The Construction of Lyric Subjectivity in Shelley's "Ozymandias"
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The view of life presented by the most refined deductions of the intellectual philosophy, is that of unity. Nothing exists but as it is perceived. The difference is merely nominal between those two classes of thoughts, which are vulgarly distinguished by the names of ideas and external objects. Pursuing the same thread of reasoning, the existence of distinct individual minds, similar to that which is employed in now questioning its own nature, is likewise found to be a delusion. The words I, you, they, are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblage of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind.

Let it not be supposed that this doctrine conducts to the monstrous presumption that I, the person who now write and think, am that one mind. I am but a portion of it. The words I and you, and they are grammatical devices invented simply for arrangement, and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them. It is difficult to find terms adequate to express so subtle a concept as that to which the Intellectual Philosophy has conducted us. We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of how little we know.¹

This passage, taken from Shelley’s “On Life,” takes us along a surprising itinerary—a line of reasoning begins with unity as a refined product of “intellectual philosophy,” but finds itself eventually at the brink of “the dark abyss of how little we know.” From a starting position of unity, we follow the trajectory projected by this “Intellectual Philosophy” and conclude at the sameness of “I, you, they” as merely different modifica-

tions of one mind. Surprisingly, this revelation—this lifting of the veil of delusion—leads not to lucidity but dizziness, not to knowledge but rather the impossibility of knowledge. The question is: why and how is it, that following Shelley’s reasoning moves us from a position of unity to a state in which we experience so terrible a linguistic and cognitive threat that “words abandon us” and “we grow dizzy”? What is the logic governing this vector that begins in unity but ends in silence and darkness?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to interrogate the nature of unity as it is employed by Shelley. It might be premature to assume that when two entities are brought into a relation such that “difference is merely nominal,” they stand together in a simple sameness. It is possible to posit a simultaneous co-existence that multiplies rather than reduces complexities and meanings. Heidegger makes the following observation on sameness and difference in one of his Hölderlin essays:

The same never coincides with the equal, not even in the empty indifference of what is merely identical. The equal or identical always moves towards the absence of difference, so that everything may be reduced to a common denominator. The same, by contrast, is the belonging together of what differs, through a gathering by way of difference. We can only say “the same” if we think difference.  

The premise of this logic is that a gathering of two entities can present them in co-existence without erasing difference. The “merely nominal” difference, in Shelley’s formulation of unity, remains a difference; it holds in proximity but also separates at the most basic level, resulting in an oscillation that defies simplification. Unity, as an attempt to sustain this oscillation such that two opposing poles can be apprehended simultaneously, is thus a fragile state of affairs, one whose tenability is flanked by dispersion on one side and collapse on the other. The dizziness that accompanies the bringing together of “I, you, they” is therefore not a felicitous moment of transcendent ekstasis, but rather one of epistemological astonishment. The shift from the singular person to the collective third person pronoun “we” in the passage therefore coincides with the dissolution of the line of inquiry and its collapse in the face of the limits of knowledge. If we think of unity not as simple equivalence or identity, but rather as something akin to this uncanny Heidegerrian sameness, then we move one step closer to Shelley’s abyss.

In Shelley’s passage, the peculiar oscillating unity that separates while it

brings together holds in proximity not just the pronominal markers of various subject positions (I, you, and they); it is also the relation which binds the writing, thinking “I” to the enunciated I, the grammatical device that marks an articulated subjectivity. The second paragraph of the passage enacts a shift from mention to actual use of the pronoun “I.” This placemaker and its implicit subject position, however, makes its first appearance only to be problematized a mere two sentences later—if pronouns are indeed “devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them,” and are simply grammatical markers, then the position of the one who thinks and writes becomes compromised, and its ability to manifest or even articulate itself with any authoritative immanence through its pronoun becomes suspect. The text itself therefore cannot be grounded in the authorial presence and its availability as a subject position within textuality.

Rather than marking singular, discrete subject positions, the pronouns in Shelley’s passage, including the “I,” all seem to point to the “one mind” with its different modifications, of which the writing subject is but a part. We are reminded, however, in an appositive clause, that the “I” is the person who “now” writes and thinks. This moment in the passage is significant—just prior to the final containment of the individual subject position within a purely spatial configuration of markers that all point to the undifferentiated one mind, a time adverbial is inscribed, pointing to a “now,” a moment of writing that is generated by and generative of writing. The one mind, with its inseparable modifications, goes on to rarefy itself beyond the limits of knowledge and language, but this “I”—“the person who now write[s] and think[s]”—remains standing at the edge of an abyss, suspended between the impossibility of immanence within textuality and the prospect of absorption into non-differentiation and silence. The moment of writing is inscribed within language itself, and present time thus becomes another indexical rather than an axis of temporality. This moment in Shelley’s passage brings to mind Benveniste’s much later writings on the pronoun:

What then is the reality to which I or you refers? It is solely “a reality of discourse,” and this is a very strange thing. I cannot be defined except in terms of “locution,” not in terms of objects as a nominal sign is. I signifies “the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing I.” This instance is unique by definition and has validity only in its uniqueness. If I perceive two successive instances of discourse containing I, uttered in the same voice, nothing guarantees to me that one of them is not a reported discourse, a
quotation in which I could be imputed to another. It is thus necessary to stress this point: I can only be identified by the instance of discourse that contains it and by that alone.3

The time adverbial in Shelley’s passage thus introduces a third position to be inhabited by the subject, one whose referentiality is confined to the “instance of discourse” which contains it. It is ironically this fleeting moment that allows the “I” to split off from the self-consuming spatial dialectics of the passage and persist as residual voice.

The overall tone of Shelley’s passage remains, nonetheless, one of failure. We are presented the narrative of one who pursues, approaches, and seems to arrive at a visual apprehension of unity, but at that point, finds himself at the limits of knowledge and language. He has to come to an abrupt stop from which he can only contemplate impossibility and failure. It is this failure that will form the backdrop to our reading of “Ozymandias”—another allegory of linguistic and epistemological limits. The objective of the reading will be to show how Ozymandias’ failure—too often read in a limited sense, as confined only to one narrative register and contained within a didactic framework—actually manifests itself as a rhetorical pole from the very first word of the poem, and situates itself as constitutive rather than symptomatic of the poetic moment. We will return, also, to consider the relation of this possibility of failure to the possibility of knowledge itself, both in the prose fragment and in “Ozymandias.”

1

Shelley’s sonnet is one whose poetic structure often remains unread, or unexplored. The ease with which “Ozymandias” yields its profound moral lessons seems to preclude the possibility that the poem’s actual rhetoric, as opposed to its narrative content, requires reading. In fact, the poem itself seems to install an initial hermeneutic momentum that hurls the reader through a series of rhetorical maneuvers within the space of a few lines:

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert...”4

These lines impart an imperative direction and velocity of reading that takes the text from speaker position to actual narrative, twice over. We move from the “I” to its speech, and then from the traveller to his account. This

doubled gesture points to an inner space of signification that is arrived at after one rushes past the actual non-signifying frame of the narrative. This installs the categories of margin and center that chart a fairly uncomplicated course for reading the rest of the poem. Yet, the aim of our reading will be to resist this hermeneutic momentum, thus putting the semiotic model it seductively offers in suspension and exploring the possibility of signification prior to the self-effacement of the speaker position.

The very first word of the poem—"I"—is itself the mark of passage from an enunciatory position to an actual enunciation. This originary lyric moment stands as the moment of poiesis, an apparition of voice that straddles potentiality and actuality, silence and speech. The written "I" acts as a pointer to "that I, the person who . . . write[s] and think[s]," and thus enables the text itself to act as a map to reading its own relation to the extra-textual. As we have seen, the written "I" and the writing "I" are not identical, but rather held together in a complex relation of unity, separated by a distance that can be pointed across. From the point at which the "I" becomes inscribed, it locates itself in a spatial configuration that now limits and defines it, namely the space of writing, or poetic space. This spatial framework constructs and installs the "I"—the position inscribed as the poetic subject. We shall call this the "lyric I." In reading it, we read not simply how it behaves and the configurations which it installs, but also how it came to be, and the configurations which brought it about. An "I" in discourse has a double function: it is at once a referential pointer to the speaking subject, proper to the paradigmatic rules that provide for language, and also the marker of a grammatical position, existing only within a particular syntagma. This is the doubleness noted by Benveniste in "The Nature of Pronouns":

It is as a phenomenon of language that we pose the problem [of pronouns] here, in order to show that pronouns do not constitute a unitary class but are of different types depending on the mode of language of which they are the signs. Some belong to the syntax of a language, others are characteristics of what we shall call "instances of discourse," that is, the discrete and always unique acts by which the language is actualized in speech by a speaker. (217)

The passage is strikingly similar to Shelley’s. What we shall add to Benveniste’s description is the observation that, in all modes of discourse, both these functions of pronouns exert their presence as possibilities, paradigmatic poles of linguistics. These two poles, as described by Benveniste, exist only as limits—one stands as the perfectly horizontal axis of syntax as pure combination, and the other the idealized moment of enunciation as actualization, tying speech to speaker. Each instance of a pronoun in
language actually participates in both these modes, and is conditioned by both axes of possibility simultaneously.

Lyric subjectivity is thus constituted and held through strategic moments of gravitation towards and movement away from these two possible "I"s. In a poem such as "Ozymandias," the lyric "I" as originary speaker position subtends, generates and participates in the "grammatical arrangement" that Shelley describes. The integrity of its position is dependent on its ability to hold itself apart from the other subject positions, evacuating and reinforcing a space for itself, and also on the critical distance between speaker position and written pronoun, which would enable the latter to persist as voice. Failure on these counts would mean dissolution, a return to silence and anonymity. In "On Life," this disembodied position is compared to childhood:

We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt, from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass. There are some persons who, in this respect, are always children. Those who are subject to the state called reverie, feel as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction. (195)

In this state of reverie, one apprehends Life through an osmosis of the universe and its sensation into one's consciousness. The terrible danger inherent in this state, however, is the breakdown of the imperviousness and thus the boundaries of subjectivity. The subject which is equal to that which it feels and sees would be unable to re-present these sensations and would remain condemned to silence. The lyric "I" can therefore be read as a counter to this threat, a product of pure distinction and articulation. Shelley describes the sort of differentiation which the lyric "I" has to perform: to preserve its voice—it has to hold itself apart from all that it sees and feels. In other words, it has to hold itself apart from its perceptions, constructing a receptive surface for itself, dividing inner and outer. In short, it installs itself as subject. In doing so, it differentiates itself from other subjects—the you and the they. The process of differentiation which it enacts in order to do so is more akin to espacement than the tracing of actual margins or borders of ontological difference. The lyric "I" is involved in an intricate economy of space—a space inhabited by other pronouns and subjects, and organized by moments of coming together, falling apart, containment and punctuation.

In "Ozymandias," the hermeneutic imperative mentioned earlier seems to imply that the issues which surround the moment of the apparition of the lyric "I" are to be read past rather than read. This seductive elision invites us to consider this apparition as a non-event, one which does not
signify, and read inwards into a concentric structure of frames that surround a central event. The event which the rhetoric of the text points to is, of course, the pivotal encounter between the traveller and the fallen statue of Ozymandias. This event is strategically situated not just as the center of the narrative structure, but also as origin in terms of temporality, for it is the traveller’s encounter that engenders his repeated account to the lyric “I” and thus the poem itself as lyric address. Having chosen to suspend this momentum of reading, however, we open the possibility of an alternative chronology of reading—one that follows the textual rather than the extra-textual axis of temporality. This would allow us to reveal the traveller’s encounter as a simulacrum, removed by a structure of iteration and framing from the original locus of textual anxieties and thus acting as its displaced double.

2

In his essay “Approaching the Lyric,” Northrop Frye describes the lyric as being generated by an occasion, something that “blocks normal activity.” The writing of a lyric would therefore be a means of overcoming a block that one encounters in “normal” life, a displaced activity akin to contemplation or meditation. At some point, the lyric itself “ceases to be opaque and becomes transparent” (Frye 33), thus enabling writing to end and “ordinary continuous experience in space and time” (Frye 31) to resume. The occasions described by Frye appear as the cause of the lyric project, the origin of the writing, which is never implicated in the writing itself and whose passing away is the object of all writing. One can discern events within the poetic text, however, that are characterized by a different structure. Because they occur specifically within the space of writing, and are primarily linguistic, such textual events do not get written away by the poetic project. Instead, they organize the trajectory of the lyric, by bringing together two or more entities within the lyric space and presenting their interaction, in terms of transferences, disruptions and containments.

By this definition, there are three textual events in “Ozymandias” which organize the lyric space around themselves and which demand reading: the first is the encounter between the “I” and the unnamed addressee of the poem, to whom is repeated the traveller’s account; the second is the encounter between the “I” and the traveller, who recounts his encounter with the statue in the desert; and the third is the encounter between the traveller and Ozymandias’ statue, and the address enacted by the latter’s inscription. These events are chained along consecutively in the poetic

space in a direction opposite to the imputed historical sequence of events, but even more significant than this tension between poetic temporality and experiential one is the fact that they all partake in the same genus of address, and are all subtended by a common ground—the fact that once spoken, a fragment of language can be reported, repeated and re-presented without implicating its original speaker.

The poem begins with the lyric “I” presenting a reported account to its unnamed addressee. A distinction is immediately installed between two modes of language, one that allows the reproduction of an utterance without installing the complete set of extra-linguistic conditions which determine its truth conditions. A statement that contains a reported utterance would be evaluated solely on the truth conditions of the predication of the act of saying on the speaking subject, and not on any predications made in the reported utterance. This margin of difference holds apart the I’s utterance and the traveller’s. In this rhetorical space, the traveller’s words are simply the topic of a conversation in Shelley’s poem. The following lines from another of Heidegger’s essays make a simple, but intriguing statement about conversations: “But now what is meant by ‘a conversation?’ Plainly, the act of speaking with others about something.” The conversation thus sets up two things: the someone and the something, or the You and the It. At its most basic register, the someone of “Ozymandias” is a “You” that is not given a name, but which exists nonetheless as the addressee position of the lyric, and the traveller is the “It,” the something that is spoken about. It is into this articulated structure, already provided by the rhetorical rules of language, and thus in relation to these two positions, that the lyric “I” makes its entrance.

Martin Buber describes in his work, I and Thou, two modes of experience and thinking: the I-You relation and the I-It relation. He calls these “primary words” (Grundworte). These are not simply two ways of relating to others; the subjects that are constituted by the two different relations are not at all one and the same. This coincides with the view expressed in Shelley’s “On Life”; in both cases, pronouns like “you” or “they” are not treated as objects, which would imply a stable thematizing subject position, but rather as relations which play a constitutive role in the formation of

the “I” position. The I-It, when it is spoken, installs an “I” which stands in relation to things. It describes, in this manner, the process of thematization and containment. The I-You primary word, on the other hand, puts the “I” in relation to another subject. This is the relation which subtends the trope of apostrophe. The “It” is a thing, and is contained and bound by other things, but the “You” is boundless. The “I” of the I-It relation installs itself securely as the active subject, and through the process of thematization, or making a “something,” it contains and holds stable that which it faces. The “I” of the I-You relation, however, is in a more precarious position. The “You” is not a thing, and has no ontology prior to the address; in order to engage it, the “I” has to create it, by installing a position which is capable of speech and hearing. We refer to this trope as prosopopoeia, a word that names the performance aptly: prosopon—face, and poiein to make or create, from which we get the word “poetry” itself. This maneuver is a gesture of primary creation, putting a face—eyes, ears, mouth—where there was none, evacuating a space for and thus summoning another subject, an Other. The contemporaneous apparition of speaker and addressee position as enacted by Buber’s I-You primary word, in line with Shelley’s description of both as mere devices for arrangement, situate prosopopoeia as that trope that provides for both these positions.

As a philosopher concerned primarily with theology, Buber is concerned with an ontological system that connects questions of Being with direct experiential phenomena. The structure of his theory, however, gives rise to a useful line of analysis when applied to the “I,” “You,” and “It” of writing. It enacts a shift or a transference of power from the “I” to the actual enunciation, and locates agency not in the speaker of the address, but in the actual articulation that installs these relations. This displaces the conventional attribution of consciousness and will to the “I” as subject position. It is this shift which is most useful to us as a tool of rhetorical analysis. In Buber’s terms then, the “I” of our poem makes its entrance as the lyrical speaker by initiating an account, a story, to its addressee. In this account, the lyric “I” tells the story of a traveller, re-presenting the latter’s speech, and thus installing an “It.” This is only, of course, the very first locutionary level of the poem. We pass quickly from this to two more nested structures. In the first, the traveller stands in the speaker position to the lyric “I,” and the topic of conversation is the former’s encounter with Ozymandias. The second, which forms the central event of the poem, is the re-presentation of Ozymandias’ words as inscribed on his statue:

And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty and despair!
In this last address, Ozymandias stands in the position of speaker, and points his addressee’s attention at his work, which forms the theme of the address.

The earlier description of the poem as a series of concentric frames installs a hermeneutic logic that treats the poem as akin to a palimpsest, with each layer being successively erased in order to yield the meaning of the next. This model of reading precludes not just the possibility of there being signification at any layer but the final, but also the possibility that any meaning is contained between layers, in the internal relation between them. The alternative poetic structure that has now emerged—one in which the lyric space is organized around three rhetorical movements, or textual events—enables us to describe each movement in terms of the relation between speaker position, addressee and theme, and also see how these moments of address are installed as discrete tokens of a common type. This is the key to describing how the lyric “I” manages to hold itself at a distance from Ozymandias as speaker, and explicating the relationship between the success of the former’s address and the failure of the latter’s.

Ozymandias’ address is an example of an inscription as material marker of a voice that belongs to an absent or dead speaker—in other words, an epitaph. This is Frye’s account of the genre:

In another lyrical genre the block relates to the reader rather than the poet: this is what we find in the epitaph convention that we have had from the Greek times on. Here the reader is assumed to be a traveler, pursuing his normal course through time and space, who is suddenly confronted with something he should stop and read. What he reads is the verbal essence of a life which has once had its context in time and space but is now enclosed in a framework of words. He is often told, at the end, that he has been looking in a mirror: his own context is still in ordinary space and time, but it will eventually disappear, and the verbal essence of his life may make an equally short poem. (32–33)

This address participates in a genre that involves the seeking and the arresting of an addressee by a voice from a dead or absent speaker. The object of this search is the passing traveller, whose attention is caught by the inscription long enough for him to become the “You” of the apostrophe inscribed there. Ozymandias’ epitaph has managed to find an addressee, but what remains missing is the “something” about which the conversation has to be about. The irony of Ozymandias’ words lies partly in the fact that its perlocution fails even though it is syntactically well-formed and semantically meaningful. The words themselves conform to the rules of rhetoric and grammar, but the deictic quality of its indexicals necessitates the presence of the referent, the very “context in space and time” which
surrounded them at one point, but which have irrecoverably fallen away from the actual inscription. The “Works” to which Ozymandias’ statue gestures have passed away, and all that remains is the “lone and level sands.” The sign that subtends his utterance is thus nothing more than a lacuna left in the wake of this departure. The illocutionary force of the address, as it manifests itself as imperative structure, thus belies itself, and condemns the perlocution to failure.

The persistence of Ozymandias’ utterance as material trace, long after the material circumstances of its production have ceased to exist, becomes a source of irony, and its failure to convey an illocutionary force commensurate with its form becomes a sign of the speaker’s hubris. Yet, it is this very same ability of language to be separated from its material context that forms the pre-conditions for the lyric “I”s voice, and thus the entire poem. “Ozymandias” as a lyric is a written text that persists beyond the unique event of its inscription and address. The structure of language allows for the potentially infinite iterability of its linguistic signs without the presence of their objective correlates, opening it to removal from its context in space and time, and by this very move allowing it to extend its life-span beyond the singular moment of its production. In “Ozymandias,” this property simultaneously determines the success of one address and the failure of another. The lyric “I” therefore stands in a necessarily ambiguous relation to Ozymandias, one that oscillates between sameness and difference. Its proximity to Ozymandias’ address is inescapable, for the structures of both are provided for by a common property of language; yet, difference has to be held if its own utterance aspires to a life-span longer than that of the king. The set of rules that provide for the possibility of citation is, by its very nature, inseparable from the possibility of its failure. The susceptibility of language to repetition is, in the words of Derrida, “a failure or trap into which language may fall or lose itself as in an abyss situated outside of or in front of itself” (17).

On the thematic level, the nested structure of the lyric ensures that this failure remains firmly installed from the start as an “It” and thus contained, to a certain extent. The scene of Ozymandias’ linguistic failure is tied to the direct reference to materiality that it attempts to install. The utterances of the lyric “I” and that of the traveller are consequently situated further from the infelicitous reference that ties Ozymandias’ fate to the integrity of material correlates. The traveller’s story gestures only to a vague geography, describes only dismembered body parts rendered in stone, and takes as its central theme a failed address. The lyric “I”s tale is one even farther removed from the circumstances of its own production—the phrase “antique land” removes it from both present time and present place, and the
choice of a traveller as thematized speaker gestures at a plurality of locales that further destabilizes geographical reference. There is thus a thematic hierarchy at work here: Ozymandias’ address is the most directly connected in its reference to materiality, while the lyric “I”s is the least, with the traveller’s somewhere in between. At the opposite pole from Ozymandias’ inscription as grandiose but vain gesture, we thus have the poem itself as a system of dedicated reference. Its theme is itself linguistic in nature, and this reflexivity allows it to represent the conditions for its own production within the poetic space, mirrored in the two narratives that it encloses. The successful apostrophe, in “Ozymandias’” terms, is therefore one that turns away from the material circumstances of its own production, pointing the lyric “I” towards an addressee and installing a dialogic structure that forms the ground of the utterance.9

Our reading has thus far addressed the problem of belief in reading the poem, in that it answers, in non-psychologized terms, why we believe the words of the “I” will persist and escape the fate of Ozymandias’ hollow boast. There remains an interesting moment in the poem that is not accounted for by this reading, however—one that is not contained by the opposition of success to failure, felicity to infelicity. The story of Ozymandias’ failure is not simply a tale of mockery, but one of actual physical destruction. According to the terms of the narrative, the monument is both a marker left in the wake of a passing away, and also an embodiment of the subject. This petrified corpse, as it were, is not merely rendered a speaker in vain by the poem, but is literally dismembered:

Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,

The mutilated state of this body is not incidental to the poem. The key to this relationship between the dissembling and the dis-assembling of this work of art lies in the material surface of the stone itself, and what and how it attempts to signify.

We have noted the ways in which the “I-It” relationship makes of its object a thing, and enacts a containment through thematization which

9. It would thus be akin to the successful performative, which does not have its referent, in Derrida’s words, “outside of itself, or in any event, before and in front of itself” (13), but rather, completely coincident with its actual enunciation. The poem’s terms thus invite us to interrogate the identity of the address of a lyric in terms of its apparition as a rhetorical, rather than psychological subject position.
enables apprehension in entirety. We have also seen that the “I-You” relationship of apostrophe contains a risk, a confrontation with the mechanics of transference of voice. This danger is ultimately necessary, however, and can be carefully negotiated. The one primary word, though, which we encountered in “On Life” and hinted at briefly in our reading of Buber, but which we have yet to consider in “Ozymandias,” involves prosopopoeia of the original sort. It conditions the move from the space of the paradigmatic which is inhabited by the “I” that is still the mere potentiality of a word, to the “I” which is inscribed as an actual mark, open to syntagmatic combinations. It is the primary word which forms the condition for the possibility of writing itself, namely the I-“I” relation. The sameness that we posited between these two entities at the beginning now returns to be read.

The “I” which begins the poem stands at the precarious edge of an abyss. It is itself a pronoun, participating in the poetic space and its differences. At the same time, however, it points the way to the poet who thinks and writes, whose presence is excluded from the poem itself. Shelley claims a position for the “I” who thinks and writes that makes this absence necessary, namely its participation in the one mind which is conscious of no distinction. The lack of differentiation that guarantees a vivid apprehension of life, thus also guarantees the absence of this subject from the inscription which it produces to represent this apprehension. The written “I” has to be made to speak for this absence, and the trope which allows the absent or the dead to speak is, of course, prosopopoeia. The poetic effect of the lyric is to hold the written “I” and the writing “I” in a relation of sameness, such that the former can stand in a relation of true appearance, in the Heideggerian sense, to the latter, and herald its presence. This gesture is thus the primary marker of the poetic, for it has to be performed before any of the other structures—the I-You and the I-It relations—can be put into place. The trope of apostrophe seen in this light emerges as an iteration of this original move of giving voice to the written “I” by making it point to the writing “I.”

As a gesture of turning away, apostrophe enables not just the move from the “real” to the poetic world, as in Frye’s account of the lyric, but also the lyric “I”’s turning from its contemplation of its relation to the writing “I,” to a spatial confrontation with the lyric “You.” As our reading has shown, this is the moment of poetry, in the sense of making or creation, for it is from this moment that the “I” achieves voice, and is able to articulate itself. The lyric “I” in Shelley’s poem is an example of a written mark which manages to navigate the border of materiality and consciousness, without tumbling into the abyss on either side. It manages to maintain its function both as placeholder in the spatial configuration of the lyric, in
terms of its relation to its addressees and objects, and also as the herald of the “I” that cannot show itself. Most importantly, it holds these two configurations apart even while it participates in both of them. The lyric “I” thus acts as a border between them, a margin that generates the possibility of writing. Ozymandias’ monument, however, performs a move which is something other than this setting-in-sameness; it brings together on one surface and in one form the consciousness of the “I” and its appearance, its material trace. The bodily interiority that represents the integral immanence of the subject is projected onto the same surface as, and made coincident with its exteriority, the manifestation which it presents as the border that holds it apart from other subjects. Ozymandias’ statue thus usurps and contains the “I” that sees and feels, and literally makes of it a thing. The two modes of existence which the “I” inhabits are collapsed onto this one surface of the statue, and the consequences of this proximity are petrification, mockery, and physical destruction. This is the inverse death scenario of the earlier “I” which remains in the state of reverie, and in union with the “one mind.” Such an “I” would be in complete one-ness with the universe, but remain without body, voice or any other material pointer. In the case of Ozymandias, the death involves a complete reification of this “I” in its material marker, the consequence of which is the fragmentation of this petrified corpse marker, and the persistence of only its voice—its most material aspect.

In the poem, this opposition of interiority and exteriority is represented by “the hand that mocked” and “the heart that fed” the stone features of the king that lay strewn about in the sand. The poem claims that the stone features managed to capture perfectly both the apprehension of Ozymandias’ exterior features by the artist, as well as the way these features reflect the interiority of Ozymandias. A direct line is thus drawn between interior subjectivity, external features and appearance to others, and then immediately collapsed and set in stone. This collapse can also be traced in the rhetorical register. The relationship between exterior features and interior subjectivity is presented as one of feeding; the “wrinkled lip” and “sneer of cold command” on Ozymandias’ visage are said to be “fed” by a source, determined by a relationship of nurturing that enables the origin to make its presence manifest in its dependents. This source is figured as the “heart,” which represents the original totality of the subject that is made manifest in its external features. We thus have a juxtaposition of a physiological system and a metaphysical one, with the former being substituted and made to represent the latter in the text, based on the similarity of the two hierarchies. On the other side of the divide, we have the primary instrument of representation (“the hand that mocked them”) standing in
for the entire body of the perceiver, a subject position that stands in proximity to the body of Ozymandias, and that is able to perceive and represent its features with the utmost fidelity. The hand is thus the substitute for an entire chain of relations that is grounded on contiguity. In rhetorical terms, therefore, the stone surface of Ozymandias is positioned as the intersection of the metaphoric axis of similarity and the metonymic one of contiguity, or rather the nexus into which they are both collapsed.

This moment of collapse is actually a rhetorical double of Ozymandias’ inscription, which attempts to enact the same condensation of terms. The inscription names the erect statue, attempting to hold stable a vertical structure of identity, while simultaneously pointing to the “Works” that surround the scene of inscription along the axis of contiguity, arranged together with the statue in a horizontal chain and organized by the principle of proximity. The vertical structure eventually crumbles, proven untenable by the uncontrollable proliferation of the horizontal. The essentially spatial logic of this fall is given by the poem itself, in its opposition of stone statue to lone and level sand—both are similar in their material constitution; their difference lies solely, to recall Shelley’s terms, in “arrangement.” The failure of Ozymandias’ inscription to contain and hold stable the circumstances of its production—its context—is paralleled by the erosion of the statue’s vertical profile and its gradual reduction to the level plane of the sands from which it arose.

The illocutionary failure of Ozymandias’ inscription and the physical destruction of his statue are doubles of each other, both iterations of the same type. More significantly, the textual anxieties that they both play out are the same as those surrounding the poetic text itself as an utterance produced by the lyric “I.” The issue of the persistence of voice beyond the moment and circumstances of its production is displaced away from the original moment of giving voice onto another site, and performed in spatial and rhetorical terms. The lyric “I” stands, as does Ozymandias’ statue, at the intersection between the vertical axis of metaphor as substitution and the horizontal axis of metonymy as combination. It participates in relations of sameness with both the “I” who speaks and writes, and the “I” which stands in the configuration of subjects and relations that make up the textual space of the poem. An originary moment is required to unite these disparate elements, thus permitting the poem to be voiced, but this unifying moment does not recede as a hypostatized origin. The poetry generated by this moment remains grounded in the conditions that allowed for its
production; each subsequent moment of giving voice doubles back on the first.

The failure of Ozymandias as speaker and his inscription as imperative thus stand as modifications of the lyric “I”s apparition and its articulation. The opposition between success and failure, felicity and infelicity, should not be read as stabilized difference, but as a dynamic oscillation that allows the poetic text to make its oblique approach towards the central theme—the giving of voice itself, or prosopopoeia. The co-presence of prosopopoeia as success and as failure within the poem allows the lyric “I” to stand in contemplation of the moment in which it is itself given voice, without losing, in the process, full participation in its enunciation. Its situation is flanked on one side by rarefaction and absorption into an undifferentiated silence, and on the other by complete separation from its ground and subsequent petrification. The “I” of “Ozymandias” thus suspends itself in this delicate position, within a text that is at once praxis and theory, poetry and poetics.

The oblique trajectory of Shelley’s poetry permits a rereading of the search for knowledge in “On Life.” The final position of knowledge in the prose passage with which we began is not a point reached by a linear movement, but rather the product of oscillation and difference. Against the uni-directional narrative of pursuit that is constructed on the thematic register, we have the rhetorical movement that shows the first person pronoun constantly crossing boundaries from use to mention, from the position of speaker to theme and doubling back again. When the thematic linearity ends at an impasse, we realize that the space that it can only point towards as a “beyond” has already been arrived at and departed from linguistically. The abyss is the actual horizon of voice, a position that generates rather than defeats knowledge and poetry. To apprehend this limit is therefore not to arrive at an ending but at a beginning; it is from this position that the “I” attains its proper position within writing.

These two registers of rhetoric and theme, form and content are at work in a similar fashion in “Ozymandias.” While the story is one of linguistic failure, the poetic text itself presents itself as a necessarily felicitous speech-act. As our reading has shown, however, the poles of success and failure are both semantically significant to the poem. The authorial veracity of the lyric “I” holds itself apart but yet remains grounded in the linguistic failure of Ozymandias as a speaking subject. A complete reading of the poem therefore cannot afford to ignore or preempt the question of how structure and content are textually interconnected, for it is in this very difference between the two registers that the poem yields its meaning. “Ozymandias”
may seem a strange lyric, for its speaker professes no grand emotions and performs no high affective drama; yet, it addresses the very essence of lyricism in its bold, albeit oblique, approach to the space in which the writing subject is constituted, where poetry itself becomes a possibility.

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