Chapter 7 considers the distinctive poetics of exile in a conversation between English poets (living and dead) and the unfamiliar, but gradually internalized music of their Italian surroundings. Reading English texts aloud, the Shelleys were able to immerse themselves in the sound of a language that no longer surrounded them with the air they breathed, creating a literary community to replace the intellectual circles that they had forfeited when they left England. This chapter draws on the psychology of Dan McAdams to suggest ways in which literature is necessarily woven with individual life narratives. McAdams’s theory is brought to bear on analysis of the way that Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning read Byron and Shelley through each other’s eyes during their courtship correspondence—a literary relationship that lasts to the end of their lives.

Keywords: sound, association, poetics, psychology music, conversation, Byron, Shelley, Barrett, Browning
Dante’s configuration of exile as the flight of an arrow, the flavour of bread, and the gradient of stairs draws our attention to the body, especially the senses of touch and taste. Travel literature tends to be dominated by the visual, but the literature of exile—as with Philoctetes—attends to auditory nerves. In Jacopo’s long discussion with Marina about the sorrows of exile in Act III of The Two Foscari, Byron refers to the melody that can recreate a place so acutely ‘out of tones and tunes’ (III.1.177) that those who hear it away from home can die of grief. A laconic footnote points the reader to ‘the Swiss air and its effects’.\(^1\) It is in vain for strangers to try to account for the effect of the air, Rousseau had warned when he wrote about it in the Dictionnaire de Musique, because that can only come from ‘habit, recollections, and a thousand circumstances retraced’.\(^2\) In this final chapter, I want to examine some of the effects of recapturing home through sound, and what happens to the national air we recognize in another context.

Reading English texts aloud in the evenings, the Shelleys were able to immerse themselves in the sound of a language that no longer surrounded them with the air they breathed, creating a literary community to replace the intellectual circles that they had forfeited when they left England. In exile, the sound of English as an ‘unheard melody’ becomes mixed with the new sounds of life abroad. Chapter 3 considered some of the ways in which the music of Italian church services had a disquieting, and sometimes liberating, effect on the auditory imagination of English exiles. Examination of Boccaccio’s legacy in Chapter 4 has shown how the Italian poetic tradition was envisaged as a musical softening and relaxation of English structures. The Italian language itself was also received as a form of music, and Landor eagerly anticipated Robert Browning’s move to warmer climes ‘where/The Siren waits thee, singing song for song’ (ll. 13–14). Timothy Webb has recently explored the ‘sweet syllables’ of the south; I want to develop his discussion of the linguistic challenges for \(\text{(p.224)}\) travellers in Italy by looking at the ways in which foreign cadences intermix with the English poetic tradition, creating a distinctive poetics of exile.\(^3\)
Music and language are not the only Italian sounds to which exiles respond. Mary and Percy Shelley’s letters reveal a succession of encounters with unfamiliar noises. Some are delightful; others less so. Mary writes to Marianne Hunt about the peasants singing Rossini’s music, ‘accompanied by the cicala a kind of little beetle that makes a noise with its tail as loud as Johnny [Marianne’s second child] can sing’. Allegra’s excited play in the convent, Percy tells Mary, involves ringing the tocsin bell (surely the source for Byron’s description of the women in the harem ‘like a tocsin bell’); meanwhile, the grand palazzo in which Byron lives with his menagerie ‘resounds with their unarbitrated quarrels’. The Shelleys can hear the vine-dressers singing, but also the clanking of the irons from prisoner chain gangs; the south west wind, the Libeccio, ‘howls like a chorus of fiends all day’. 

Choruses from nature are, of course, familiar contributors to Romantic poetry, but in Italy, Shelley does not always know what to call them. The ‘Letter to Maria Gisborne’ tests this mixture of familiar and unfamiliar sounds. ‘Libeccio rushes round/With an inconstant and an idle sound’ (ll. 114–15), Shelley interjects, ‘I heed him’. The wind is personified along with the ‘babbling’ gossip of the poet and his interlocutor, who lets him speak Spanish ‘inarticulately’ (ll. 165, 185), while the ‘oaths from clergymen’ (l. 109), and the ‘shriek of the world’s carrion jays’ (l. 130) are dehumanizing counter voices. The sound of the gathering storm in Livorno interrupts ‘the contadino’s song .../Rude, but made sweet by distance—and a bird/Which cannot be the nightingale, and yet/I know none else that sings so sweet as it’ (ll. 286–9). Shelley recognizes the peasant’s song, but does not yet know the bird. This blend of proximity and strangeness is carried in his Huntian rhymed couplets, which, like the form of ‘Julian and Maddalo’, use the rhythms of conversation. In one direction, the verse letter flows towards the freedom of blank verse, and in another to the painfully precise observations of Coleridge’s epistolary ‘Dejection: An Ode’.

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Not knowing the name for something that makes a powerful sensory impression is a microcosmic version of every poet’s struggle to find the right words for his or her imaginative conceptions. Percy Shelley’s ‘The Aziola’ versifies a skirmish with sound after the half-humorous introduction, in which the poet thinks that Mary’s remark about the Aziola’s cry refers (p.225) to ‘some tedious woman’ (l. 6). ‘How elate/I felt’, Percy writes in anti-social mood, ‘to know that it was nothing human’ (ll. 7–8). The strangeness of the owl’s cry, its ‘unlikeness’ from other sounds, is what the poet values, but he can only realize the experience once Mary supplies the language for it, ‘’Tis nothing but a little downy owl’:

Sad Aziola, many an eventide  
Thy music I had heard  
By wood and stream, meadow and mountainside,  
And field and marshes wide,  
Such as nor voice, nor lute, nor wind, nor bird  
The soul ever stirred –  
Unlike and far sweeter than them all.  
Sad Aziola, from that moment, I  
Loved thee and thy sad cry. (ll. 13–21)
Beginning in conversation and ending with the solitary poet’s identification of and with a bird, ‘The Aziola’ captures the paradoxical situation of the poet in exile, caught between two cultures, using the resources of the English tongue to translate an alien sound, and finally internalizing that strange music. Nightingales abound in English verse, and Shelley quietly registers his different setting through a distant echo of Keats’s fading nightingale anthem: ‘Past the near meadows, over the still stream,/Up the hill-side’ (ll. 76–7). Readers might identify the silhouette of Keats’s ode or catch a glimpse of the ‘downy owl’, who is one of the possible partners of sorrow’s mysteries in the ‘Ode on Melancholy’, but at a remoteness that withdraws from the full richness of the younger poet’s swathing himself in English words. In the vacancy left by departed English music, Shelley bids farewell, one by one, to all the familiar English ciphers for poetic melody: ‘nor voice, nor lute, nor wind, nor bird’, and leaves the reader with the new-found mirror image of his poetics of exile: ‘Sad Aziola, from that moment, I/Loved thee and thy sad cry’. Shelley’s poem was first published in the same volume of *The Keepsake* (1829) that contained Coleridge’s ‘The Garden of Boccaccio’ and shows two utterly different Romantic responses to Italy: looking at a picture in England, and looking back to England from Italy.
We will never know, of course, what sounds Byron and Shelley would have produced if they had not left England when they did; nevertheless, the works we have examined suggest that their exiled writing exhibits some distinctive features: there is an embattled relationship with contemporary English readers, the simultaneous cultivation of an elect form of retirement, and an urgent desire to overcome the distance that divides writers and readers. Engagement with the English poetic tradition is charged with an elegiac sense of lack; there is a tendency to signal allusion and to summon poetic precursors in person; exiled writers seem more aware of books as material objects. Allusions tend to be multilayered, or palimpsestuous and strongly associative, bringing with them not just an isolated cadence, but also an uneasy recollection of locale and the atmosphere of the home country. In exiled writing, we find a higher frequency of what David Duff calls ‘rough-mixing’, the heterogeneous compound genre that always creates a disruptive and defamiliarizing effect on its audience.\(^7\) Within the company of dead and living writers, there is a band of fellowship between those who share the knowledge of banishment; for this group, conversation acquires an intensity that exceeds the models of sociability devised for literary intercourse in 19th-century England. The experience of exile also breaks down the distinctions between different periods and different languages: while the personal biographical past is seen as irretrievably shut off, the literary past (as we saw with Byron in Ravenna) and the political present exist in a diachronic continuum; dialogues between the living and the dead are a way of coming to terms with the present; there is a firm belief that, in the vigour and variety of literature, there is a transmissive power that can make a difference to the future. My concluding case study traces one such conversation in the writing of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning.

The Byron-Shelley-Barrett-Browning Conversation
We have seen how exiled writers read, write, and think like Frankenstein’s creature through a layering of literature, determined by the accident of what books came to hand. Byron sees Milton through the Swiss edition of his biography, and his memory of the memoirs of rival poets who are trying to assume Milton’s authority; Mary Shelley thinks she describes Raphael through Percy’s translation of Plato on love, when she is recalling Burton’s account of love’s melancholy; Elizabeth Barrett Browning thinks she is seeing Italy for the first time, but she is looking through the lens of Charles Dickens’s *Pictures from Italy*. In the final section of this chapter, I shall consider this amalgam of voices in more detail, suggesting ways in which the Romantic company of authors mediates experience for the later group of exiles which headed to Italy, and, in turn, what this tells us about the act of reading more generally.

When the newly married Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning arrived in Pisa, one of their first actions was to seek out the home of the exiled Byron, and, like many eager tourists, to look for physical traces of the writers with whom they had identified so closely. On 25 October 1846, they ‘achieved a due pilgrimage to the Lafranchi Palace to walk in the footsteps of Byron . . & Shelley . . & also of Leigh Hunt.’ They picked leaves from Byron’s orange trees (still preserved in the pages of their copy of Byron’s letters) and examined the plaster casts of footprints (allegedly Byron’s) from the garden. Their elopement to Italy, which Elizabeth knew would be seen as mad and bad, was in the footsteps of Byron and Shelley, and their travels in Italy were seen through the eyes of those poets and at least one friend who located them precisely in the ‘Paradise of Exiles’. For the Brownings, Italy was bound up with the spell of Byron and Shelley in obvious touristy ways, and also because Byron and Shelley—like Shakespeare and Milton—had become part of the language they used to express themselves. When Elizabeth confessed to Robert that she believed herself responsible for her brother’s death, her letter used the words of Byron’s Manfred to declare: ‘“not with my hand but heart” I was the cause’. When, in a much more bizarre accident in Florence, Elizabeth knelt in a sedan chair to say her prayers and toppled over, bruising her forehead, she described the accident as ‘“written on my brow”’, borrowing the words of the Giaour when he confesses to the Friar.
The strata of earlier poetic voices play a curious role in the creation of poetic identity in exile. Anna Jameson, who accompanied the Brownings to Pisa, had a theory that remarkable poetry (Childe Harold was her example) ‘becomes a pervading power; a part of the lives of [the poets’] contemporaries’. She theorized that this happens ‘as if by an electric force’ or by a sort of vibration. Her ideas are remarkably close to the way in which behavioural psychologists describe our incorporation of emotionally charged images as part of the self. And it fits with a common intuition that what we read, especially what we re-read, is woven with our other memories and becomes part of our identity. For exiled readers in particular, the voices of authors offer a constant form of companionship, and a link with the homeland left behind. In some cases, literary creations take the place of friends or families lost or estranged. Like so many (p.228) 19th-century readers, we still search works of literature for patterns that will help give meaning to our existence, and our changing preoccupations cause us to fall in and out of sympathy with particular parts of poems and novels at different points in our lives. The interweaving of literature with life is a central concern of this chapter, and I shall approach it through a mixture of critical biography and contemporary psychology.

For exiled writers, literature acquires an intensified agency. For Byron, good literature was synecdochally the better part of the England that he missed, whereas book parcels, such as the one including the ‘trash’ of Keats, were unwelcome intrusions from the sort of company he wished to avoid: ‘Pray send me no more poetry but what is rare and decidedly good … No more Keats I entreat –’.12 Exile renders the materiality of the text in distinct ways: there is an enhanced awareness of books as physical objects that have to be packed up and transported or posted and passed through customs, or borrowed or purchased with more trouble and expense than at home.13 There is also a sense in which the books (and newspapers) read away from home stand in for the social and political arenas of home; they become the prime native cultural milieu in which one’s identity can be tested, proved, and defined. The formative role that literature plays in shaping identity is heightened for the exile, but according to contemporary behavioural psychology, that tendency may be present to a greater or lesser extent in all subjects or citizens.
In the 1990s, the American psychologist Dan P. McAdams used narrative theory to suggest that in post-Enlightenment Western society, ‘identity is an evolving personal myth’ and that ‘we draw on the entire spectrum of comic and tragic narrative possibilities in making sense of our own lives’.\(^\text{14}\) McAdams makes the point that the human memory is not like the hard drive of a computer, from which parts can be retrieved as originally ‘saved’; instead, for him, the fading and distortion of memories are part of the process of telling a life story—a narrative that changes as one’s own sense of direction changes. His idea of the mixed genre and constantly evolving narrative form of identity endorses a more conversational model of poetic influence and relationship, one that I would like to advance in this chapter. Throughout his or her life, McAdams argues, the individual must work out how to negotiate two central themes—agency and communion:

\textbf{(p.229)} Agency refers to the individual’s striving to separate from others, to master the environment, to assert, protect and expand the self ... By contrast, communion refers to the individual’s striving to lose his or her own individuality by merging with others, participating in something that is larger than the self.\(^\text{15}\)

These themes of individuation and socialization are important for everyone, but we can see that they would hold heightened significance for the exiles for whom environment and community are radically dislocated. The emphasis on narrative in the psychology of human development devised by McAdams provides a valuable way of looking at literary evolution as an intensification of a process that is latent in all members of society. Exile disrupts social kinship in an interesting way, and I shall build on McAdams’s work by analysing the aesthetic process of negotiation that he sees as an essential part of identity formation. Growing up, according to McAdams, usually brings with it an acceptance that ‘identities begin and must ultimately remain woven into a historical and social fabric’; in addition, identity ‘becomes more and more concerned with generativity as we mature’, so that ‘endings are qualified, mitigated, blurred by the beginnings that are left behind’.\(^\text{16}\) For exiles, the historical and social fabric is ragged, rather than offering a continuum, leaving many more loose ends to deal with, through personal life narrative, or through works of art, where the individual concerned has the outlet of literary creation.
McAdams’s discussion of the human tendency to defray the psychological cost of death by focusing on new life might be applied to poetry’s concern with posthumous survival. Most authors have far more control over their books than their children, and we can see in Romantic-period literature a dialogue between agency and communion as the desire for poetic immortality shapes identity. Shelley, Byron, Barrett, and Browning all thought that being among the English poets after their death was a fundamental part of their identity while living. Conversations between dead and living poets, therefore, matter a great deal, and poetic allusion is a critical part of the distorting and remoulding process of identity formation. Poetic allusions are stories, tessellated biographies, and forms of quarrelling or wrangling, and I think our usual critical methods of discussing influence and allusion neglect this lateral fracas in the interests of a tidy linear narrative.

Marlon Ross is perhaps the only critic in the last 25 years (p. 230) to explore the aesthetic possibilities of unresolved relationships between writers. He argues that the greatest anxiety of influence exists between contemporaries, rather than between dead forefathers and their poetic offspring: ‘the potential of the fellow poet, as opposed to the actual power of the dead father, is itself unsettling because its claims are unpredictable and its territory always renegotiable’. The conversation we shall be tracing between Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning about the poetic merits of Byron and Shelley is an example of just such an unpredictable field.
The quarrels of authors are an important allusive hinterland: ‘We talked a great deal of poetry & such matters last night’, Shelley wrote when he was staying with Byron at Ravenna in August 1821, ‘& as usual differed & I think more than ever. He affects to patronize a system of criticism fit for the production of mediocrity.’¹⁹ The importance of systems and schools of criticism is, as we have seen, a vital, if contentious, part of 19th-century poetic identity. Under conditions of exile, the formation of group identity is particularly complex. English travellers abroad of the 18th and 19th centuries usually possessed a keen sense of their patriotic identity, thrown into relief by the customs (in all senses) they encountered. Percy Shelley wrote to tell Byron that the copy of the third canto of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* he had carried back to England had been ‘taken for a smuggler, and turned over and over by a greasy Custom-house officer, to see if lace, &c., were hidden within’.²⁰ For exiles, secure group identity was complicated by the sense of exclusion from full Englishness. Byron was acutely sensitive to reviews that aligned him with one or other school of poetry, and we can see across his career a restless anxiety about literary and political kinship that impelled him to enter and then abandon a succession of new enterprises: the projected journal with Moore; storing weapons for the Carbonari; the *Liberal* with Hunt and Shelley; the Greek newspaper; and the involvement with what would become known as Greek Nationalism.²¹ The writers who were intermittently part of Byron’s circle, and those that came after him, had to wrestle with similar questions of allegiance.
At the same time as trying to work out who they were after leaving home, the 19th-century writers who went to live in Italy also had to work out who they were not. This process of differentiation was made more problematic by their having to negotiate the identities that kept being foisted on them by reviewers back in England, hostile and sympathetic alike. The so-called ‘Pisan Confederacy’ had one root in the ‘League of Incest’ rumour, leading to Southey’s ‘Satanic School’ label discussed in Chapter 6. The other root was the poetical dyad of Byron and Shelley established by Shelley in ‘Julian and Maddalo’ and continued by Leigh Hunt in *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries*. Elizabeth Barrett refused to read Hunt’s book because she ‘understood that he said cruel things & ungrateful of poor Byron’; and this reaction alerts us to another version of narrative identity: that of calumny or misrepresentation, the stories we tell about other people. Satiric caricature has a complicated role here, because it might be a distortion, but it might also be an apprehension of the essence or peculiarity of a subject: it can feel more real than the reality.

For the purposes of satiric caricature, the differences between Byron and Shelley were accentuated in essays and debates about the two poets throughout the 19th century, when they were seen as mutually opposing, but equally negative influences on English poetry. This is the public context of the more private investment in Byron and Shelley made by the Brownings that we shall be examining. One contested strand was the question of national identity. Byron was usually seen as dangerously cosmopolitan, but not beyond the hope that maturity might retrieve his exiled Englishness. According to Kingsley, Byron ‘had no objection to a pot of beer;’ and ... might, if he had reformed, have made a gallant English gentleman.’
The young Elizabeth Barrett, who planned to run away and become Lord Byron’s page, had no worries about the poet’s national identity. But in her later years, when she compared Byron with William Wordsworth, Elizabeth Barrett found Byron’s experience ‘incomplete’: ‘Poetry ought to be the revelation of the complete man’, but, she concluded, Byron’s manhood consisted of a ‘one-sided passionateness’. Nevertheless, he stood nearer to the crowd than Wordsworth ‘because everybody understands passion’. In this distinction, we find the familiar paradox of Wordsworthian criticism: Wordsworth’s poetry evinces a strong commitment to communality, but his voice is resistant to other sensibilities; conversely, Byron’s poetry is ostensibly misanthropic, glorying in isolation; but its texture is more open to other people. In ‘A Vision of Poets’ (1844), Barrett depicts Shelley as more of a theoretical human: asexual and disembodied, ‘in his white ideal,/All statue-blind’ (pp. 406–7); in the same poem, Byron is loaded with affective power:

And poor, proud Byron, sad as grave  
And salt as life; forlornly brave,  
And quivering with the dart he drave (ll. 412–14)

Byron is animal emotion in motion, while Shelley gleams as a lapidary surface only. Elizabeth Barrett is cooler about Shelley than about Byron. In part, this was because she saw Shelley as a cold poet: ‘high, & yet too low, [an] elemental poet, who froze in cold glory between Heaven & earth, neither dealing with man’s heart, beneath, nor … aspiring to communion with … the heart of the God-Man. Therefore his poetry glitters & is cold’.

‘Coldness’ is a property that Barrett always associates with the non-Byronic, the most telling example of this in life being Lady Byron:

There are two false wives, within the last century, standing cold upon pedestals of alabaster … one of them being called by their admiring publics, “Innocence” … the other … “Virtue”,—Marie Louise [Napoleon’s widow] & Lady Byron! Oh! I know that Lady Byron is of course “wisest virtuosest discretionest best” … but “all that” just makes her odious-est to me.”
Meanwhile, she follows Lady Blessington’s line on Byron: ‘He was not by nature cold & heartless—but his affections were turned into bitterness’. For Barrett, Byron’s experience of suffering connects him with the heart. Her ‘Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron’ salute his ‘generous heart’ (l. 16); ‘Take out my heart’, she says to her mentor Hugh Stuart Boyd in 1842, ‘& try it … & answer & tell me if I do not love & admire Byron more warmly than you’. Her admiration for Robert Browning’s poetry was also predicated on the heart she found at the centre of Bells and Pomegranates. ‘Lady Geraldine’s Courtship’, from the 1844 volume, describes reading ‘from Browning some “Pomegranate,” which, if cut deep down the middle,/Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity.’ These were the lines that prompted Robert Browning’s first letter to Elizabeth in January 1845.

‘[W]hat poets have been your sponsors?’, Barrett asked her future husband in February 1845. The question initiated a highly charged re-reading of each other’s favourite authors. And it is fascinating to compare the different identities of Byron and Shelley that each has in mind. From the start, Browning introduces a warmer sort of Shelley to Barrett. In May 1845, he describes his recent visit to Italy and tells Barrett how it was Shelley who told me years ago that in the mountains it was a feast ‘when one should find those globes of deep red gold – which in the woods the strawberry-tree doth bear, suspended in their emerald atmosphere’, so that when my Mule walked into a sorb-tree … and I felt the fruit against my face, the little ragged bare-legged guide fairly laughed at my knowing them so well.

That image of the red fruit knocking against the face transforms Edenic temptation into cornucopia. Browning later put the same image into ‘The Englishman in Italy’, his most sensuous evocation of Romantic exile. In terms of biography, this exchange of poetic images encouraged Barrett’s interest in Browning, her plans to visit Pisa with her sister in 1845 as a health cure—and eventually, merged with her decision to rebel against her father’s decree, marry, and escape to Italy with Browning in September 1846.
During their courtship, Browning was clearly concerned to foster Barrett’s enthusiasm for Shelley. He tactfully praised her lines on Shelley in *Poems* (1844) as perfection, but encouraged her to re-read Shelley in September 1845, and was dismayed when she encountered Shelley’s novel *St Irvyne* and wrote to tell him that she thought it a ‘flood of boarding-school idiocy’: ‘I have read to the last line of your Rosicrucian; & my scepticism grew & grew ... & at last rose to the full stature of incredulity. . for I never could believe Shelley capable of such a book’.\(^{32}\) Browning wished that Shelley were not the author: ‘Well, let us hope against hope in the sad matter of the novel’, but he had to admit that he had inside information: ‘yet, yet,—it IS by Shelley, if you will have the truth—as I happen to know—proof last being that Leigh Hunt told me he unearthed it in Shelley’s own library at Marlow once, to the author’s horror & shame’.\(^{33}\) Browning smoothed over this unpalatable discovery and begged Barrett: ‘please read a chorus in the “Prometheus Unbound” or a scene from the “Cenci”- and join company with Shelley again!’\(^{34}\) We can see that for Browning, therefore, Shelley is not the author of *St Irvyne*, he is only the author of *Prometheus Unbound*, or *The Cenci*, or the ‘Ode to Naples’.

The identities of poets for particular audiences depend on a multitude of variables and (often) a highly selective reading of the work. The conversations between Barrett and Browning allow us to see the changing contours of reception on both sides, for Barrett was also trying to convert (p.234) Browning to Byron. From the start, she detected an affinity between them: ‘He has had very little of the “rank popular breath”’, she confides about Browning to Miss Mitford in January 1845 (making him a Childe Harold figure), and then tells him directly: ‘You were like Lord Byron (another point of likeness!) in imitating Ossian’.\(^{35}\) This is an example of how she re-reads Byron through an idea of Browning that she has herself shaped in Byron’s image.
When he started corresponding with Barrett, Browning was not at all ignorant of Barrett’s favourite poet, but felt he had outgrown Byron in his early work, *Incondita*. Equally obstructive to a mature reassessment of Byron was the fact that Browning’s early attempts to get his plays staged by the actor-manager William Macready had been overshadowed by Macready’s great success in Byronic roles. During his time at Drury Lane and Covent Garden, Macready successfully produced *Marino Faliero*, *Werner*, and *The Two Foscari*. By contrast, Browning’s *Blot in the Scutcheon* was a dismal failure, running for three nights only. In 1842, Browning sent a brief letter to tell the actor: ‘how impressed I was by your admirable Faliero’.

It was a note, rather than a visit, because Macready had banned him from coming backstage. Byron’s somewhat sensational dramatic revival in the late 1830s, therefore, effectively confronted Browning with an image of his own failure.

Under Barrett’s tutelage, however, Browning managed to get over his low opinion of Byronic performance. In his letters to her we can see him learning to read Byron differently. Within a matter of months, his allusions to Byron take on entirely different meanings. In May 1845, Browning made some sort of impetuous declaration of love, or outright proposal of marriage, to Barrett, and she threatened to break off their meetings and correspondence. He then wrote a tortuous letter to retrieve the situation, expressing the fear that she might think him ‘attitudinizing à la Byron’—a reference that drew from her no response whatsoever.

In the months that followed, Browning realized that for Barrett, Byron did not just strike attitudes. By January 1846, he could refer jokingly to her initial reservations about himself, borrowing words from *Mazeppa*: ‘and “one refusal no rebuff”’. In August 1846, he reassured her that ‘Lord Byron is altogether in my affection again... I have read on to the end, [Moore’s *Life* with letters and journals] and am quite sure of the great qualities which the last ten or fifteen years had partially obscured’.
Browning’s actions in these exchanges accord with McAdams’s account of normative narrative strategy, whereby we incorporate a change of direction (p.235) into a life narrative so as to suggest that it had been there all along, and is part of our constant and coherent personality. By this time, Browning could drop casually into a letter, ‘By the way, Byron speaks of plucking oranges in his garden at Pisa’, a comment that suggests he has been reading Moore’s *Life* attentively and hints at the sensuous fulfilment they might find together if they too fled to Italy.\(^40\) It makes a huge difference, of course, that Byron is known through his letters and Moore’s *Life* relatively soon after his death. Mary Shelley, on the other hand, was forbidden to publish Shelley’s letters in 1824, and in 1840, the letters were selectively edited. Not until Hogg’s biography of 1858 did Shelley’s life and correspondence start to become part of his public identity, and we can, therefore, only speculate about how Elizabeth Barrett’s views on Shelley might have been modified if she had been able to read him in epistolary mode.

The charged reading and re-reading of Byron and Shelley in their courtship period (1845–6), as they contemplated following the poets into exile, changed the identities of Barrett and Browning, and coloured their poetic voices, too. In Browning’s 1849 volume, it is possible to detect a subtle modification of his male dramatic heroes that I would suggest comes from his re-reading of Byron through Barrett. About his ‘imaginary theatre’, *Luria*, he wrote: ‘in a drama of this kind, all the events ... take place in the minds of the actors’.\(^41\) Undaunted by his failure with *A Blot in the Scutcheon*, Browning is still writing for the stage, but is evidently elaborating the idea of a mental theatre. Both *Luria* and *A Soul’s Tragedy* are saturated with memories of Byron’s Italy: the emotional connection with a place epitomized in *The Two Foscari*, and the exploration of the Byronic experience of falling from popular adulation into exile. The character Luria (a moor) appears from the outside as a close relation of Byron’s hero from the Turkish tales:

\[
\text{Born free from any ties that bind the rest} \\
\text{Of common faith in Heaven or hope on Earth} \\
\text{No past with us, no Future. (I, 157–9)}\]

But his own speeches reveal him to be acutely sensitive to the moment when the crowd turns against him:
And always comes, I say, the turning point
When something changes in the friendly eyes
That love and look on you...so slight, so slight...

(p.236) And yet it tells you they are dead and
gone,
Or changed and enemies for all their words,
And all is mockery, and a maddening show. (III,
106-11)

The whole passage recalls the Byron of 1816, and the last line,
specifically, echoes a critical confrontation in *Manfred* ('Oh God! If it be thus, and *thou*/Art not a madness and a mockery’ I.1.189-90). The ‘too slight ... so slight’ turning point of *Marino Faliero* is the judgement of the Forty which goes against the Doge (I.2.76-8).

Browning’s protagonists follow the path that Byron’s heroes took from *Manfred* into the historical dramas, whereby both dramatist and leading character experience public judgement, the way identity is constructed and deconstructed by the crowd, and the sense of identity lost in exile and a tarnished reputation. Like Byron, Browning is interested in apostasy as a version of exile: the apostate changes political or religious allegiance, disavows his or her own past, and starts a new life but, unlike the exile, the apostate usually carries on in the same geographical location. Under the editorial eye of Barrett, Browning arranged his 1849 volume to begin with *Paracelsus* (his version of *Alastor*). But the collection ends with the voices of the dramatic lyrics, ‘Saul’ (part one), ‘Time’s Revenges’, and ‘The Glove’. These poems ventriloquize the partial, peripheral, or oblique perspectives of travellers and exiles with a rueful wit that salutes late Byron, especially the Byron of the letters on which Browning found he could base a genuine enthusiasm for Byron’s identity.
While she learned from Browning to value Shelley (her 1847 sonnets ‘Love’ and ‘Life’ are ample proof of that), Barrett retained her allegiance to Byron. Helen Cooper assumes that Elizabeth Barrett ‘outgrew her adolescent fervor for Byron’; Dorothy Mermin suggests that Barrett’s enthusiasm for Byron has slipped by 1838, and Marjorie Stone is convinced that Elizabeth Barrett’s Romantic Hellenism ‘peters out’; but Byron still haunts Casa Guidi Windows (1851), despite Barrett Browning’s explicit wish to dissociate Casa Guidi from Romantic representations of Italy headed by Byron. The first part of Casa Guidi Windows (dating from 1847) was written against a background of tremendous optimism, as the liberal reforms of Pius IX and Leopold II seemed to offer a chance of Italian unification. It focuses on the crowds of Tuscans that the Brownings saw from their windows on the day of their first wedding anniversary, which coincided with a popular celebration for what looked, then, like the start of a free Italy. Heralding a new era of poetry and politics, Barrett Browning summons Byron by allusion: ‘I kiss their footsteps, yet their words gainsay’ (l. 51), she writes as she challenges Byron’s poetic images of Italy as a ‘Sea-Cybele’ or ‘Niobe of Nations’—a beautiful feminine lost cause. But just after her formal disavowal of Byron’s version of Italia, his identity floods the evocation of Florence:

I can but muse in hope upon this shore
Of golden Arno as it shoots away
Through Florence’ heart beneath her bridges four:
Bent bridges, seeming to strain off like bows,
And tremble while the arrowy undertide
Shoots on and cleaves the marble as it goes. (ll. 52–7)

‘Arrowy’ is a very unusual word for ‘swift or darting motion’. The OED dates its first appearance to Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage Canto III, to describe the blue Rhone just as Byron rejects the crushing crowd:

Is it not better, then, to be alone,
And love earth only for its earthly sake?
By the blue rushing of the arrowy Rhone,
Or the pure bosom of its nursing lake (III, 71)
There is just the faint echo, too, in Barrett’s lines, of Dante’s image of the bow shot of exile, ‘e questo e quello strale/che l’arco dello essilio pria saetta’. Barrett Browning wants to differentiate her voice from what she saw as Byron’s misappropriation of Italia, but the Arno passage is haunted by her memory of Byron as she had described him in ‘A Vision of Poets’, ‘quivering with the dart he drave’. ‘Cleaves’ is also a Byronic ‘bye word for division’—The Rhone ‘cleaves his way between/Heights’ in Canto III, 94, and Velino ‘cleaves the wave-worn precipice’ in Canto IV, 69. Images of Byron’s separation from the past haunt Barrett Browning’s entry into a new land.

As a political agent, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wants to be one with the Tuscan crowd, but her poetic identity turns back to Byron and draws her apart. Dorothy Mermin argues that, in Casa Guidi Windows, ‘the speaker defines herself explicitly both as a woman and as a poet’: part of this artistic identity, I suggest, is an ‘undertide’ of the voices of Byron and Shelley, which tells us about Elizabeth’s ambivalence towards the Tuscan crowd. In Part I, she attempts to break out of the removed and authorizing overview of the Romantic spectator, but, very movingly, finds herself back in the footsteps of first Byron, and then Shelley. It is a form of homesickness or homeless (p.238) sickness. As Casa Guidi Windows calls for communal action in the Italian struggle, Barrett Browning reaches for Shelley’s language of peaceful revolution in The Mask of Anarchy (‘“Rise like lions after slumber/In unvanquishable number—/Shake your chains to earth like dew/Which in sleep had fallen on you—/Ye are many—they are few”’):

Will, therefore to be strong, thou Italy!
Will to be noble! Austrian Metternich
Can fix no yoke unless the neck agree;
And thine is the like the lion’s when the thick
Dews shudder from it ...
Roar, therefore! Shake your dew-laps dry abroad.
(ll. 661–70)
Percy Shelley’s almost call to arms is echoed in the shaking off of dew; but a second voice behind Barrett’s lines is, of course, Shakespeare’s Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, who is offering to take his bride hunting and hoping, like any English country squire, that she will share his enthusiasm for his dogs. The word ‘dew-laps’ takes us to Shakespeare. Shelley’s creatures are too mythical to have flabby jowls (unless he is translating Greek), but as a devoted dog owner, Barrett Browning knows all about drooling canine muzzles. Despite the Spartan pedigree offered for the hounds, Shakespeare’s ‘dew-lapp’d’ pack is a distinctively English portrait of a hunt on a dewy morning, and Barrett Browning’s summoning of it breathes a sigh for England, even as it casts itself toward the Italian *Risorgimento*:

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My hounds are bred out of the Spartan kind,
So flew’d, so sanded; and their heads are hung
With ears that sweep away the morning dew;
Crook-knee’d and dew-lapp’d like Thessalian bulls;
Slow in pursuit, but match’d in mouth like bells
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(4.1.118–22)

We can see why Shelley drew on Shakespeare’s hunt to describe the beginnings of a revolutionary force. Shakespeare gives us the slowness of the hunt getting underway, the inevitability of its gathering momentum, and the communality of it, without any bloodiness or violence. In her doubled echo, Barrett Browning insists on the gathering force that Shelley is just holding at bay. Her picture of a people coming together blends Shakespearean sociality with Byron’s rejection of crowds, and Shelley’s call for peaceful collective resistance. Elizabeth Barrett would like to base her hopes for the future of Italy in its people, but in the allusive undertow of the verse is the sense that art is the only thing that lasts. Her literary hesitation was right, because Grand Duke Leopold’s liberal idealism turned out to be very short-lived and, two years after the wedding anniversary (p.239) celebrations, he invited the Austrians to take charge. By accident, or perhaps not, allusion outlasts the contingencies of the poem’s moment and reaches into a longer view of human history and experience.
In August 1846, a few weeks before their marriage, and the traumatic journey to Paris, then Italy, Browning showed that he had successfully revised his view of Byron. He wrote to Barrett:

I always retained my first feeling for Byron in many respects... the interest in the places he had visited, in relics of him: I would at any time have gone to Finchley to see a curl of his hair or one of his gloves, I am sure—while Heaven knows that I could not get up enthusiasm enough to cross the room if at the other end of it all Wordsworth, Coleridge & Southey were condensed into the little china bottle yonder, after the Rosicrucian fashion... they seem to “have their reward” and want nobody’s love or faith.  

Browning echoes the satiric group treatment of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey in Byron’s Dedication to *Don Juan*, including the imputation that they have all profited from their careers. His dig at them as a collective Rosicrucian icon picks up the sort of 19th-century periodical exaggeration that was used to caricature and dismiss poetic sects, and reminds Barrett of their agreement the previous year about *St Irvyne; or, the Rosicrucian: a Romance*. Browning’s gallant declaration of loyalty to Byron (and Barrett) alerts us to the way that belonging to one or other poetic group was a vital part of poetic identity, particularly as the Brownings stood on the verge of exchanging their London literary lives for the new identity of an eloping couple.
For Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning, the identities of Byron and Shelley are resolved in the locality and temporality of poetic allusion. This is also Byron’s notion of posterity. His works recognize that poetic reputation is a matter of sheer contingency. For all its riskiness, poetic identity resides in the ‘now’ of the poem, and is not sealed (though it may be imperilled) by the retrospective constructions of the biographer. The transient moment of belonging and meaning that is fixed by one reading of a poem mirrors the local and fleeting accommodation of the exile. Our readings of poetry are, however, increasingly layered and complicated as we grow older, and this conversation between the living and the dead goes on for as long as we do. Elizabeth Barrett’s copy of Byron’s Letters, with Notices of His Life is in the Armstrong Library at Baylor University. Below her name on the flyleaf is a note by Browning: ‘Read for the last time by Robert Browning in June 1881’. ‘There are few things’, as Dr Johnson remarked, ‘of which we can say, without some emotion of uneasiness, (p. 240) “This is the last.” ’

Technology in the form of electronic books now denies readers the link with earlier readers in the form of inscriptions, enclosed letters, and pressed leaves, but thanks to the preservation of material objects in the Armstrong Collection, we can still see Elizabeth Barrett’s influence on Robert Browning in this last recorded act of re-reading 20 years after she died. His willingness to know Byron through Elizabeth Barrett stayed with Browning as an act of loyalty to a ring, a book, and a shared past until the end of his life.

Notes:
(1) CPW VI, 636.
(2) The Two FoscariColeridge (ed.), The Works of Lord Byron, V, 159.
(4) MWSL I, 102–3.
(5) PBSL II, 330, 335.
(6) PBSL II, 93, 105, 213.
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(9) *BC XI*, 43.

(10) *BC XV*, 136.


(12) *BLJ VII*, 200–2.


(19) *PBSL II*, 317.

(20) *PBSL I*, 504.


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(24) The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning

(25) BC V, 60.

(26) BC VII, 60.

(27) BC II, 139.

(28) BC VI, 192.


(30) BC X, 53.

(31) BC X, 200.

(32) BC XI, 106.

(33) BC XI, 106–8.

(34) BC XI, 108.

(35) BC X, 33; XIII, 296.

(36) BC VI, 103.

(37) BC X, 234.

(38) BC XI, 291.

(39) BC XIII, 280.

(40) BC XIII, 287.

(41) BC XI, 309.


(44) Mermin, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 163.

(45) BC XIII, 280.
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