

Selections from Keats's Letters (1817)

BY [JOHN KEATS](#)

INTRODUCTION

John Keats died of tuberculosis at the age of 25 after writing a remarkable number of poems that have helped define the Romantic tradition. Keats and his siblings George, Tom, and Frances (Fanny) lost their father when he died after a fall from a horse in 1803, and their mother to tuberculosis in 1811. Keats was an apprentice to an apothecary–surgeon when he was 15; he received his apothecary certificate in 1816, but gave up that profession in order to write.

Keats was acquainted with the writer and editor Leigh Hunt, who introduced him to some of the leading intellectuals and writers of the time. Dogged by illness and poverty, Keats was unable to marry Fanny Brawne, whom he fell in love with and was engaged to in 1818. Keats, like his mother and brother Tom, contacted tuberculosis. He was invited to Rome by Shelley to convalesce, and eventually traveled there in 1821 with the painter John Severn; his health continued to decline and he died in Rome.

The excerpts from Keats's letters give us glimpses of his thoughts about poetry, and of the concerns that occupied him in 1817 and 1818, the years before he would write some of his best-known works. His letters have also served generations of writers with provocative ideas and insights into poetry and the creative process. In the letters, he writes about beauty, the imagination, and the concept of “Negative Capability”—“when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” Keats also address the merits of other poets, including Milton, Keat's contemporary Wordsworth, and Shakespeare, who Keats admired above all other writers. He often calls out for qualities he wishes he could attain as a poet and person, as when he asks “for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!” In other letters Keats shows his talent for original metaphors and insights into life, as when he likens life to a “large Mansion of Many Apartments,” in which we slowly feel and find our way through darkened rooms.” Such observations and imaginative spurts make Keats's letters required reading for any poet or critic and as important as Keats's poems.

In 1819, Keats had an extremely rich year of creativity; he wrote “The Eve of St. Agnes,” “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” and his six great odes, which include “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode on Indolence,” “Ode on Melancholy,” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

The recipients of the letters are friends—the poet and insurance clerk John Hamilton Reynolds, and Benjamin Bailey; Keats's brothers George and Tom; and John Taylor—a member of the publishing house Taylor and Hessey where his long poem *Endymion* was published.

[On Shakespeare and “Eternal Poetry”]: Letter to J. H. Reynolds, 17, 18 April 1817]

Carisbrooke April 17th

My dear Reynolds,

Ever since I wrote to my Brothers from Southampton I have been in a taking, and at this moment I am about to become settled. for I have unpacked my books, put them into a snug corner—pinned up Haydon—Mary Queen of Scotts, and Milton with his

daughters in a row. In the passage I found a head of Shakspeare which I had not before seen—It is most likely the same that George spoke so well of; for I like it extremely—Well—this head I have hung over my Books, just above the three in a row, having first discarded a french Ambassador—Now this alone is a good morning's work—Yesterday I went to Shanklin, which occasioned a great debate in my mind whether I should live there or at Carisbrooke. Shanklin is a most beautiful place—sloping wood and meadow ground reaches round the Chine, which is a cleft between the Cliffs of the depth of nearly 300 feet at least. This cleft is filled with trees & bushes in the narrow part; and as it widens becomes bare, if it were not for primroses on one side, which spread to the very verge of the Sea, and some fishermen's huts on the other, perched midway in the Ballustrades of beautiful green Hedges along their steps down the sands. [. . .] From want of regular rest, I have been rather *narvus*—and the passage in Lear—'Do you not hear the Sea?'—has haunted me intensely.

[*A draft of the Sonnet 'On the Sea' follows*]

April 18th

Will you have the goodness to do this? Borrow a Botanical Dictionary—turn to the words Laurel and Prunus show the explanations to your sisters and Mrs Dilk and without more ado let them send me the Cups Basket and Books they trifled and put off and off while I was in Town—ask them what they can say for themselves—ask Mrs Dilk wherefore she does so distress me—Let me know how Jane has her health—the Weather is unfavorable for her—Tell George and Tom to write.—I'll tell you what—On the 23rd was Shakespeare born—now If I should receive a Letter from you and another from my Brothers on that day 'twould be a parlous good thing—Whenever you write say a Word or two on some Passage in Shakespeare that may have come rather new to you; which must be continually happening, notwithstanding that we read the same Play forty times—for instance, the following, from the Tempest, never struck me so forcibly as at present,

'Urchins

*Shall, for that vast of Night that they may work,
All exercise on thee—'*

How can I help bringing to your mind the Line—

In the dark backward and abysm of time—

I find that I cannot exist without poetry—without eternal poetry—half the day will not do—the whole of it—I began with a little, but habit has made me a Leviathan—I had become all in a Tremble from not having written any thing of late—the Sonnet over leaf did me some good. I slept the better last night for it—this Morning, however, I am nearly as bad again—Just now I opened Spencer, and the first Lines I saw were these.—

‘The noble Heart that harbors virtuous thought,
And is with Child of glorious great intent,
Can never rest, until it forth have brought
Th’ eternal Brood of Glory excellent—’

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**[On the Imagination and “a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts”:
Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817]**

[. . .] But I am running my head into a Subject which I am certain I could not do justice to under five years study and 3 vols octavo—and moreover long to be talking about the Imagination—[. . .] I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty—In a Word, you may know my favorite Speculation by my first Book and the little song I sent in my last—which is a representation from the fancy of the probable mode of operating in these Matters—The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream—he awoke and found it truth. I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning—and yet it must be—Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections—However it may be, O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts! It is ‘a Vision in the form of Youth’ a Shadow of reality to come—and this consideration has further convinced me for it has come as auxiliary to another favorite Speculation of mine, that we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated—And yet such a fate can only befall those

who delight in sensation rather than hunger as you do after Truth—Adam’s dream will do here and seems to be a conviction that Imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as human Life and its spiritual repetition. But as I was saying—the simple imaginative Mind may have its rewards in the repetition of its own silent Working coming continually on the spirit with a fine suddenness—to compare great things with small—have you never by being surprised with an old Melody—in a delicious place—by a delicious voice, felt over again your very speculations and surmises at the time it first operated on your soul—do you not remember forming to yourself the singer’s face more beautiful than it was possible and yet with the elevation of the Moment you did not think so—even then you were mounted on the Wings of Imagination so high—that the Prototype must be here after—that delicious face you will see—What a time! I am continually running away from the subject—sure this cannot be exactly the case with a complex Mind—one that is imaginative and at the same time careful of its fruits—who would exist partly on sensation partly on thought—to whom it is necessary that years should bring the philosophic Mind—such an one I consider your’s and therefore it is necessary to your eternal Happiness that you not only drink this old Wine of Heaven which I shall call the redigestion of our most ethereal Musings on Earth; but also increase in knowledge and know all things.

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**[On Negative Capability: Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, ?27
December 1817]**

Hampstead Sunday
22 December 1818

My dear Brothers

I must crave your pardon for not having written ere this [. . .] [T]he excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth—Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout; but in this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness—The picture is larger than Christ rejected—I dined with Haydon the Sunday after you left, & had a very pleasant day, I dined too (for I have been out too much lately) with Horace Smith & met his two brothers with Hill & Kingston & one Du Bois, they only served to convince me, how superior humour is to wit in respect to enjoyment—These men say things which make one start, without making one feel, they are all alike; their manners are alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in

their very eating & drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter—They talked of Kean & his low company—Would I were with that company instead of yours said I to myself! I know such like acquaintance will never do for me & yet I am going to Reynolds, on wednesday—Brown & Dilke walked with me & back from the Christmas pantomime. I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.

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[On the Aims of Poetry: Letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3 February 1818]

Hampstead Tuesday.

[. . .] We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject.—How beautiful are the retired flowers! how would they lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway crying out, 'admire me I am a violet! dote upon me I am a primrose! Modern poets differ from the Elizabethans in this. Each of the moderns like an Elector of Hanover governs his petty state, & knows how many straws are swept daily from the Causeways in all his dominions & has a continual itching that all the Housewives should have their coppers well scoured: the antients were Emperors of vast Provinces, they had only heard of the remote ones and scarcely cared to visit them.—I will cut all this—I will have no more of Wordsworth or Hunt in particular—Why should we be of the tribe of Manasseh when we can wander with Esau? why should we kick against the Pricks, when we can walk on Roses? Why should we be owls, when we can be Eagles?

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**[On Axioms and the Surprise of Poetry: Letter to John Taylor, 27
February 1818]**

Hampstead 27 Feby-

[. . .] In Poetry I have a few Axioms, and you will see how far I am from their Centre. 1st I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity—it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance—2nd Its touches of Beauty should never be half way therby making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the Sun come natural natural too him—shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight—but it is easier to think what Poetry should be than to write it—and this leads me on to another axiom. That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.

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**[On Life as a “large Mansion of Many Apartments”: Letter to J. H.
Reynolds, 3 May 1818]**

Teignmouth May 3d

[. . .] Well—I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me—The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think—We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle—within us—we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one’s vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing ones nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heratbreak, Pain, Sickness, and oppression—whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken’d and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—

but all dark—all leading to dark passages—We see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist—We are now in that state—We feel the ‘burden of the Mystery,’ To this point was Wordsworth come, as far as I can conceive when he wrote ‘Tintern Abbey’ and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those dark Passages. Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them. he is a Genius and superior to us, in so far as he can, more than we, make discoveries, and shed a light in them—Here I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton[.]