the bulls-eye of a target and literally lift her 'earth-born frame' onto a stake where she will be burned to death. Unlike the prose statement included in this work or the main poem, the epigraph includes no reference or allusion to Joan. By choosing for the epigraph lines from her own meditation on

womanhood and celebrity, Hemans is able to broaden its scope so that it channels her voice as well as Joan's, a rhetorical practice noted earlier. Her unapologetic empathy for the female subjects of her poetry reaches a high level of hyperbole here. Though Hemans, an immensely popular poet, clearly experienced the downside of fame – the public's love for her seemed only to accentuate the lack of real intimacy in her life – for her to imply there is a lateral link between the legendary French heroine and herself is, at the very least, immodest. Nevertheless, Hemans is able to go public with her feelings in the privacy of the epigraph. The epitaphic character of the epigraphs suggests that in her works Hemans engraves her own tombstone over and over again.

Predictably, one Hemans poem that resists epitaphic status has as its subject the spirit itself. In 'The Spirit's Mysteries' Hemans omits a prose statement, quite likely since there is no empirical history of the spirit to relate. Instead, the entrée to the poem is an epigraph, borrowed from Byron:

*And slight, withal, may be the things which bring  
Back on the heart the weight which it would fling  
Aside for ever; – it may be a sound –  
A tone of music – summer's breath, or spring –  
A flower – a leaf – the ocean – which may wound –  
Striking th' electric chain wherewith we are darkly bound.* (p. 135)

In this excerpt from Canto 4 of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron describes how sense impressions evoke latent feelings.<sup>14</sup> In her poem, Hemans uses Byron's physical explanation as a springboard for a metaphysical explanation, proposing that spirit acts on the senses or through the senses and thereby awakens strong feeling. In a counterintuitive move, she argues that evidence of the existence of spirit is empirical:

The sudden images of vanish'd things,  
That o'er the spirit flash, we know not why;  
Tones from some broken harp's deserted strings,  
Warm sunset hues of summers long gone by,  
A rippling wave – the dashing of an oar –  
A flower scent floating past our parents' door;  
[...]  
Are not these mysteries when to life they start,  
And press vain tears in gushes from the heart? (7-18)

Though Hemans' religious convictions put her in diametrical opposition to Byron, her poem, which acknowledges and pursues ephemeral phenomena, is in that respect an extension of the Byronic epigraph. At the same time, however, it is a corrective to Byron's verse, as seen in the closing admonition:

Let us walk humbly on, but undismay'd!  
  
Humbly – for knowledge strives in vain to feel  
Her way amidst these marvels of the mind;  
Yet undismay'd – for do they not reveal  
Th' immortal being with our dust entwin'd? –  
So let us deem! and e'en the tears they wake  
Shall then be blest, for that high nature's sake. (36-42)

Though Byron, in the epigraph, illumines life's mysteries, one gathers that since 'knowledge strives in vain', he illumines the mysteries *as mysteries*. Hemans, by

contrast, is not content with revering an enigma. By claiming that those unknown marvels 'reveal/ Th' immortal being with our dust entwin'd', she presents the philosophical paradox of immortality mingling with mortality as an epistemological paradox, a known mystery. Moreover, the concluding lines of the poem, quoted above, suggest that the paradox is only a paradox from an empirical standpoint; from the standpoint of revelation, which rests on another kind of reasoning, there is no 'dismay'. The parallel structure between the epigraph and the poem enables Hemans to present revelation as an alternative epistemology, a way of knowing, which parallels the structure of empiricism, with its cause/effect logic, but substitutes spirit for the psyche.

To close, I would like to note one more way paratexts operate in Hemans' works. Auxiliary texts are so plentiful in her poems, they call into question the sufficiency of Hemans' poems. By enhancing the poems, the accompaniments seem ironically to weaken the poems, which appear unable to stand on their own. Oddly enough, that may be part of their purpose. Hemans' private correspondence lets us in on why she may have been inclined to compose works that required paratextual supplements rather than write stand-alone poetry.

In a letter written in 1828 Hemans confesses feelings that are transparent in her poems: 'Unfortunately for me, interchange of thought is an habitual *want* of my mind, and I pine without it, as the Swiss Exile does for his native Air, so that I look with a feeling almost of alarm, to the loneliness (not literal, but *mental* loneliness.) which seems awaiting me' (Kelly, p. 429). In another letter written in the same period Hemans speaks of the downside of aspirations:

I, too, have high views, doubt it not. My very suffering proves it – for how much of this is occasioned by quenchless aspirations after intellectual and moral beauty, never to be found on earth! they seem to sever me from others, and make my lot more lonely than life has made it. Can you think that any fervent and aspiring mind ever passed through this world without suffering from that void which has been the complaint of all? (Kelly, pp. 432-3)

The acute loneliness Hemans felt in her life permeates her poetry, but while in her life she was not able to call to her side companions with whom she could enjoy an 'interchange of thought', in her poetry she had the power to invoke the companionship of other writers or, as in the case of 'Properzia Rossi', other voices of her own creating. Paratexts are so plentiful in Hemans' works, her poems, which often dramatize loneliness, are rarely solitary.

The auxiliary material gives Hemans sympathetic souls with whom to commiserate and in doing so they serve a related purpose. By distributing the voices in her works with the aid of paratexts, Hemans is able to avoid becoming a lone authoritative Romantic voice; in her own words, 'that despicable thing, a woman living upon admiration!' (Kelly, p. 433). Hemans' strident language echoes the accepted view that there was something distasteful, if not unnatural, about women who celebrated their celebrity in the early nineteenth century. As Susan Wolfson notes, 'The woman who lived her fame risked judgment as immodest, improper, degraded' (*Borderlines*, p. 68). Hemans' critique of institutionalized sexism, which Wolfson examines in depth, leaves open the possibility, however, that Hemans' renunciation of women 'living upon admiration' was satirical, a scornful rebuke to her provincial society. There is also a third possible reading: Hemans may have resisted the ideal of the celebrity poet, not because it was unbecoming to a proper English woman, but on the grounds that it did not resonate with her sensibilities. Even when

she authors the paratexts, she creates multi-vocal, multi-genre compositions, which counter the uni-verse of the writers of early nineteenth-century England whose poetry magnifies and romanticizes the stand-alone ego.

The ability to bring people together is often regarded as more feminine than feminist. Hemans' practice of drawing writers together in the same poem is so abundant, however, her collective works stand up and refuse the ideology of masculinist poetry, which accentuates the lone author and the author-worship such poetry inspires. Like many of her male and female contemporaries who include paratexts in their poetry, Hemans uses supplemental texts in part to strengthen the scholarly and artistic authority of her poems. But her inclusion of additional texts also counters the strong current in the poetry of her contemporaries toward self-sufficient individualism.

When Rossi declares in Hemans' poem, 'I have been/ Too much alone' and 'my brief aspirings [...] / Are ever but as some wild fitful song,/ Rising triumphantly, to die ere long/ In dirge-like echoes' (68-69, 75-78), one hears the plaintive voice of Hemans in a moment of profound self-doubt. And yet, by companioning her 'wild fitful song[s]' with paratexts, Hemans creates poems of consequence. As readers cross from the prose statement to the epigraph, and from the epigraph to the main poem, the visible gaps between the texts close and the distinct voices of the separate literary units, which in Hemans' mind are always 'Too much alone', give way to communitarian discourse. Since Hemans' name, like all names, invokes while refusing to invoke, only by surrendering her famous name and the illusion it fosters of being a lone poet, can Hemans ensure her perpetuity.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 22. Subsequent references to this work will be given in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Kelly, ed., *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose, and Letters* (Lexington, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), p. 30. Subsequent references to this work will be given in parentheses.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Hartman, 'Doing Things with Poems: Performativity and Cultural Form', *Victorian Poetry*, 41 (2003), p. 488. Subsequent references to this work will be given in parentheses.

<sup>4</sup> In a comprehensive analysis of Hemans's encounter with nineteenth century assumptions regarding women's writing, Susan Wolfson locates crosscurrents in Hemans's poetry about women, arguing that 'Hemans's poetry of "Woman" traces its "feminine" ideal on a fabric of dark contradictions'. Wolfson goes on to say that Hemans has 'an oppositional sensibility, and a willingness to expose it' (Susan J. Wolfson, *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* [Stanford: Stanford University Press], p. 47). Subsequent references to this work will be given in parentheses.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1971), p. 154.

<sup>6</sup> Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Stillinger, ed., *William Wordsworth: Selected Poems and Prefaces* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), p. 460.

<sup>8</sup> Jason R. Rudy, 'Hemans' Passion', *Studies in Romanticism*, 45 (2006), 543-562 (pp. 550-551). Subsequent references to this work will be given in parentheses.

<sup>9</sup> All quotations from Hemans's poems are from *Records of Woman With Other Poems*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Susan J. Wolfson, ed., *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 518.

<sup>11</sup> Emma Mason, *Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century* (Tavistock, Devon: Northcote House Publishers, Ltd., 2006), p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis of 'Properzia Rossi' within the context of Romantic ekphrastic poetry, see Grant F. Scott, 'The Fragile Image: Felicia Hemans and Romantic Ekphrasis' in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining*

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*Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 36-54.

<sup>13</sup> Michael T. Williamson discusses Hemans as a 'self-conscious elegist' in his article 'Impure Affections: Felicia Hemans's Elegaic Poetry and Contaminated Grief' in Sweet and Melnyk, pp. 19-35.

<sup>14</sup> The lines from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* are not quoted verbatim by Hemans, who writes 'summer's breath' instead of 'summer's eve' and 'a leaf' instead of 'the wind'.

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