

## JOHN KEATS 1795-1821

John Keats's father was head stableman at a London livery stable; he married his employer's daughter and inherited the business. The poet's mother, by all reports, was an affectionate but negligent parent to her children; remarrying almost immediately after a fall from a horse killed her first husband, she left the eight-year-old John (her firstborn), his brothers, and a sister with their grandmother and did not reenter their lives for four years. The year before his father's death, Keats had been sent to the Reverend John Clarke's private school at Enfield, famous for its progressive curriculum, where he was a noisy, high-spirited boy; despite his small stature (when full-grown, he was barely over five feet in height), he distinguished himself in sports and fistfights. Here he had the good fortune to have as a mentor Charles Cowden Clarke, son of the headmaster, who later became a writer and an editor; he encouraged Keats's passion for reading and, both at school and in the course of their later friendship, introduced him to Spenser and other poets, to music, and to the theater.

When Keats's mother returned to her children, she was already ill, and in 1810 she died of tuberculosis. Although the livery stable had prospered, and £8,000 had been left in trust to the children by Keats's grandmother, the estate remained tied up in the law courts for all of Keats's lifetime. The children's guardian, Richard Abbey, an unimaginative and practical-minded businessman, took Keats out of school at the age of fifteen and bound him apprentice to Thomas Hammond, a surgeon and apothecary at Edmonton. In 1815 Keats carried on his medical studies at Guy's Hospital, London, and the next year qualified to practice as an apothecary-surgeon—but almost immediately, over his guardian's protests, he abandoned medicine for poetry.

This decision was influenced by Keats's friendship with Leigh Hunt, then editor of the *Examiner* and a leading political radical, poet, and prolific writer of criticism and periodical essays. Hunt, the first successful author of Keats's acquaintance, added his enthusiastic encouragement of Keats's poetic efforts to that of Clarke. More important, he introduced him to writers greater than Hunt himself—William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, and Percy Shelley—as well as to Benjamin Robert Haydon, painter of grandiose historical and religious canvases. Through Hunt, Keats also met John Hamilton Reynolds and then Charles Wentworth Dilke and Charles Brown, who became his intimate friends and provided him with an essential circumstance for a fledgling poet: a sympathetic and appreciative audience.

The rapidity and sureness of Keats's development has no match. Although he did not begin writing poetry until his eighteenth year, by 1816 in the bold sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" he had found his voice. Later that same year he wrote "Sleep and Poetry," in which he laid out for himself a program deliberately modeled on the careers of the greatest poets, asking only

for ten years, that I may overwhelm  
Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed  
That my own soul has to itself decreed.

For even while his health was good, Keats felt a foreboding of early death and applied himself to his art with a desperate urgency. In 1817 he went on to compose *Endymion*, an ambitious undertaking of more than four thousand lines. It is a rich allegory of a mortal's quest for an ideal feminine counterpart and a flawless happiness beyond earthly possibility; in a number of passages, it already exhibits the sure movement and phrasing of his mature poetic style. But Keats's critical judgment and aspiration exceeded his achievement: long before he completed it, he declared impatiently that he carried on with the "slipshod" *Endymion* only as a "trial of invention" and began to block out *Hyperion*, conceived on the model of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in that most demanding of forms, the epic poem. His success in achieving the Miltonic manner is one of the reasons why Keats abandoned *Hyperion* before it was finished, for he

recognized that he was uncommonly susceptible to poetic influences and regarded this as a threat to his individuality. "I will write independently," he insisted. "The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man." He had refused the chance of intimacy with Shelley "that I might have my own unfettered scope"; he had broken away from Leigh Hunt's influence lest he get "the reputation of Hunt's *élève* [pupil]"; now he shied away from domination by Milton's powerfully infectious style.

In sentimental, later-nineteenth-century accounts of "poor Keats," 1818 was cast as the year in which this rising genius, already frail and sensitive, was mortally crushed by vicious reviews. Percy Shelley helped initiate this myth in *Adonais*, which describes Keats as "a pale flower." Byron, who did not like Keats's verse, put it unsentimentally: Keats, he wrote, was "snuffed out by an article." It is true that the critics were brutal to Keats, those associated with the Tory journals especially; for them his poetry proved an irresistible target precisely because it had been promoted by the radical Hunt. *Endymion* was mauled in the *Quarterly Review*, and one of the articles on "the Cockney School of Poetry" that appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* condemned Keats as hopelessly vulgar, a writer who wanted to be a poet of nature but thought, as a social-climbing, undereducated Londoner would, that nature was "flowers seen in window-pots." "It is a better and wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet," the reviewer scolded: "so back to the shop Mr John." Keats had for his own part the good sense to recognize that the attacks were motivated by political prejudice and class snobbery, and he had already passed his own severe judgment on *Endymion*: "My own domestic criticism," he said, "has given me pain without comparison beyond what *Blackwood* or the *Quarterly* could possibly inflict." More important was the financial distress of his brother George and his young bride, who emigrated to Kentucky and lost their money in an ill-advised investment. Keats, short of funds and needing to supplement the family income, had now to find ways to make money from his writing: he turned to journalism and began planning plays. His brother Tom contracted tuberculosis, and the poet, in devoted attendance, helplessly watched him waste away until his death that December. In the summer of that year, Keats had taken a strenuous walking tour in the English Lake District, Scotland, and Ireland. It was a glorious adventure but a totally exhausting one in wet, cold weather, and he returned in August with a chronically ulcerated throat made increasingly ominous by the shadow of the tuberculosis that had killed his mother and brother. And in the late fall of that same year, Keats fell unwillingly but deeply in love with Fanny Brawne, the eighteen-year-old girl next door. They became engaged, knowing, though, that Keats's poverty and worsening health might well make their marriage impossible.

In this period of turmoil, Keats achieved the culmination of his brief poetic career. Between January and September of 1819, masterpiece followed masterpiece in astonishing succession: *The Eve of St. Agnes*, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," all of the "great odes," *Lamia*, and a sufficient number of fine sonnets to make him, with Wordsworth, the major Romantic craftsman in that form. All of these poems possess the distinctive qualities of the work of Keats's maturity: a slow-paced, gracious movement; a concreteness of description in which all the senses—tactile, gustatory, kinetic, visceral, as well as visual and auditory—combine to give the total apprehension of an experience; a delight at the sheer existence of things outside himself, the poet seeming to lose his own identity in a total identification with the object he contemplates; and a concentrated felicity of phrasing that reminded his friends, as it has many critics since, of the language of Shakespeare. Under the richly sensuous surface, we find Keats's characteristic presentation of all experience as a tangle of inseparable but irreconcilable opposites. He finds melancholy in delight and pleasure in pain; he feels the highest intensity of love as an approximation to death; he inclines equally toward a life of indolence and "sensation" and toward a life of thought; he is aware both of the attraction of an imaginative dream world without "disagreeables" and the remorseless pressure of the actual; he aspires at the same time to aesthetic detachment and to social responsibility.

His letters, hardly less remarkable than his poetry, show that Keats felt on his pulses the conflicts he dramatized in his major poems. Above all, they reveal him wrestling with the problem of evil and suffering—what to make of our lives in the discovery that "the world is full of misery and heartbreak, pain, sickness and oppression." To the end of his life, he refused to seek solace for the complexity and contradictions of experience either in the abstractions of inherited philosophical doctrines or in the absolutes of a religious creed. At the close of his poetic career, in the latter part of 1819, Keats began to rework the epic *Hyperion* into the form of a dream vision that he called *The Fall of Hyperion*. In the introductory section of this fragment the poet is told by the prophetess Moneta that he has hitherto been merely a dreamer; he must know that

The poet and the dreamer are distinct,  
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes,

and that the height of poetry can be reached only by

those to whom the miseries of the world  
Are misery, and will not let them rest.

He was seemingly planning to undertake a new direction and subject matter, when illness and death intervened.

On the night of February 3, 1820, he coughed up blood. As a physician he refused to evade the truth: "I cannot be deceived in that colour; that drop of blood is my death warrant. I must die." That spring and summer a series of hemorrhages rapidly weakened him. In the autumn he allowed himself to be persuaded to seek the milder climate of Italy in the company of Joseph Severn, a young painter, but these last months were only what he called "a posthumous existence." He died in Rome on February 23, 1821, and was buried in the Protestant Cemetery, where Mary and Percy Shelley had already interred their little son William, and where Percy's ashes, too, would be deposited in 1822. At times the agony of his disease, the seeming frustration of his hopes for great poetic achievement, and the despair of his passion for Fanny Brawne compelled even Keats's brave spirit to bitterness and jealousy, but he always recovered his gallantry. His last letter, written to Charles Brown, concludes: "I can scarcely bid you good bye even in a letter. I always made an awkward bow. God bless you! John Keats."

No one can read Keats's poems and letters without an undersense of the tragic waste of an extraordinary intellect and genius cut off so early. What he might have done is beyond conjecture; what we do know is that his poetry, when he stopped writing at the age of twenty-four, exceeds the accomplishment at the same age of Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton.

The texts here are taken from Jack Stillinger's edition, *The Poems of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978).

### On First Looking into Chapman's Homer<sup>1</sup>

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;

1. Keats's mentor Charles Cowden Clarke introduced him to Homer in the robust translation by the Elizabethan poet and dramatist George Chapman. They read through the night, and Keats walked home at dawn. This sonnet reached Clarke by the ten o'clock mail that same morning. It was the gold-hunter Balboa, not Cortez, the Spanish

conqueror of Mexico, who caught his first sight of the Pacific from the heights of Darien, in Panama, but none of Keats's contemporaries noticed the supposed error, and modern scholarship (*Keats-Shelley Journal* 2002) has strongly argued that Keats knew exactly what he was doing.

Round many western islands have I been  
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
 5 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
   That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;<sup>2</sup>  
   Yet did I never breathe its pure serene<sup>3</sup>  
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
 10 When a new planet swims into his ken;<sup>o</sup> *view*  
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
   He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men  
 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
   Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Oct. 1816

1816

### From Sleep and Poetry<sup>1</sup>

[O FOR TEN YEARS]

O for ten years, that I may overwhelm  
 Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed  
 That my own soul has to itself decreed.  
 Then will I pass the countries that I see  
 100 In long perspective, and continually  
 Taste their pure fountains. First the realm I'll pass  
 Of Flora, and old Pan:<sup>2</sup> sleep in the grass,  
 Feed upon apples red, and strawberries,  
 And choose each pleasure that my fancy sees;  
 105 Catch the white-handed nymphs in shady places,  
 To woo sweet kisses from averted faces,—  
 Play with their fingers, touch their shoulders white  
 Into a pretty shrinking with a bite  
 As hard as lips can make it: till agreed,  
 110 A lovely tale of human life we'll read.  
 And one will teach a tame dove how it best  
 May fan the cool air gently o'er my rest;  
 Another, bending o'er her nimble tread,  
 Will set a green robe floating round her head,  
 115 And still will dance with ever varied ease,  
 Smiling upon the flowers and the trees:  
 Another will entice me on, and on  
 Through almond blossoms and rich cinnamon;  
 Till in the bosom of a leafy world

2. Realm, feudal possession.

3. Clear expanse of air.

1. At the age of twenty-one, Keats set himself a regimen of poetic training modeled on the course followed by the greatest poets. Virgil had established the pattern of beginning with pastoral writing and proceeding gradually to the point at which he was ready to undertake the epic, and this pattern had been deliberately followed by Spenser and Milton. Keats's version of this program, as he describes it here, is to begin with the realm "of

Flora, and old Pan" (line 102) and, within ten years, to climb up to the level of poetry dealing with "the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts" (lines 124–25). The program Keats set himself is illuminated by his analysis of Wordsworth's progress in his letter to J. H. Reynolds of May 3, 1818 (p. 945).

2. I.e., the carefree pastoral world. Flora was the Roman goddess of flowers. Pan was the Greek god of pastures, woods, and animal life.

882 / JOHN KEATS

120 We rest in silence, like two gems upcurl'd  
In the recesses of a pearly shell.

And can I ever bid these joys farewell?  
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,  
Where I may find the agonies, the strife  
125 Of human hearts: for lo! I see afar,  
O'er sailing the blue cragginess, a car<sup>3</sup>  
And steeds with streamy manes – the charioteer  
Looks out upon the winds with glorious fear:  
And now the numerous tramlings quiver lightly  
BO Along a huge cloud's ridge; and now with sprightly  
Wheel downward come they into fresher skies,  
Tipt round with silver from the sun's bright eyes.  
Still downward with capacious whirl they glide;  
And now I see them on a green-hill's side  
135 In breezy rest among the nodding stalks.  
The charioteer with wond'rous gesture talks  
To the trees and mountains; and there soon appear  
Shapes of delight, of mystery, and fear,  
Passing along before a dusky space  
uo Made by some mighty oaks: as they would chase  
Some ever-fleeting music on they sweep.  
Lo! how they murmur, laugh, and smile, and weep:  
Some with upholden hand and mouth severe;  
Some with their faces muffled to the ear  
145 Between their arms; some, clear in youthful bloom,  
Go glad and smilingly athwart" the gloom;  
Some looking back, and some with upward gaze;  
Yes, thousands in a thousand different ways  
Flit onward – now a lovely wreath of girls  
150 Dancing their sleek hair into tangled curls;  
And now broad wings. Most awfully intent,  
The driver of those steeds is forward bent,  
And seems to listen: O that I might know  
All that he writes with such a hurrying glow.

*against*

155 The visions all are fled – the car is fled  
Into the light of heaven, and in their stead  
A sense of real things comes doubly strong,  
And, like a muddy stream, would bear along  
My soul to nothingness: but I will strive  
160 Against all doubtings, and will keep alive  
The thought of that same chariot, and the strange  
Journey it went.

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Oct. – Dec. 1816

1817

3. Chariot. The description that follows recalls the traditional portrayal of Apollo, god of the sun and poetry, and represents the higher poetic imagina-

tion, which bodies forth the matters "of delight, of mystery, and fear" (line 138) that characterize the grander poetic genres.

### On Seeing the Elgin Marbles<sup>1</sup>

My spirit is too weak—mortality  
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,  
And each imagined pinnacle and steep  
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die  
5 Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.  
Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep  
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep  
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.  
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain  
10 Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;  
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,  
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude  
Wasting of old time—with a billowy main<sup>0</sup>— *ocean*  
A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.

Mar. 1 or 2, 1817

1817

### From *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*<sup>1</sup>

"The stretched metre of an antique song"

INSCRIBED TO THE MEMORY OF THOMAS CHATTERTON

#### *Preface*

Knowing within myself the manner in which this Poem has been produced, it is not without a feeling of regret that I make it public.

What manner I mean, will be quite clear to the reader, who must soon perceive great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished. The two first books, and indeed the two last, I feel sensible are not of such completion as to warrant their passing the press; nor should they if I thought a years castigation would do them any good;—it will not: the foundations are too sandy. It is just that this youngster

1. Lord Elgin had brought to England in 1806 many of the marble statues and friezes that adorned the Parthenon at Athens. In 1817 Keats, along with his artist friend Haydon, viewed the marbles at the British Museum, which had just purchased them, an acquisition that was and remains controversial. Keats's sonnet first appeared on the same day in both Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* and, through Keats's friend Reynolds, *The Champion*, and then was reprinted in Haydon's magazine *Annals of the Fine Arts*.

1. This poem of more than four thousand lines (based on the classical myth of a mortal beloved by the goddess of the moon) tells of Endymion's long and agonized search for an immortal goddess whom he had seen in several visions. In the course of his wanderings, he comes upon an Indian maid who had been abandoned by the followers of Bacchus, god of wine and revelry. To his utter despair,

he succumbs to a sensual passion for her, in apparent betrayal of his love for his heavenly ideal. The conclusion to Keats's "romance" offers a way of resolving this opposition, which runs throughout the poem, between the inevitably mortal pleasures of this world and the possibility of delights that would be eternal: the Indian maid reveals that she is herself Cynthia (Diana), goddess of the moon, the celestial subject of his earlier visions.

The verse epigraph is adapted from Shakespeare's Sonnet 17, line 12: "And stretched metre of an antique song," Thomas Chatterton (1752–1770), to whom *Endymion* is dedicated, and who is the "marvellous Boy" of Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence," wrote a number of brilliant pseudoarchaic poems that he attributed to an imaginary 15th-century poet, Thomas Rowley. Keats described him as "the most English of poets except Shakespeare."

should die away: a sad thought for me, if I had not some hope that while it is dwindling I may be plotting, and fitting myself for verses fit to live.

This may be speaking too presumptuously, and may deserve a punishment: but no feeling man will be forward to inflict it: he will leave me alone, with the conviction that there is not a fiercer hell than the failure in a great object. This is not written with the least atom of purpose to forestall criticisms of course, but from the desire I have to conciliate men who are competent to look, and who do look with a zealous eye, to the honour of English literature.

The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted: thence proceeds mawkishness, and all the thousand bitters which those men I speak of must necessarily taste in going over the following pages.

I hope I have not in too late a day touched the beautiful mythology of Greece,<sup>2</sup> and dulled its brightness: for I wish to try once more,<sup>3</sup> before I bid it farewell.

Teignmouth, April 10, 1818

From *Book 1*

[A THING OF BEAUTY]

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:  
Its loveliness increases; it will never  
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep  
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep  
5 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.  
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing  
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,  
Spite<sup>0</sup> of despondence, of the inhuman dearth *despite*  
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,  
io Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways  
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,  
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall  
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,  
Trees old, and young sprouting a shady boon  
15 For simple sheep; and such are daffodils  
With the green world they live in; and clear rills<sup>0</sup> *small streams*  
That for themselves a cooling covert make  
'Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake,<sup>0</sup> *thicket*  
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:  
20 And such too is the grandeur of the dooms<sup>0</sup> *judgments*  
We have imagined for the mighty dead;  
All lovely tales that we have heard or read:

2. In 1820 an anonymous reviewer of Keats's final volume of poems cited this phrase and, in a complaint that suggests the political charge that the poetic use of classical mythology could carry at this time, wrote disparagingly of "the nonsense that Mr. Keats . . . and Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley, and

some of the poets about town, have been talking of 'the beautiful mythology of Greece' "; "To some persons . . . that mythology comes recommended chiefly by its grossness – its alliance to the sensitive pleasures which belong to the animal."

3. In *Hyperion*, which Keats was already planning.

An endless fountain of immortal drink,  
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.

25 Nor do we merely feel these essences  
For one short hour; no, even as the trees  
That whisper round a temple become soon  
Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,  
The passion poesy, glories infinite,  
30 Haunt us till they become a cheering light  
Unto our souls, and bound to us so fast,  
That, whether there be shine, or gloom o'er-cast,  
They always must be with us, or we die.

Therefore, 'tis with full happiness that I  
35 Will trace the story of Endymion.  
The very music of the name has gone  
Into my being, and each pleasant scene  
Is growing fresh before me as the green  
Of our own vallies. \* \* \*

[THE "PLEASURE THERMOMETER"]

"Peona!<sup>4</sup> ever have I long'd to slake  
770 My thirst for the world's praises: nothing base,  
No merely slumberous phantasm, could unlace  
The stubborn canvas for my voyage prepar'd—  
Though now 'tis tatter'd; leaving my bark bar'd  
And sullenly drifting: yet my higher hope  
775 Is of too wide, too rainbow-large a scope,  
To fret at myriads of earthly wrecks.  
Wherein lies happiness? In that which beckons<sup>5</sup> *beckons*  
Our ready minds to fellowship divine,  
A fellowship with essence; till we shine,  
780 Full alchemiz'd,<sup>6</sup> and free of space. Behold  
The clear religion of heaven! Fold  
A rose leaf round thy finger's taperness,  
And soothe thy lips: hist,<sup>6</sup> when the airy stress *listen*  
Of music's kiss impregnates the free winds,  
785 And with a sympathetic touch unbinds  
Eolian<sup>6</sup> magic from their lucid wombs:  
Then old songs waken from encloued tombs;  
Old ditties sigh above their father's grave;

4. The sister to whom Endymion confides his troubles. Of lines 769–857 Keats said to his publisher, John Taylor: "When I wrote it, it was the regular stepping of the Imagination towards a Truth. My having written that Argument will perhaps be of the greatest Service to me of anything I ever did—It set before me at once the gradations of Happiness even like a kind of Pleasure Thermometer, and is my first step towards the chief attempt in the Drama—the playing of different Natures with Joy and Sorrow." The gradations on this "Pleasure Thermometer" mark the stages on the way to what Keats calls "happiness" (line

777)—his secular version of the religious concept of "felicity" that, in the orthodox view, is to be achieved by a surrender of oneself to God. For Keats the way to happiness lies through a fusion of ourselves, first sensuously, with the lovely objects of nature and art (lines 781–97), then on a higher level, with other human beings through "love and friendship" (line 801) and, ultimately, sexual love.

5. Transformed by alchemy from a base to a precious metal.

6. From Aeolus, god of winds.



Ghosts of melodious prophecyings rave  
Round every spot where trod Apollo's foot;  
Bronze clarions awake, and faintly bruit,<sup>7</sup>  
Where long ago a giant battle was;  
And, from the turf, a lullaby doth pass  
In every place where infant Orpheus<sup>8</sup> slept.  
Feel we these things?—that moment have we stept  
Into a sort of oneness, and our state  
Is like a floating spirit's. But there are  
Richer entanglements, enthralmments far  
More self-destroying, leading, by degrees,  
To the chief intensity: the crown of these  
Is made of love and friendship, and sits high  
Upon the forehead of humanity.  
All its more ponderous and bulky worth  
Is friendship, whence there ever issues forth  
A steady splendour; but at the tip-top  
There hangs by unseen film, an orb'd drop  
Of light, and that is love: its influence,  
Thrown in our eyes, genders a novel sense,  
At which we start and fret; till in the end,  
Melting into its radiance, we blend,  
Mingle, and so become a part of it,—  
Nor with aught else can our souls interknit  
So wingedly: when we combine therewith,  
Life's self is nourish'd by its proper pith,<sup>9</sup>  
And we are nurtured like a pelican brood.<sup>1</sup>  
Aye, so delicious is the unsating food,<sup>2</sup>  
That men, who might have tower'd in the van<sup>o</sup>  
Of all the congregated world, to fan  
And winnow from the coming step of time  
All chaff of custom, wipe away all slime  
Left by men-slugs and human serpentry,  
Have been content to let occasion die,  
Whilst they did sleep in love's elysium.<sup>o</sup>  
And, truly, I would rather be struck dumb,  
Than speak against this ardent listlessness:  
For I have ever thought that it might bless  
The world with benefits unknowingly;  
As does the nightingale, upperched high,  
And cloister'd among cool and bunched leaves—  
She sings but to her love, nor e'er conceives  
How tiptoe Night holds back her dark-grey hood.<sup>3</sup>  
Just so may love, although 'tis understood  
The mere commingling of passionate breath,  
Produce more than our searching witnesseth:  
What I know not: but who, of men, can tell

*forefront*

*heaven*

7. Make a sound.

8. The musician of Greek legend, whose beautiful music could move even inanimate things.

9. Its own elemental substance.

1. Young pelicans were once thought to feed on their mother's flesh. In a parallel way our life is

nourished by another's life, with which it fuses in love.

2. Food that never satiates, that never ceases to satisfy.

3. I.e., in order to hear better.

That flowers would bloom, or that green fruit would swell  
To melting pulp, that fish would have bright mail,  
The earth its dower of river, wood, and vale,  
The meadows runnels, runnels pebble-stones,  
840 The seed its harvest, or the lute its tones,  
Tones ravishment, or ravishment its sweet,  
If human souls did never kiss and greet?

"Now, if this earthly love has power to make  
Men's being mortal, immortal; to shake  
845 Ambition from their memories, and brim  
Their measure of content; what merest whim,  
Seems all this poor endeavour after fame,  
To one, who keeps within his stedfast aim  
A love immortal, an immortal too.  
850 Look not so wilder'd; for these things are true,  
And never can be born of atomies" *mites*  
That buzz about our slumbers, like brain-flies,  
Leaving us fancy-sick. No, no, I'm sure,  
My restless spirit never could endure  
855 To brood so long upon one luxury,  
Unless it did, though fearfully, espy  
A hope beyond the shadow of a dream."

Apr.—Nov. 1817

1818

### On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again<sup>1</sup>

O golden-tongued Romance, with serene lute!  
Fair plumed syren,<sup>2</sup> queen of far-away!  
Leave melodizing on this wintry day,  
Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute.  
5 Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute  
Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay  
Must I burn through; once more humbly assay" *test*  
The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit.  
Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,<sup>3</sup>  
10 Begetters of our deep eternal theme!  
When through the old oak forest I am gone,  
Let me not wander in a barren dream:  
But, when I am consumed in the fire,  
Give me new phoenix' wings to fly at my desire.

Jan. 22, 1818

1838

1. Keats pauses, while revising *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, to read again Shakespeare's great tragedy. The word "syren" (line 2) indicates Keats's feeling that "Romance" was enticing him from the poet's prime duty, to deal with "the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts" (*Sleep and Poetry*, lines 124-25).

2. Syrens (sirens) were sea nymphs whose singing lured listeners to their deaths.

3. Old name for England. *King Lear* is set in Celtic Britain.

4. The fabulous bird that periodically burns itself to death to rise anew from the ashes.

### When I have fears that I may cease to be<sup>1</sup>

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,  
Before high piled books, in charactry,<sup>2</sup>  
Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;  
5 When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,  
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
And think that I may never live to trace  
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;  
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
10 That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the fairy power  
Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

Jan. 1818

1848

### To Homer

Standing aloof in giant ignorance,  
Of thee I hear and of the Cyclades,<sup>1</sup>  
As one who sits ashore and longs perchance  
To visit dolphin-coral in deep seas.  
5 So wast thou blind;—but then the veil was rent,  
For Jove uncurtain'd heaven to let thee live,  
And Neptune made for thee a spumy tent,  
And Pan made sing for thee his forest-hive;  
Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,  
10 And precipices show untrodden green,  
There is a budding morrow in midnight,  
There is a triple sight in blindness keen;  
Such seeing hadst thou, as it once befel  
To Dian, Queen of Earth, and Heaven, and Hell.<sup>2</sup>

1818

1848

### The Eve of St. Agnes<sup>1</sup>

i

St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!  
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;

1. The first, and one of the most successful, of Keats's attempts at the sonnet in the Shakespearian rhyme scheme.

2. Characters; printed letters of the alphabet.

1. A group of islands in the Aegean Sea, off Greece. Keats's allusion is to his ignorance of the Greek language. Schooling in Greek was a badge of gentlemanly identity in the period.

2. In late pagan cults Diana was worshiped as a

three-figured goddess, the deity of nature and of the moon as well as the queen of hell. The "triple sight" that blind Homer paradoxically commands is of these three regions and also of heaven, sea, and earth (the realms of Jove, Neptune, and Pan, lines 6-8).

1. St. Agnes, martyred ca. 303 at the age of thirteen, is the patron saint of virgins. Legend has it that if a chaste young woman performs the proper

The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,  
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:  
Numb were the Beadsman's<sup>2</sup> fingers, while he told  
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,  
Like pious incense from a censer old,  
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,  
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

2

His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man;  
Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,  
And back returneth, meagre,<sup>0</sup> barefoot, wan, *lean*  
Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees:  
The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,  
Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails:  
Knights, ladies, praying in dumb<sup>0</sup> orat'ries,<sup>0</sup> *silent /chapels*  
He passeth by; and his weak spirit fails  
To think' how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

3

Northward he turneth through a little door,  
And scarce three steps, ere Music's golden tongue  
Flatter'd<sup>0</sup> to tears this aged man and poor; *beguiled*  
But no—already had his deathbell rung;  
The joys of all his life were said and sung:  
His was harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve:  
Another way he went, and soon among  
Rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieve,<sup>0</sup> *salvation*  
And all night kept awake, for sinners' sake to grieve.

4

That ancient Beadsman heard the prelude soft;  
And so it chanc'd, for many a door was wide,  
From hurry to and fro. Soon, up aloft,  
The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide:  
The level chambers, ready with their pride,<sup>0</sup> *ostentation*  
Were glowing to receive a thousand guests:  
The carved angels, ever eager-eyed,  
Star'd, where upon their heads the cornice rests,  
With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on their breasts.

5

At length burst in the argent revelry,<sup>4</sup>  
With plume, tiara, and all rich array,  
Numerous as shadows haunting fairily  
The brain, new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay  
Of old romance.<sup>0</sup> These let us wish away, *stories*  
And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there,

ritual, she will dream of her future husband on the evening before St. Agnes's Day, January 21. Keats combines this superstition with the Romeo and Juliet theme of young love thwarted by feuding families and tells the story in a sequence of evolving Spenserian stanzas. The poem is Keats's first complete success in sustained narrative romance. For the author's revisions while composing stanzas

26 and 30 of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, see "Poems in Process," in the appendices to this volume.

2. One who is paid to pray for his benefactor. He "tells" (counts) the beads of his rosary to keep track of his prayers.

3. I.e., when he thinks.

4. Silver-adorned revelers.

890 / JOHN KEATS

Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day,  
On love, and wing'd St. Agnes' saintly care,  
As she had heard old dames full many times declare.

6

They told her how, upon St. Agnes' Eve,  
Young virgins might have visions of delight,  
And soft adorings from their loves receive  
Upon the honey'd middle of the night,  
If ceremonies due they did aright;  
As, supperless to bed they must retire,  
And couch supine their beauties, lily white;  
Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require  
Of heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire.

7

Full of this whim was thoughtful Madeline:  
The music, yearning like a god in pain,  
She scarcely heard: her maiden eyes divine,  
Fix'd on the floor, saw many a sweeping train<sup>5</sup>  
Pass by—she heeded not at all: in vain  
Came many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier,  
And back retir'd, not cool'd by high disdain;  
But she saw not: her heart was elsewhere:  
She sigh'd for Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the year.

8

She danc'd along with vague, regardless eyes,  
Anxious her lips, her breathing quick and short:  
The hallow'd hour was near at hand: she sighs  
Amid the timbrels,<sup>0</sup> and the throng'd resort *tambourines*  
Of whisperers in anger, or in sport;  
'Mid looks of love, defiance, hate, and scorn,  
Hoodwink'd with faery fancy; all amort,  
Save to St. Agnes<sup>6</sup> and her lambs unshorn,<sup>7</sup>  
And all the bliss to be before to-morrow morn.

9

So, purposing each moment to retire,  
She linger'd still. Meantime, across the moors,  
Had come young Porphyro, with heart on fire  
For Madeline. Beside the portal doors,  
Buttress'd from moonlight,<sup>8</sup> stands he, and implores  
All saints to give him sight of Madeline,  
But for one moment in the tedious hours,  
That he might gaze and worship all unseen;  
Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss—in sooth such things have been.

10

He ventures in: let no buzz'd whisper tell:  
All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords

5. Skirts sweeping along the ground.

6. Entirely oblivious or dead ("amort") to everything except St. Agnes. "Hoodwinked": covered by a hood or blindfolded.

7. On St. Agnes's Day it was the custom to offer

lambs' wool at the altar, to be made into cloth by nuns.

8. Sheltered from the moonlight by the buttresses (the supports projecting from the wall).

Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel:  
85 For him, those chambers held barbarian hordes,  
Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords,  
Whose very dogs would execrations howl  
Against his lineage: not one breast affords  
Him any mercy, in that mansion foul,  
90 Save one old beldame,<sup>9</sup> weak in body and in soul.

11

Ah, happy chance! the aged creature came,  
Shuffling along with ivory-headed wand,<sup>o</sup> *staff*  
To where he stood, hid from the torch's flame,  
Behind a broad hall-pillar, far beyond  
95 The sound of merriment and chorus bland:<sup>o</sup> *soft*  
He startled her; but soon she knew his face,  
And grasp'd his fingers in her palsied hand,  
Saying, "Mercy, Porphyro! hie thee from this place;  
They are all here to-night, the whole blood-thirsty race!

12

∞ "Get hence! get hence! there's dwarfish Hildebrand;  
He had a fever late, and in the fit  
He cursed thee and thine, both house and land:  
Then there's that old Lord Maurice, not a whit  
More tame for his gray hairs—Alas me! flit!  
105 Flit like a ghost away."—"Ah, Gossip<sup>1</sup> dear,  
We're safe enough; here in this arm-chair sit,  
And tell me how"—"Good Saints! not here, not here;  
Follow me, child, or else these stones will be thy bier."<sup>o</sup> *tomb*

!3

i 10 He follow'd through a lowly arched way,  
Brushing the cobwebs with his lofty plume,  
And as she mutter'd "Well-a—well-a-day!"  
He found him in a little moonlight room,  
Pale, lattic'd, chill, and silent as a tomb.  
115 "Now tell me where is Madeline," said he,  
"O tell me, Angela, by the holy loom  
Which none but secret sisterhood may see,  
When they St. Agnes' wool are weaving piously."

'4

"St. Agnes! Ah! it is St. Agnes' Eve—  
Yet men will murder upon holy days:  
120 Thou must hold water in a witch's sieve,<sup>2</sup>  
And be liege-lord of all the Elves and Fays,  
To venture so: it fills me with amaze  
To see thee, Porphyro!—St. Agnes' Eve!  
God's help! my lady fair the conjuror plays<sup>3</sup>  
125 This very night: good angels her deceive!  
But let me laugh awhile, I've mickle<sup>o</sup> time to grieve." *much*

9. Old (and, usually, homely) woman; an ironic development in English from the French meaning, "lovely lady."

!. In the old sense: godmother or old friend.

2. A sieve made to hold water by witchcraft.

3. I.e., uses magic in her attempt to evoke the vision of her lover.

15

Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon,  
While Porphyro upon her face doth look,  
Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone  
130 Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book,  
As spectacled she sits in chimney nook.  
But soon his eyes grew brilliant, when she told  
His lady's purpose; and he scarce could brook<sup>0</sup> *restrain*  
Tears, at the thought of those enchantments cold,  
135 And Madeline asleep in lap of legends old.

16

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,  
Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart  
Made purple riot: then doth he propose  
A stratagem, that makes the beldame start:  
140 "A cruel man and impious thou art:  
Sweet lady, let her pray, and sleep, and dream  
Alone with her good angels, far apart  
From wicked men like thee. Go, go!—I deem  
Thou canst not surely be the same that thou didst seem."

17

145 "I will not harm her, by all saints I swear,"  
Quoth Porphyro: "O may I ne'er find grace  
When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer,  
If one of her soft ringlets I displace,  
Or look with ruffian passion in her face:  
150 Good Angela, believe me by these tears;  
Or I will, even in a moment's space,  
Awake, with horrid shout, my foemen's ears,  
And beard<sup>0</sup> them, though they be more fang'd than wolves and *confront*  
bears."

18

"Ah! why wilt thou affright a feeble soul?  
155 A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing,  
Whose passing-bell<sup>0</sup> may ere the midnight toll;  
Whose prayers for thee, each morn and evening,  
Were never miss'd."—Thus plaining,<sup>0</sup> doth she bring *death knell*  
A gentler speech from burning Porphyro; *complaining*  
160 So woful, and of such deep sorrowing,  
That Angela gives promise she will do  
Whatever he shall wish, betide her weal or woe.<sup>4</sup>

19

Which was, to lead him, in close secrecy,  
Even to Madeline's chamber, and there hide  
165 Him in a closet, of such privacy  
That he might see her beauty unespied,  
And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,  
While legion'd fairies pac'd the coverlet,

4. I.e., whether good or ill befalls her.

And pale enchantment held her sleepy-eyed.  
170 Never on such a night have lovers met,  
Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.<sup>5</sup>

20

"It shall be as thou wishest," said the Dame:  
"All cates<sup>6</sup> and dainties shall be stored there  
Quickly on this feast-night: by the tambour frame<sup>6</sup> *delicacies*  
175 Her own lute thou wilt see: no time to spare,  
For I am slow and feeble, and scarce dare  
On such a catering trust my dizzy head.  
Wait here, my child, with patience; kneel in prayer  
The while: Ah! thou must needs the lady wed,  
180 Or may I never leave my grave among the dead."

21

So saying, she hobbled off with busy fear.  
The lover's endless minutes slowly pass'd;  
The dame return'd, and whisper'd in his ear  
To follow her; with aged eyes aghast  
185 From fright of dim espial. Safe at last,  
Through many a dusky gallery, they gain  
The maiden's chamber, silken, hush'd, and chaste;  
Where Porphyro took covert, pleas'd amain.<sup>0</sup> *mightily*  
His poor guide hurried back with agues<sup>0</sup> in her brain. *shivering*

22

190 Her falt'ring hand upon the balustrade,  
Old Angela was feeling for the stair,  
When Madeline, St. Agnes' charmed maid,  
Rose, like a mission'd spirit,<sup>7</sup> unaware:  
With silver taper's light, and pious care,  
195 She turn'd, and down the aged gossip led  
To a safe level matting. Now prepare,  
Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed;  
She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove fray'd<sup>0</sup> and fled. *frightened*

Out went the taper as she hurried in;  
200 Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died:  
She clos'd the door, she panted, all akin  
To spirits of the air, and visions wide:  
No uttered syllable, or, woe betide!  
But to her heart, her heart was voluble,  
205 Paining with eloquence her balmy side;  
As though a tongueless nightingale<sup>8</sup> should swell  
Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled, in her dell.

5. Probably the episode in the Arthurian legends in which Merlin, the magician, lost his life when the wily Vivien turned one of his own spells against him.

6. A drum-shaped embroidery frame.

7. I.e., like an angel sent on a mission.

8. An allusion to Ovid's story, in the *Metamorphoses*, of Philomel, who was raped by Tereus, her sis-

ter's husband. He cut out Philomel's tongue to prevent her from speaking of his crime, but she managed to weave her story and make herself understood to her sister, Procne. Just as Tereus was about to kill both women, Philomel and Procne were metamorphosed into a nightingale and a swallow.



24

A casement<sup>9</sup> high and triple-arch'd there was, *windm*  
All garlanded with carven imag'ries  
210 Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,  
And diamonded with panes of quaint device,  
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,  
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;  
And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,  
215 And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,  
A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings.<sup>9</sup>

25

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,  
And threw warm gules' on Madeline's fair breast,  
220 As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;<sup>0</sup> *gift, blessing*  
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,  
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,  
And on her hair a glory,<sup>0</sup> like a saint: *halo*  
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,  
Save wings, for heaven:—Porphyro grew faint:  
225 She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

26

Anon his heart revives: her vespers done,  
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;<sup>2</sup>  
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;  
Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees  
230 Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:  
Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,  
Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,  
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,  
But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.

27

235 Soon, trembling in her soft and chilly nest,  
In sort of wakeful swoon, perplex'd<sup>3</sup> she lay,  
Until the popped warmth of sleep oppress'd  
Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued away;  
Flown, like a thought, until the morrow-day;  
240 Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain;  
Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray;<sup>4</sup>  
Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain,  
As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again.

28

245 Stol'n to this paradise, and so entranced,  
Porphyro gazed upon her empty dress,

9. I.e., among the genealogical emblems ("heraldries") and other devices ("emblazonings"), a heraldic shield signified by its colors that the family was of royal blood.

1. Red (heraldry).

2. The Pre-Raphaelite-inspired painter Daniel Maclise represented this moment in Keats's romance in his painting of 1868, *Madeline after Prayer*. For a reproduction of the painting, see the

color insert.

3. In a confused state between waking and sleeping.

4. Various interpretations; perhaps: held tightly, cherished (or else kept shut, fastened with a clasp), like a Christian prayer book ("missal") in a land where the religion is that of dark-skinned pagans ("swart Paynims").

And listen'd to her breathing, if it chanced  
To wake into a slumberous tenderness;  
Which when he heard, that minute did he bless,  
And breath'd himself: then from the closet crept,  
Noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness,  
And over the hush'd carpet, silent, stept,  
And 'tween the curtains peep'd, where, lo!—how fast she slept.

29

Then by the bed-side, where the faded moon  
Made a dim, silver twilight, soft he set  
A table, and, half anguish'd, threw thereon  
A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet:—  
O for some drowsy Morphean amulet!<sup>5</sup>  
The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion,<sup>6</sup>  
The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarionet,  
Affray" his ears, though but in dying tone:—  
The hall door shuts again, and all the noise is gone. *frighten*

30

And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,  
In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd,  
While he from forth the closet brought a heap  
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;<sup>7</sup>  
With jellies soother than the creamy curd, *melon*  
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;  
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd  
From Fez,<sup>8</sup> and spiced dainties, every one,  
From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

31

These delicacies he heap'd with glowing hand  
On golden dishes and in baskets bright  
Of wreathed silver: sumptuous they stand  
In the retired quiet of the night,  
Filling the chilly room with perfume light.—  
"And now, my love, my seraph<sup>9</sup> fair, awake!  
Thou art my heaven, and I thine hermit:<sup>10</sup>  
Open thine eyes, for meek St. Agnes' sake,  
Or I shall drowse beside thee, so my soul doth ache."

32

Thus whispering, his warm, unnerv'd<sup>11</sup> arm *unmanned, weak*  
Sank in her pillow. Shaded was her dream  
By the dusk curtains:—'twas a midnight charm  
Impossible to melt as iced stream:  
The lustrous salvers<sup>12</sup> in the moonlight gleam; *trays*  
Broad golden fringe upon the carpet lies:  
It seem'd he never, never could redeem  
From such a stedfast spell his lady's eyes;  
So mus'd awhile, entail'd in woofed phantasies.'

5. Sleep-producing charm.

6. High-pitched trumpet.

7. I.e., jellies softer ("soother") than the curds of cream, clear ("lucent") syrups tinged with cinnamon, and sweet gums ("manna") and dates trans-

ported in a great merchant ship ("argosy") from Fez, in Morocco.

8. One of the highest orders of angels,

9. Hermit, religious solitary.

10. Entangled in a weave of fantasies.

33

Awakening up, he took her hollow lute, –  
290 Tumultuous, – and, in chords that tenderest be,  
He play'd an ancient ditty, long since mute,  
In Provence call'd, "La belle dame sans mercy":<sup>2</sup>  
Close to her ear touching the melody; –  
Wherewith disturb'd, she utter'd a soft moan:  
295 He ceased – she panted quick – and suddenly  
Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone:  
Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone.

34

Her eyes were open, but she still beheld,  
Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep:  
300 There was a painful change, that nigh<sup>o</sup> expell'd  
The blisses of her dream so pure and deep: *nearly*  
At which fair Madeline began to weep,  
And moan forth witless words with many a sigh;  
While still her gaze on Porphyro would keep;  
305 Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye,  
Fearing to move or speak, she look'd so dreamingly.

35

"Ah, Porphyro!" said she, "but even now  
Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,  
Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;  
310 And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:  
How chang'd thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!  
Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,  
Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!  
Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,  
315 For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go."

36

Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far  
At these voluptuous accents, he arose,  
Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star  
Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;  
320 Into her dream he melted, as the rose  
Blendeth its odour with the violet, –  
Solution<sup>o</sup> sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows *fusion*  
Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet  
Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set.

37

325 'Tis dark: quick pattereth the flaw-blown<sup>o</sup> sleet: *gust-blown*  
"This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!"  
'Tis dark: the iced gusts still rave and beat:  
"No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!  
Porphyro will leave me here to fade and pine. –  
330 Cruel! what traitor could thee hither bring?"

2. "The Lovely Lady without Pity," title of a work by the medieval poet Alain Chartier. Keats later adopted the title for his own ballad.

I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine,  
Though thou forsakest a deceived thing;—  
A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing."

38

"My Madeline! sweet dreamer! lovely bride!  
335 Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest?  
Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil<sup>0</sup> dyed? *vermilion*  
Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest  
After so many hours of toil and quest,  
A famish'd pilgrim,— saved by miracle.  
340 Though I have found, I will not rob thy nest  
Saving of thy sweet self; if thou think'st well  
To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel.

39

"Hark! 'tis an elfin-storm from faery land,  
Of haggard<sup>3</sup> seeming, but a boon indeed:  
345 Arise—arise! the morning is at hand;—  
The bloated wassaillers<sup>4</sup> will never heed:—  
Let us away, my love, with happy speed;  
There are no ears to hear, or eyes to see,—  
Drown'd all in Rhenish and the sleepy mead:<sup>5</sup>  
350 Awake! arise! my love, and fearless be,  
For o'er the southern moors I have a home for thee."

40

She hurried at his words, beset with fears,  
For there were sleeping dragons all around,  
At glaring watch, perhaps, with ready spears—  
355 Down the wide stairs a darkling<sup>6</sup> way they found,—  
In all the house was heard no human sound.  
A chain-droop'd lamp was flickering by each door;  
The arras,<sup>0</sup> rich with horseman, hawk, and hound, *tapestry*  
Flutter'd in the besieging wind's uproar;  
360 And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor.

41

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;  
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;  
Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,  
With a huge empty flaggon by his side:  
365 The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,  
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:<sup>7</sup>  
By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:—  
The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;—  
The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

42

370 And they are gone: ay, ages long ago  
These lovers fled away into the storm.

3. Wild, untamed (originally, a wild hawk).

4. Drunken carousers.

5. Rhine wine and the sleep-producing mead (a

heavy fermented drink made with honey).

6. In the dark.

7. Acknowledges a member of the household.

35 That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,  
 And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form  
 Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,  
 Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old  
 Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform;  
 The Beadsman, after thousand aves<sup>s</sup> told,  
 For aye<sup>o</sup> unsought for slept among his ashes cold. *ever*

Jan.—Feb. 1819 1820

Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell<sup>1</sup>

Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell:  
 No god, no demon of severe response,  
 Deigns to reply from heaven or from hell.  
 Then to my human heart I turn at once—  
 5 Heart! thou and I are here sad and alone;  
 Say, wherefore did I laugh? O mortal pain!  
 O darkness! darkness! ever must I moan,  
 To question heaven and hell and heart in vain!  
 Why did I laugh? I know this being's lease—  
 10 My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads:  
 Yet could I on this very midnight cease,  
 And the world's gaudy ensigns<sup>s</sup> see in shreds. *banners*  
 Verse, fame, and beauty are intense indeed,  
 But death intenser—death is life's high meed.

Mar. 1819 1848

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art<sup>1</sup>

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—  
 Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night,  
 And watching, with eternal lids apart,  
 Like nature's patient, sleepless hermit,<sup>s</sup>  
 5 The moving waters at their priestlike task  
 Of pure ablution<sup>s</sup> round earth's human shores,  
 Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask  
 Of snow upon the mountains and the moors;  
 No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,  
 10 Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,  
 To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,

8. The prayers beginning *Ave Maria* ("Hail Mary").

1. In the letter to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana Keats, into which he copied this sonnet, March 19, 1819, Keats wrote: "Though the first steps to it were through my human passions, they went away, and I wrote with my Mind—and perhaps I must confess a little bit of my heart. . . . I went to bed, and enjoyed an uninterrupted sleep. Sane I went to bed and sane I arose."

1. While on a tour of the Lake District in 1818,

Keats had said that the austere scenes "refine one's sensual vision into a sort of north star which can never cease to be open lidded, and steadfast over the wonders of the great Power." The thought developed into this sonnet, which Keats drafted in 1819, then copied into his volume of Shakespeare's poems at the end of September or the beginning of October 1820, while on his way to Italy, where he died.

2. Hermit, religious solitary.

3. Washing, as part of a religious rite.

Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,  
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,  
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.<sup>4</sup>

1819

1838

La Belle Dame sans Merci: A Ballad<sup>1</sup>

i

0 what can ail thee, knight at arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge<sup>2</sup> has wither'd from the lake,  
And no birds sing. *rushes*

2

5 O what can ail thee, knight at arms,  
So haggard and so woe-begone?  
The squirrel's granary is full,  
And the harvest's done.

3

10 I see a lily on thy brow  
With anguish moist and fever dew,  
And on thy cheeks a fading rose  
Fast withereth too.

4

15 I met a lady in the meads,  
Full beautiful, a fairy's child;  
is Her hair was long, her foot was light,  
And her eyes were wild.

5

20 I made a garland for her head,  
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;<sup>3</sup>  
She look'd at me as she did love,  
And made sweet moan.

6

I set her on my pacing steed,  
And nothing else saw all day long,  
For sidelong would she bend, and sing  
A fairy's song.

7

25 She found me roots of relish<sup>4</sup> sweet, *flavor*  
And honey wild, and manna dew,

4. In the earlier version: "Half passionless, and so swoon on to death."

1. The title, though not the subject, was taken from a medieval poem by Alain Chartier and means "The Lovely Lady without Pity." The story of a mortal destroyed by his love for a supernatural femme fatale has been told repeatedly in myth, fairy tale, and ballad. The text printed here is

Keats's earlier version of the poem, as transcribed by Charles Brown. The version published in 1820 begins, "Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight."

Keats imitates a frequent procedure of folk ballads by casting the poem into the dialogue form. The first three stanzas are addressed to the knight, and the rest of the poem is his reply.

2. Belt (of flowers).

900 / JOHN KEATS

And sure in language strange she said—  
I love thee true.

She took me to her elfin grot<sup>o</sup> *cave*  
And there she wept, and sigh'd full sore,  
And there I shut her wild wild eyes  
With kisses four.<sup>3</sup>

9

And there she lulled me asleep,  
And there I dream'd—Ah! woe betide!  
The latest<sup>4</sup> dream I ever dream'd *last*  
On the cold hill's side.

I saw pale kings, and princes too,  
Pale warriors, death pale were they all;  
They cried—"La belle dame sans merci  
Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam<sup>o</sup> *twilight*  
With horrid warning gaped wide,  
And I awoke and found me here  
On the cold hill's side.

45 And this is why I sojourn here,  
Alone and palely loitering,  
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,  
And no birds sing.

Apr. 1819

1820

### Sonnet to Sleep

O soft embalmer of the still midnight,  
Shutting with careful fingers and benign  
Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light,  
Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:  
5 O soothest<sup>5</sup> Sleep! if so it please thee, close, *softest*  
In midst of this thine hymn, my willing eyes,  
Or wait the Amen ere thy poppy<sup>6</sup> throws  
Around my bed its lulling charities.  
Then save me or the passed day will shine  
10 Upon my pillow, breeding many woes:  
Save me from curious<sup>7</sup> conscience, that still hoards *scrupulous*  
Its strength for darkness, burrowing like the mole;

3. Keats commented in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, "Why four kisses—you will say—why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse—she would have fain said 'score' without hurting the rhyme—but we must

temper the Imagination as the Critics say with Judgment. I was obliged to choose an even number that both eyes might have fair play."

1. Opium is made from the dried juice of the opium poppy.

Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards,<sup>2</sup>  
And seal the hushed casket of my soul.

Apr. 1819

1838

### Ode to Psyche<sup>1</sup>

0 Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers,<sup>3</sup> wrung *verses*  
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,  
And pardon that thy secrets should be sung  
Even into thine own soft-conched<sup>4</sup> ear:  
5 Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see  
The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?  
I wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly,  
And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,  
Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side  
10 In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof  
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran  
A brooklet, scarce espied:  
'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,  
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,<sup>5</sup>  
is They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;  
Their arms embraced, and their pinions<sup>6</sup> too; *wings*  
Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,  
As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,  
And ready still past kisses to outnumber  
20 At tender eye-dawn of aureorean love:<sup>7</sup>  
The winged boy I knew;  
But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?  
His Psyche true!

O latest born and loveliest vision far  
25 Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!<sup>8</sup>

2. The ridges in a lock that correspond to the notches of the key.

1. This poem initiated the sequence of great odes that Keats wrote in the spring of 1819. It is copied into the same journal-letter that included the "Sonnet to Sleep" and several other sonnets as well as a comment about "endeavoring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have." It is therefore likely that Keats's experiments with sonnet schemes led to the development of the intricate and varied stanzas of his odes and also that he abandoned the sonnet on discovering the richer possibilities of the more spacious form.

*Psyche*, which gives us our modern term *psychology*, means mind or soul (and also butterfly) in Greek. In the story told by the Roman author Apuleius in the 2nd century, Psyche was a lovely mortal beloved by Cupid, the "winged boy" (line 21), son of Venus. To keep their love a secret from his mother, who envied Psyche's beauty, he visited his lover only in the dark of night, and had her promise never to try to discover his identity. After Psyche broke the promise, she endured various tribula-

tions as a penance and then was finally wedded to Cupid and translated to heaven as an immortal. To this goddess, added to the pantheon of pagan gods too late to have been the center of a cult, Keats in the last two stanzas promises to establish a place of worship within his own mind, with himself as poet-priest and prophet.

2. Soft and shaped like a seashell.

3. The purple dye once made in ancient Tyre.

4. Aurora was the goddess of the dawn.

5. The ranks of the gods who lived on Mount Olympus, according to the classical mythology now eclipsed (made "faded") by Christianity. "You must recollect that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess before the time of Apuleius the Platonist who lived after the Augustan age, and consequently the Goddess was never worshiped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervour—and perhaps never thought of in the old religion—I am more orthodox than] to let a hethen Goddess be so neglected" (Keats, in a long letter written over several months to George and Georgiana Keats in America, April 30, 1819).



902 / JOHN KEATS

Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star,<sup>6</sup>  
Or Vesper,<sup>6</sup> amorous glow-worm of the sky; *evening star*  
Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,  
Nor altar heap'd with flowers;  
30 Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan  
Upon the midnight hours;  
No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet  
From chain-swung censer teeming;  
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat  
35 Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

O brightest! though too late for antique vows,<sup>7</sup>  
Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,  
When holy were the haunted<sup>8</sup> forest boughs, *spirit-filled*  
Holy the air, the water, and the fire;  
40 Yet even in these days so far retir'd  
From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,<sup>9</sup> *shining wings*  
Fluttering among the faint Olympians,  
I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired.  
So let me be thy choir, and make a moan  
45 Upon the midnight hours;  
Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet  
From swinged censer teeming;  
Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat  
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

50 Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane<sup>9</sup> *temple*  
In some untrodden region of my mind,  
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,  
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:  
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees  
55 Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;<sup>8</sup>  
And there by zephyrs, streams,<sup>9</sup> and birds, and bees, *breezes*  
The moss-lain Dryads<sup>9</sup> shall be lull'd to sleep; *wood nymphs*  
And in the midst of this wide quietness  
A rosy sanctuary will I dress  
60 With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,  
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,  
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,  
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:  
And there shall be for thee all soft delight  
65 That shadowy thought can win,  
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,  
To let the warm Love<sup>9</sup> in!

Apr. 1819

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6. The moon, supervised by the goddess Phoebe (Diana).

7. I.e., of worshippers.

8. I.e., the trees shall stand, rank against rank, like layers of feathers.

9. I.e., Cupid, god of love.

Ode to a Nightingale<sup>1</sup>

i

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock<sup>2</sup> I had drunk,  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
5 One minute past, and Lethe<sup>3</sup>-wards had sunk:  
Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thine happiness,—  
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,  
In some melodious plot  
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
10 Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

2

O, for a draught of vintage!<sup>4</sup> that hath been *wine*  
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
Tasting of Flora<sup>5</sup> and the country green,  
Dance, and Provençal song,<sup>6</sup> and sunburnt mirth!  
is O for a beaker full of the warm South,  
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,<sup>6</sup>  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
And purple-stained mouth;  
20 That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

3

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
25 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;<sup>7</sup>  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs,  
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
30 Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

4

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,  
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,

1. Charles Brown, with whom Keats was then living in Hampstead, wrote: "In the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table to the grass plot under a plum tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale."  
2. A poisonous herb, not the North American

evergreen tree; a sedative if taken in small doses.  
3. River in Hades whose waters cause forgetfulness.  
4. The Roman goddess of flowers or the flowers themselves.  
5. Provence, in southern France, was in the late Middle Ages renowned for its troubadours—writers and singers of love songs.  
6. Fountain of the Muses on Mount Helicon, hence the waters of inspiration, here applied metaphorically to a beaker of wine.  
7. Keats's brother Tom, wasted by tuberculosis, had died the preceding winter.

904 / JOHN KEATS

But on the viewless wings of Poesy,<sup>8</sup>  
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:  
35 Already with thee! tender is the night,  
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;<sup>9</sup> *fairies*  
But here there is no light,  
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown  
40 Through verdurous<sup>0</sup> glooms and winding mossy ways, *green-foliaged*

5

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
But, in embalmed<sup>0</sup> darkness, guess each sweet *perfumed*  
Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
45 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;<sup>9</sup>  
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;  
And mid-May's eldest child,  
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
50 The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

6

Darkling<sup>0</sup> I listen; and, for many a time *in darkness*  
I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a mused<sup>0</sup> rhyme, *meditated*  
To take into the air my quiet breath;  
55 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy!  
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—  
60 To thy high requiem<sup>0</sup> become a sod. *mass for the dead*

7

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!  
No hungry generations tread thee down;  
The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
In ancient days by emperor and clown:<sup>0</sup> *peasant*  
65 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
Through the sad heart of Ruth,<sup>1</sup> when, sick for home,  
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;<sup>0</sup> *wheat*  
The same that oft-times hath  
Charm'd magic casements,<sup>0</sup> opening on the foam *windows*  
70 Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

8

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
Adieu! the fancy<sup>2</sup> cannot cheat so well

8. I.e., by getting drunk not on wine (the "vintage" of stanza 2) but on the invisible ("viewless") wings of the poetic imagination. (Bacchus, god of wine, was sometimes represented in a chariot drawn by "pards" —leopards.)

9. Sweetbrier or honeysuckle.

1. The young widow in the biblical Book of Ruth.

2. I.e., imagination, "the viewless wings of Poesy" of line 33.

As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.  
75 Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem<sup>a</sup> fades *hymn*  
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,  
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep  
In the next valley-glades:  
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
SO Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?  
May 1819 1819

Ode on a Grecian Urn<sup>1</sup>

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,  
Sylvan<sup>b</sup> historian, who canst thus express  
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:  
5 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape  
Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?<sup>c</sup>  
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?  
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?  
10 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

2

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear,<sup>d</sup> but, more endear'd,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:  
15 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;  
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
20 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

3

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed  
Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;  
And, happy melodist, unwearied,

1. Another poem that Keats published in Haydon's *Annals of the Fine Arts*. This urn, with its sculptured reliefs of revelry and panting young lovers in chase and in flight, of a pastoral piper under spring foliage, and of the quiet procession of priest and townspeople, resembles parts of various vases, sculptures, and paintings, but it existed in all its particulars only in Keats's imagination. In the urn—which captures moments of intense experience in attitudes of grace and immobilizes them in marble—Keats found the perfect correlative for his concern with the longing for permanence in a world of change. The interpretation of the details with which he develops this concept, however, is hotly disputed. The disputes begin with the open-

ing phrase: is "still" an adverb ("as yet"), or is it an adjective ("motionless"), as the punctuation of the *Annals* version, which adds a comma after "still," suggests? And the two concluding lines have accumulated as much critical discussion as the "two-handed engine" in Milton's "Lycidas" or the most difficult cruxes in Shakespeare's plays.

2. Rustic, representing a woodland scene.

3. The valleys of Arcadia, a state in ancient Greece often used as a symbol of the pastoral ideal. "Tempe": a beautiful valley in Greece that has come to represent rural beauty.

4. The ear of sense (as opposed to that of the "spirit," or imagination).

For ever piping songs for ever new;  
25 More happy love! more happy, happy love!  
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,  
For ever panting, and for ever young;  
All breathing human passion far above,  
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,  
30 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

4  
Who are these coming to the sacrifice?  
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?  
35 What little town by river or sea shore,  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?  
And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
40 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

5  
O Attic<sup>5</sup> shape! Fair attitude!<sup>6</sup> with brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,<sup>7</sup>  
With forest branches and the trodden weed;  
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
45 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"<sup>8</sup> – that is all  
50 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

1819

1820

**ode on Melancholy** This is Keats's best-known statement of his recurrent theme of the mingled contrarities of life. The remarkable last stanza, in which Melancholy becomes a veiled goddess worshiped in secret religious rites, implies that it is the tragic human destiny that beauty, joy, and life itself owe not only their quality but their value to the fact that they are transitory and turn into their opposites. Melancholy—a synonym for depression, involving a paralyzing self-consciousness engendered by an excess of thought—is a highly literary and even bookish ailment, as Keats knew. Shakespeare's Hamlet and Milton's speaker in "Il Penseroso" are the

5. Greek. Attica was the region of Greece in which Athens was located.

6. Probably used in its early, technical sense: the pose struck by a figure in statuary or painting.

7. Ornamented ail over ("overwrought") with an interwoven pattern ("brede"). The adjective "overwrought" might also modify "maidens" and even "men" and so hint at the emotional anguish of the figures portrayed on the urn.

8. The quotation marks around this phrase are found in the volume of poems Keats published in 1820, but there are no quotation marks in the version printed in *Annals of the Fine Arts* that same year or in the transcripts of the poem made by

Keats's friends. This discrepancy has multiplied the diversity of critical interpretations of the last two lines. Critics disagree whether the whole of these lines is said by the urn, or "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" by the urn and the rest by the lyric speaker; whether the "ye" in the last line is addressed to the lyric speaker, to the readers, to the urn, or to the figures on the urn; whether "all ye know" is that beauty is truth, or this plus the statement in lines 46<sup>^</sup>\*8; and whether "beauty is truth" is a profound metaphysical proposition, an overstatement representing the limited point of view of the urn, or simply nonsensical.

disorder's most famous sufferers. Keats was also an admirer of Robert Burton's encyclopedic *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621).

The poem once had the following initial stanza, which Keats canceled in manuscript:

Though you should build a bark of dead men's bones,  
And rear a phantom gibbet for a mast,  
Stitch creeds together for a sail, with groans  
To fill it out, bloodstained and aghast;  
Although your rudder be a Dragon's tail,  
Long sever'd, yet still hard with agony,  
Your cordage large uprootings from the skull  
Of bald Medusa: certes you would fail  
To find the Melancholy, whether she  
Dreameth in any isle of Lethe dull.

### Ode on Melancholy

No, no, go not to Lethe,<sup>1</sup> neither twist  
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;  
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd  
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;<sup>2</sup>  
5 Make not your rosary of yew-berries,<sup>3</sup>  
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be  
Your mournful Psyche,<sup>4</sup> nor the downy owl  
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;<sup>5</sup>  
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,  
10 And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.<sup>6</sup>

2

But when the melancholy fit shall fall  
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,  
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,  
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;  
15 Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,  
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,  
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;  
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,  
20 And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

3

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,

1. The waters of forgetfulness in Hades.  
2. The wife of Pluto and queen of the underworld. "Nightshade" and "wolf's-bane" (line 2) are poisonous plants.  
3. A symbol of death.  
4. In ancient times Psyche (the soul) was sometimes represented as a butterfly or moth, fluttering out of the mouth of a dying man. The allusion may also be to the death's-head moth, which has skull-

like markings on its back. The "beetle" of line 6 refers to replicas of the large black beetle, the scarab, which were often placed by Egyptians in their tombs as a symbol of resurrection.  
5. Secret rituals.  
6. I.e., sorrow needs contrast to sustain its intensity.  
7. Usually taken to refer to Melancholy rather than to "thy mistress" in line 18.

Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:  
25 Ay, in the very temple of Delight  
    Vei'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,  
    Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue  
    Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;<sup>8</sup>  
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,  
30 And be among her cloudy trophies hung.<sup>9</sup>

1819

1820

### Ode on Indolence<sup>1</sup>

"They toil not, neither do they spin."<sup>2</sup>

#### 1

One morn before me were three figures seen,  
    With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced;  
And one behind the other stepp'd serene,  
    In placid sandals, and in white robes graced:  
5 They pass'd, like figures on a marble urn,  
    When shifted round to see the other side;  
    They came again: as when the urn once more  
Is shifted round, the first seen shades return;  
    And they were strange to me, as may betide  
10 With vases, to one deep in Phidian<sup>3</sup> lore.

#### 2

How is it, shadows, that I knew ye not?  
    How came ye muffled in so hush a masque?  
Was it a silent deep-disguised plot  
    To steal away, and leave without a task  
15 My idle days? Ripe was the drowsy hour;  
    The blissful cloud of summer-indolence  
    Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;  
Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower.  
    O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense  
20 Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?

#### 3

A third time pass'd they by, and, passing, turn'd  
    Each one the face a moment whiles to me;  
Then faded, and to follow them I burn'd  
    And ached for wings, because I knew the three:  
25 The first was a fair maid, and Love her name;

8. Sensitive, refined.

9. A reference to the Greek and Roman practice of hanging trophies in the temples of the gods.

1. On March 19, 1819, Keats wrote to George and Georgiana Keats: "This morning I am in a sort of temper indolent and supremely careless. . . . Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me: they seem rather like three figures on a greek vase—a Man and two women—whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguisement. This is the only

happiness; and is a rare instance of advantage in the body overpowering the Mind." The ode was probably written soon after this time, but was not published until 1848, long after the poet's death.

2. Matthew 6.28. Christ's comment on the lilies of the field—a parable justifying those who trust to God rather than worry about how they will feed or clothe themselves.

3. Phidias was the great Athenian sculptor of the 5th century B.C.E. who designed the marble sculptures for the Parthenon.

The second was Ambition, pale of cheek,  
And ever watchful with fatigued eye;  
The last, whom I love more, the more of blame  
Is heap'd upon her, maiden most unmeek, –  
30 I knew to be my demon<sup>4</sup> Poesy.

4  
They faded, and, forsooth! I wanted wings:  
O folly! What is Love? and where is it?  
And for that poor Ambition – it springs  
From a man's little heart's short fever-fit;  
35 For Poesy! – no, – she has not a joy, –  
At least for me, – so sweet as drowsy noons,  
And evenings steep'd in honied indolence;  
O, for an age so shelter'd from annoy,  
That I may never know how change the moons,  
40 Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!

5  
A third time came they by; – alas! wherefore?  
My sleep had been embroider'd with dim dreams;  
My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er  
With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:  
45 The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,  
Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;  
The open casement press'd a new-leaved vine,  
Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay;<sup>0</sup> *thrush's song*  
O shadows! 'twas a time to bid farewell!  
50 Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine.

6  
So, ye three ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise  
My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;  
For I would not be dieted with praise,  
A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!<sup>5</sup>  
55 Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more  
In masque-like figures on the dreamy urn;  
Farewell! I yet have visions for the night,  
And for the day faint visions there is store;  
Vanish, ye phantoms, from my idle spright,<sup>0</sup> *spirit*  
60 Into the clouds, and never more return!

Spring 1819

1848

Lamia In a note printed at the end of the poem, Keats cited as his source the following story in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621):

4. Meaning both devil and, as in Greek myth, the spirit that attends constantly on the human individual.

5. In a letter of June 9, 1819, Keats wrote: "I have been very idle lately, very averse to writing; both from the overpowering idea of our dead poets and

from abatement of my love of fame. I hope I am a little more of a Philosopher than I was, consequently a little less of a versifying Pet-lamb. . . . You will judge of my 1819 temper when I tell you that the thing I have most enjoyed this year has been writing an ode to Indolence."



One Menippus Lycius, a young man twenty-five years of age, that going betwixt Cenchreas and Corinth, met such a phantasm in the habit of a fair gentlewoman, which, taking him by the hand, carried him home to her house, in the suburbs of Corinth. . . . The young man, a philosopher, otherwise staid and discreet, able to moderate his passions, though not this of love, tarried with her a while to his great content, and at last married her, to whose wedding, amongst other guests, came Apollonius; who, by some probable conjectures, found her out to be a serpent, a lamia; and that all her furniture was, like Tantalus's gold, described by Homer, no substance but mere illusions. When she saw herself descried, she wept, and desired Apollonius to be silent, but he would not be moved, and thereupon she, plate, house, and all that was in it, vanished in an instant: many thousands took notice of this fact, for it was done in the midst of Greece.

In ancient demonology a "lamia" was a monster in woman's form who preyed on human beings. There are various clues that Keats invested the ancient legend with allegorical significance (see especially 2.229–38). Its interpretation, however, and even the inclination of Keats's sympathies in the contest between Lamia and Apollonius, have been disputed. Perhaps Keats simply failed to make up his mind or wavered in the course of composition. In any case the poem presents an inevitably fatal situation, in which no one is entirely blameless or blameworthy and no character monopolizes either our sympathy or our antipathy.

The poem, written between late June and early September 1819, is a return, after the Spenserian stanzas of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, to the pentameter couplets Keats had used in *Endymion* and other early poems. But Keats had in the meantime been studying John Dryden's closed and strong-paced couplets. The initial lines of Dryden's version of Boccaccio's story *Cymon and Iphigenia* demonstrate the kind of narrative model that helped Keats make the technical transition from the fluent but sprawling gracefulness of the opening of *Endymion* to the vigor and economy of the opening of *Lamia*:

In that sweet isle where Venus keeps her court,  
And every grace, and all the loves, resort;  
Where either sex is formed of softer earth,  
And takes the bent of pleasure from their birth;  
There lived a Cyprian lord, above the rest  
Wise, wealthy, with a numerous issue blessed. . . .

## Lamia

### Part 1

Upon a time, before the faery broods  
Drove Nymph and Satyr<sup>1</sup> from the prosperous woods,  
Before King Oberon's bright diadem,  
Sceptre, and mantle, clasp'd with dewy gem,  
5 Frighted away the Dryads and the Fauns  
From rushes green, and brakes,<sup>2</sup> and cowslip'd lawns, *thickets*  
The ever-smitten Hermes<sup>3</sup> empty left  
His golden throne, bent warm on amorous theft:  
From high Olympus had he stolen light,

1. Nymphs and satyrs—like the dryads and fauns in line 5—were minor classical deities of the woods and fields, said here to have been driven off by Oberon, king of the fairies, who were supernatural

beings of the postclassical era.

2. Or Mercury; wing-footed messenger at the summons of Jove (line 11), Hermes was notoriously amorous.

10 On this side of Jove's clouds, to escape the sight  
Of his great summoner, and made retreat  
Into a forest on the shores of Crete.  
For somewhere in that sacred island dwelt  
A nymph, to whom all hoofed Satyrs knelt;  
15 At whose white feet the languid Tritons' poured  
Pearls, while on land they wither'd and adored.  
Fast by the springs where she to bathe was wont,  
And in those meads where sometime she might haunt,  
Were strewn rich gifts, unknown to any Muse,  
20 Though Fancy's casket were unlock'd to choose.  
Ah, what a world of love was at her feet!  
So Hermes thought, and a celestial heat  
Burnt from his winged heels to either ear,  
That from a whiteness, as the lily clear,  
25 Blush'd into roses 'mid his golden hair,  
Fallen in jealous curls about his shoulders bare.<sup>4</sup>

From vale to vale, from wood to wood, he flew,  
Breathing upon the flowers his passion new,  
And wound with many a river to its head,  
30 To find where this sweet nymph prepar'd her secret bed:  
In vain; the sweet nymph might nowhere be found,  
And so he rested, on the lonely ground,  
Pensive, and full of painful jealousies  
Of the Wood-Gods, and even the very trees.  
35 There as he stood, he heard a mournful voice,  
Such as once heard, in gentle heart, destroys  
All pain but pity: thus the lone voice spake:  
"When from this wreathed tomb shall I awake!  
When move in a sweet body fit for life,  
40 And love, and pleasure, and the ruddy strife  
Of hearts and lips! Ah, miserable me!"  
The God, dove-footed,<sup>5</sup> glided silently  
Round bush and tree, soft-brushing, in his speed,  
The taller grasses and full-flowering weed,  
45 Until he found a palpitating snake,  
Bright, and cirque-couchant<sup>6</sup> in a dusky brake.

She was a gordian<sup>7</sup> shape of dazzling hue,  
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;  
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,<sup>8</sup>  
50 Eyed like a peacock,<sup>8</sup> and all crimson barr'd;  
And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,  
Dissolv'd, or brighter shone, or interwreathed  
Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries—  
So rainbow-sided, touch'd with miseries,

*leopard*

3. Minor sea gods.

4. I.e., the curls clung jealously to his bare shoulders. This line is the first of a number of Alexandrines, a six-foot line, used to vary the metrical movement—a device that Keats learned from Dryden. Another such device is the triplet, occurring first in lines 61–63.

5. I.e., quietly as a dove.

6. Lying in a circular coil. Keats borrows the language of heraldry.

7. Intricately twisted, like the knot tied by King Gordius, which no one could undo.

8. Having multicolored spots, like the "eyes" in a peacock's tail.

55 She seem'd, at once, some penanced lady elf,  
Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self.  
Upon her crest she wore a wannish<sup>9</sup> fire  
Sprinkled with stars, like Ariadne's tiar:<sup>1</sup>  
Her head was serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet!  
60 She had a woman's mouth with all its pearls<sup>2</sup> complete:  
And for her eyes: what could such eyes do there  
But weep, and weep, that they were born so fair?  
As Proserpine still weeps for her Sicilian air.<sup>3</sup>  
Her throat was serpent, but the words she spake  
65 Came, as through bubbling honey, for Love's sake,  
And thus; while Hermes on his pinions<sup>0</sup> lay, *wings*  
Like a stoop'd falcon<sup>4</sup> ere he takes his prey.

"Fair Hermes, crown'd with feathers, fluttering light,  
I had a splendid dream of thee last night:  
70 I saw thee sitting, on a throne of gold,  
Among the Gods, upon Olympus old,  
The only sad one; for thou didst not hear  
The soft, lute-finger'd Muses chaunting clear,  
Nor even Apollo when he sang alone,  
75 Deaf to his throbbing throat's long, long melodious moan.  
I dreamt I saw thee, robed in purple flakes,  
Break amorous through the clouds, as morning breaks,  
And, swiftly as a bright Phoebean dart,<sup>5</sup>  
Strike for the Cretan isle; and here thou art!  
so Too gentle Hermes, hast thou found the maid?"  
Whereat the star of Lethe<sup>6</sup> not delay'd  
His rosy eloquence, and thus inquired:  
"Thou smooth-lipp'd serpent, surely high inspired!  
Thou beauteous wreath, with melancholy eyes,  
85 Possess whatever bliss thou canst devise,  
Telling me only where my nymph is fled, —  
Where she doth breathe!" "Bright planet, thou hast said,"  
Return'd the snake, "but seal with oaths, fair God!"  
"I swear," said Hermes, "by my serpent rod,  
90 And by thine eyes, and by thy starry crown!"  
Light flew his earnest words, among the blossoms blown.  
Then thus again the brilliance feminine:  
"Too frail of heart! for this lost nymph of thine,  
Free as the air, invisibly, she strays  
95 About these thornless wilds; her pleasant days  
She tastes unseen; unseen her nimble feet  
Leave traces in the grass and flowers sweet;

9. Rather dark.

1. Ariadne's jeweled wedding crown, or tiara ("tiar"), was given to her by the god Bacchus, who took her as his wife after she was abandoned by her faithless mortal lover Theseus. The crown, transformed into a constellation of stars in the sky, is represented in Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, which Keats had seen when the painting was exhibited in London in 1816. Keats's memories of this painting may also inform his reference to Bacchus's chariot and leopards in "Ode to a Nightingale," line 32.

2. "Pearls" had become almost a synonym for teeth in Elizabethan love poems.

3. Proserpine had been carried off to Hades by Pluto from the field of Enna, in Sicily.

4. *Stoop* is the term for the plunge of a falcon on his prey.

5. A ray of Phoebus Apollo, god of the sun.

6. Hermes, when he appeared like a star on the banks of Lethe, in the darkness of Hades. (One of Hermes' offices was to guide the souls of the dead to the lower regions.)

From weary tendrils, and bow'd branches green,  
She plucks the fruit unseen, she bathes unseen:  
∞ And by my power is her beauty veil'd  
To keep it unaffronted, unassail'd  
By the love-glances of unlovely eyes,  
Of Satyrs, Fauns, and blear'd Silenus'<sup>7</sup> sighs.  
Pale grew her immortality, for woe  
105 Of all these lovers, and she grieved so  
I took compassion on her, bade her steep  
Her hair in weird" syrops, that would keep *magical*  
Her loveliness invisible, yet free  
To wander as she loves, in liberty,  
no Thou shalt behold her, Hermes, thou alone,  
If thou wilt, as thou swearest, grant my boon!"  
Then, once again, the charmed God began  
An oath, and through the serpent's ears it ran  
Warm, tremulous, devout, psalterian."  
us Ravish'd, she lifted her Circean head,  
Blush'd a live damask,<sup>9</sup> and swift-lisping said,  
"I was a woman, let me have once more  
A woman's shape, and charming as before.  
I love a youth of Corinth—O the bliss!  
120 Give me my woman's form, and place me where he is.  
Stoop, Hermes, let me breathe upon thy brow,  
And thou shalt see thy sweet nymph even now."  
The God on half-shut feathers sank serene,  
She breath'd upon his eyes, and swift was seen  
125 Of both the guarded nymph near-smiling on the green.  
It was no dream; or say a dream it was,  
Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass  
Their pleasures in a long immortal dream.  
One warm, flush'd moment, hovering, it might seem  
130 Dash'd by the wood-nymph's beauty, so he burn'd;  
Then, lighting on the printless verdure, turn'd  
To the swoon'd serpent, and with languid arm,  
Delicate, put to proof the lythe Caducean charm.<sup>1</sup>  
So done, upon the nymph his eyes he bent  
135 Full of adoring tears and blandishment,  
And towards her stept: she, like a moon in wane,  
Faded before him, cower'd, nor could restrain  
Her fearful sobs, self-folding like a flower  
That faints into itself at evening hour:  
140 But the God fostering her chilled hand,  
She felt the warmth, her eyelids open'd bland,<sup>0</sup> *softly*  
And, like new flowers at morning song of bees,  
Bloom'd, and gave up her honey to the lees.<sup>o</sup> *dregs*  
Into the green-recessed woods they flew;  
145 Nor grew they pale, as mortal lovers do.

7. Satyr, a tutor of Bacchus, usually represented as a fat, jolly drunkard.

8. Either "like a psalm" or "like the sound of the psaltery" (an ancient stringed instrument).

9. The color of a damask rose (large and fragrant

pink rose). "Circean": like that of Circe, the enchantress in the *Odyssey*.

1. I.e., put to the test the magic of the flexible Caduceus (the name given to Hermes' wand).

Left to herself, the serpent now began  
To change; her elfin blood in madness ran,  
Her mouth foam'd, and the grass, therewith besprent,<sup>0</sup> *sprinkled*  
Wither'd at dew so sweet and virulent;  
150 Her eyes in torture fix'd, and anguish drear,  
Hot, glaz'd, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear,  
Flash'd phosphor and sharp sparks, without one cooling tear.  
The colours all inflam'd throughout her train,  
She writh'd about, convuls'd with scarlet pain:  
155 A deep volcanian yellow took the place  
Of all her milder-mooned body's grace;<sup>2</sup>  
And, as the lava ravishes the mead,  
Spoilt all her silver mail, and golden brede;<sup>3</sup>  
Made gloom of all her frecklings, streaks and bars,  
160 Eclips'd her crescents, and lick'd up her stars:  
So that, in moments few, she was undrest  
Of all her sapphires, greens, and amethyst,  
And rubious-argent:<sup>0</sup> of all these bereft, *silvery red*  
Nothing but pain and ugliness were left.  
165 Still shone her crown; that vanish'd, also she  
Melted and disappear'd as suddenly;  
And in the air, her new voice luting soft,  
Cried, "Lycius! gentle Lycius!" – Borne aloft  
With the bright mists about the mountains hoar<sup>o</sup> *white*  
170 These words dissolv'd: Crete's forests heard no more.

Whither fled Lamia, now a lady bright,  
A full-born beauty new and exquisite?  
She fled into that valley they pass o'er  
Who go to Corinth from Cenchreas' shore;<sup>4</sup>  
175 And rested at the foot of those wild hills,  
The rugged founts of the Peaeran rills,  
And of that other ridge whose barren back  
Stretches, with all its mist and cloudy rack,  
South-westward to Cleone. There she stood  
180 About a young bird's flutter from a wood,  
Fair, on a sloping green of mossy tread,  
By a clear pool, wherein she passioned<sup>5</sup>  
To see herself escap'd from so sore ills,  
While her robes flaunted with the daffodils.

185 Ah, happy Lycius! – for she was a maid  
More beautiful than ever twisted braid,  
Or sigh'd, or blush'd, or on spring-flowered lea<sup>o</sup> *meadow*  
Spread a green kirtle<sup>0</sup> to the minstrelsy: *gown*  
A virgin purest lipp'd, yet in the lore  
190 Of love deep learned to the red heart's core:  
Not one hour old, yet of sciential brain  
To unperplex bliss from its neighbour pain;

2. I.e., the yellow of sulfur (thrown up by a volcano) replaced her former silvery moon color.  
3. Embroidery, interwoven pattern. "Mail": interlinked rings, as in a coat of armor.

4. Cenchrea (Keats's "Cenchreas") was a harbor of Corinth, in southern Greece.  
5. Felt intense excitement.

Define their pettish limits, and estrange  
Their points of contact, and swift counterchange;<sup>6</sup>  
195 Intrigue with the specious chaos,<sup>7</sup> and dispart  
Its most ambiguous atoms with sure art;  
As though in Cupid's college she had spent  
Sweet days a lovely graduate, still unshent,<sup>8</sup> *unspoiled*  
And kept his rosy terms<sup>8</sup> in idle languishment.

200 Why this fair creature chose so fairly  
By the wayside to linger, we shall see;  
But first 'tis fit to tell how she could muse  
And dream, when in the serpent prison-house,  
Of all she list,<sup>9</sup> strange or magnificent: *wished*  
205 How, ever, where she will'd, her spirit went;  
Whether to faint Elysium,<sup>9</sup> or where  
Down through tress-lifting waves the Nereids' fair  
Wind into Thetis' bower by many a pearly stair;  
Or where God Bacchus drains his cups divine,  
210 Stretch'd out, at ease, beneath a glutinous pine;  
Or where in Pluto's gardens palatine<sup>0</sup> *palatial*  
Mulciber's columns gleam in far piazzian line.<sup>2</sup>  
And sometimes into cities she would send  
Her dream, with feast and rioting to blend;  
215 And once, while among mortals dreaming thus,  
She saw the young Corinthian Lycius  
Charioting foremost in the envious race,  
Like a young Jove with calm uneager face,  
And fell into a swooning love of him.

220 Now on the moth-time of that evening dim  
He would return that way, as well she knew,  
To Corinth from the shore; for freshly blew  
The eastern soft wind, and his galley now  
Grated the quaystones with her brazen prow  
225 In port Cenchreas, from Egina isle  
Fresh anchor'd; whither he had been awhile  
To sacrifice to Jove, whose temple there  
Waits with high marble doors for blood and incense rare.  
Jove heard his vows, and better'd his desire;  
230 For by some freakful chance he made retire  
From his companions, and set forth to walk,  
Perhaps grown wearied of their Corinth talk:  
Over the solitary hills he fared,  
Thoughtless at first, but ere eve's star appeared  
235 His phantasy was lost, where reason fades,  
In the calm'd twilight of Platonic shades.<sup>3</sup>

6. I.e., of knowledgeable ("sciential") brain to disentangle ("unperplex") bliss from its closely related pain, to define their quarreled-over ("pettish") limits, and to separate out ("estrange") their points of contact and the swift changes of each condition into its opposite. Cf. Keats's "Ode on Melancholy," lines 21-26 (p. 907).

7. I.e., turn to her own artful purpose the seeming ("specious") chaos.

8. The terms spent studying in "Cupid's college."

9. Region inhabited by the virtuous after death.

1. Sea nymphs, of whom Thetis (line 208, the mother of Achilles) was one.

2. I.e., columns made by Mulciber (Vulcan, god of fire and metalworking) gleam in long lines around open courts (piazzas).

3. I.e., he was absorbed in musing about the obscurities of Plato's philosophy.

Lamia beheld him coming, near, more near –  
Close to her passing, in indifference drear,  
His silent sandals swept the mossy green;  
240 So neighbour'd to him, and yet so unseen  
She stood: he pass'd, shut up in mysteries,  
His mind wrapp'd like his mantle, while her eyes  
Follow'd his steps, and her neck regal white  
Turn'd – syllabling thus, "Ah, Lycius bright,  
245 And will you leave me on the hills alone?  
Lycius, look back! and be some pity shown."  
He did; not with cold wonder fearingly,  
But Orpheus-like at an Eurydice;<sup>4</sup>  
For so delicious were the words she sung,  
250 It seem'd he had lov'd them a whole summer long:  
And soon his eyes had drunk her beauty up,  
Leaving no drop in the bewildering cup,  
And still the cup was full, – while he, afraid  
Lest she should vanish ere his lip had paid  
255 Due adoration, thus began to adore;  
Her soft look growing coy, she saw his chain so sure:  
"Leave thee alone! Look back! Ah, Goddess, see  
Whether my eyes can ever turn from thee!  
For pity do not this sad heart belie<sup>5</sup> –  
260 Even as thou vanishest so I shall die.  
Stay! though a Naiad of the rivers, stay!  
To thy far wishes will thy streams obey:  
Stay! though the greenest woods be thy domain,  
Alone they can drink up the morning rain:  
265 Though a descended Pleiad,<sup>6</sup> will not one  
Of thine harmonious sisters keep in tune  
Thy spheres, and as thy silver proxy shine?  
So sweetly to these ravish'd ears of mine  
Came thy sweet greeting, that if thou shouldst fade  
270 Thy memory will waste me to a shade: –  
For pity do not melt!" – "If I should stay,"  
Said Lamia, "here, upon this floor of clay,  
And pain my steps upon these flowers too rough,  
What canst thou say or do of charm enough  
275 To dull the nice<sup>7</sup> remembrance of my home?  
Thou canst not ask me with thee here to roam  
Over these hills and vales, where no joy is, –  
Empty of immortality and bliss!  
Thou art a scholar, Lycius, and must know  
280 That finer spirits cannot breathe below  
In human climes, and live: Alas! poor youth,  
What taste of purer air hast thou to soothe  
My essence? What serener palaces,  
Where I may all my many senses please,

4. As Orpheus looked at Eurydice in Hades. Orpheus was allowed by Pluto to lead Eurydice back to Earth on condition that he not look back at her, but he could not resist doing so and hence lost her once more.

5. Be false to.

6. One of the seven sisters composing the constellation Pleiades. The lines that follow allude to the ancient belief that the planets traveled inside crystalline spheres whose movements produced heavenly music.

7. Detailed, minutely accurate.

285 And by mysterious sleights a hundred thirsts appease?  
It cannot be— Adieu!" So said, she rose  
Tiptoe with white arms spread. He, sick to lose  
The amorous promise of her lone complain,  
Swoon'd, murmuring of love, and pale with pain.  
290 The cruel lady, without any show  
Of sorrow for her tender favourite's woe,  
But rather, if her eyes could brighter be,  
With brighter eyes and slow amenity,<sup>0</sup> *pleasure*  
Put her new lips to his, and gave afresh  
295 The life she had so tangled in her mesh:  
And as he from one trance was wakening  
Into another, she began to sing,  
Happy in beauty, life, and love, and every thing,  
A song of love, too sweet for earthly lyres,  
300 While, like held breath, the stars drew in their panting fires.  
And then she whisper'd in such trembling tone,  
As those who, safe together met alone  
For the first time through many anguish'd days,  
Use other speech than looks; bidding him raise  
305 His drooping head, and clear his soul of doubt,  
For that she was a woman, and without  
Any more subtle fluid in her veins  
Than throbbing blood, and that the self-same pains  
Inhabited her frail-strung heart as his.  
310 And next she wonder'd how his eyes could miss  
Her face so long in Corinth, where, she said,  
She dwelt but half retir'd, and there had led  
Days happy as the gold coin could invent  
Without the aid of love; yet in content  
315 Till she saw him, as once she pass'd him by,  
Where 'gainst a column he leant thoughtfully  
At Venus' temple porch, 'mid baskets heap'd  
Of amorous herbs and flowers, newly reap'd  
Late on that eve, as 'twas the night before  
320 The Adonian feast;<sup>8</sup> whereof she saw no more,  
But wept alone those days, for why should she adore?  
Lycius from death awoke into amaze,  
To see her still, and singing so sweet lays;  
Then from amaze into delight he fell  
325 To hear her whisper woman's lore so well;  
And every word she spake entic'd him on  
To unperplex'd delight<sup>9</sup> and pleasure known.  
Let the mad poets say whate'er they please  
Of the sweets of Fairies, Peris,<sup>1</sup> Goddesses,  
330 There is not such a treat among them all,  
Haunters of cavern, lake, and waterfall,  
As a real woman, lineal indeed  
From Pyrrha's pebbles<sup>2</sup> or old Adam's seed.  
Thus gentle Lamia judg'd, and judg'd aright,

8. The feast of Adonis, beloved by Venus.

9. I.e., delight not mixed with its neighbor, pain (see line 192).

1. Fairylike creatures in Persian mythology.

2. Descended from the pebbles with which, in Greek myth, Pyrrha and Deucalion repopled the earth after the flood.



335 That Lycius could not love in half a fright,  
So threw the goddess off, and won his heart  
More pleasantly by playing woman's part,  
With no more awe than what her beauty gave,  
That, while it smote, still guaranteed to save.  
340 Lycius to all made eloquent reply,  
Marrying to every word a twinborn sigh;  
And last, pointing to Corinth, ask'd her sweet,  
If 'twas too far that night for her soft feet.  
The way was short, for Lamia's eagerness  
345 Made, by a spell, the triple league decrease  
To a few paces; not at all surmised  
By blinded Lycius, so in her comprized.<sup>3</sup>  
They pass'd the city gates, he knew not how,  
So noiseless, and he never thought to know.

350 As men talk in a dream, so Corinth all,  
Throughout her palaces imperial,  
And all her populous streets and temples lewd,<sup>4</sup>  
Mutter'd, like tempest in the distance brew'd,  
To the wide-spreaded night above her towers.  
355 Men, women, rich and poor, in the cool hours,  
Shuffled their sandals o'er the pavement white,  
Companion'd or alone; while many a light  
Flared, here and there, from wealthy festivals,  
And threw their moving shadows on the walls,  
360 Or found them cluster'd in the corniced shade  
Of some arch'd temple door, or dusky colonnade.

Muffling his face, of greeting friends in fear,  
Her fingers he press'd hard, as one came near  
With curl'd gray beard, sharp eyes, and smooth bald crown,  
365 Slow-stepp'd, and robed in philosophic gown:  
Lycius shrank closer, as they met and past,  
Into his mantle, adding wings to haste,  
While hurried Lamia trembled: "Ah," said he,  
"Why do you shudder, love, so ruefully?  
370 Why does your tender palm dissolve in dew?"—  
"I'm wearied," said fair Lamia: "tell me who  
Is that old man? I cannot bring to mind  
His features:—Lycius! wherefore did you blind  
Yourself from his quick eyes?" Lycius replied,  
375 " 'Tis Apollonius sage, my trusty guide  
And good instructor; but to-night he seems  
The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams."

While yet he spake they had arrived before  
A pillar'd porch, with lofty portal door,  
380 Where hung a silver lamp, whose phosphor glow

3. Bound up, absorbed.

4. Temples of Venus, whose worship sometimes involved ritual prostitution. The city of Corinth

was notorious in antiquity as a site of commerce and prostitution.

Reflected in the slabbed steps below,  
Mild as a star in water; for so new,  
And so unsullied was the marble hue,  
So through the crystal polish, liquid fine,  
385 Ran the dark veins, that none but feet divine  
Could e'er have touch'd there. Sounds Eolian<sup>5</sup>  
Breath'd from the hinges, as the ample span  
Of the wide doors disclos'd a place unknown  
Some time to any, but those two alone,  
390 And a few Persian mutes, who that same year  
Were seen about the markets: none knew where  
They could inhabit; the most curious  
Were foil'd, who watch'd to trace them to their house:  
And but the flitter-winged verse must tell,  
395 For truth's sake, what woe afterwards befel,  
'Twould humour many a heart to leave them thus,  
Shut from the busy world of more incredulous.

*Part 2*

Love in a hut, with water and a crust,  
Is—Love, forgive us!—cinders, ashes, dust;  
Love in a palace is perhaps at last  
More grievous torment than a hermit's fast:—  
5 That is a doubtful tale from faery land,  
Hard for the non-elect to understand.  
Had Lycius liv'd to hand his story down,  
He might have given the moral a fresh frown,  
Or clench'd it quite: but too short was their bliss  
10 To breed distrust and hate, that make the soft voice hiss.  
Besides, there, nightly, with terrific glare,  
Love, jealous grown of so complete a pair,  
Hover'd and buzz'd his wings, with fearful roar,  
Above the lintel of their chamber door,  
15 And down the passage cast a glow upon the floor.

For all this came a ruin: side by side  
They were enthroned, in the even tide,  
Upon a couch, near to a curtaining  
Whose airy texture, from a golden string,  
20 Floated into the room, and let appear  
Unveil'd the summer heaven, blue and clear,  
Betwixt two marble shafts:—there they reposed,  
Where use had made it sweet, with eyelids closed,  
Saving a tythe which love still open kept,  
25 That they might see each other while they almost slept;  
When from the slope side of a suburb hill,  
Deafening the swallow's twitter, came a thrill  
Of trumpets—Lycius started—the sounds fled,  
But left a thought, a buzzing in his head.  
30 For the first time, since first he harbour'd in

5. Like sounds from the wind harp (Aeolus is god of winds), which responds musically to a current of air.

That purple-lined palace of sweet sin,  
His spirit pass'd beyond its golden bourn<sup>0</sup> *boundary*  
Into the noisy world almost forsworn.  
The lady, ever watchful, penetrant,  
35 Saw this with pain, so arguing a want  
Of something more, more than her empery<sup>0</sup> *empire*  
Of joys; and she began to moan and sigh  
Because he mused beyond her, knowing well  
That but a moment's thought is passion's passing bell.<sup>o</sup> *death knell*  
40 "Why do you sigh, fair creature?" whisper'd he:  
"Why do you think?" return'd she tenderly:  
"You have deserted me;—where am I now?  
Not in your heart while care weighs on your brow:  
No, no, you have dismiss'd me; and I go  
45 From your breast houseless: ay, it must be so."  
He answer'd, bending to her open eyes,  
Where he was mirror'd small in paradise,  
"My silver planet, both of eve and morn!<sup>6</sup>  
Why will you plead yourself so sad forlorn,  
50 While I am striving how to fill my heart  
With deeper crimson, and a double smart?  
How to entangle, trammel up and snare  
Your soul in mine, and labyrinth you there  
Like the hid scent in an unbudded rose?  
55 Ay, a sweet kiss—you see your mighty woes.<sup>7</sup>  
My thoughts! shall I unveil them? Listen then!  
What mortal hath a prize, that other men  
May be confounded and abash'd withal,  
But lets it sometimes pace abroad majestic,  
60 And triumph, as in thee I should rejoice  
Amid the hoarse alarm of Corinth's voice.  
Let my foes choke, and my friends shout afar,  
While through the thronged streets your bridal car<sup>o</sup> *chariot*  
Wheels round its dazzling spokes."—The lady's cheek  
65 Trembled; she nothing said, but, pale and meek,  
Arose and knelt before him, wept a rain  
Of sorrows at his words; at last with pain  
Beseeching him, the while his hand she wrung,  
To change his purpose. He thereat was stung,  
70 Perverse, with stronger fancy to reclaim  
Her wild and timid nature to his aim:  
Besides, for all his love, in self despite,  
Against his better self, he took delight  
Luxurious in her sorrows, soft and new.  
75 His passion, cruel grown, took on a hue  
Fierce and sanguineous as 'twas possible  
In one whose brow had no dark veins to swell.  
Fine was the mitigated fury, like  
Apollo's presence when in act to strike  
so The serpent—Ha, the serpent! certes, she

6. The planet Venus, which is both the morning and the evening star.

7. Playfully: "You see how great your troubles were!"

Was none. She burnt, she lov'd the tyranny,  
And, all subdued, consented to the hour  
When to the bridal he should lead his paramour.  
Whispering in midnight silence, said the youth,  
85 "Sure some sweet name thou hast, though, by my truth,  
I have not ask'd it, ever thinking thee  
Not mortal, but of heavenly progeny,  
As still I do. Hast any mortal name,  
Fit appellation for this dazzling frame?  
90 Or friends or kinsfolk on the citted earth,  
To share our marriage feast and nuptial mirth?"  
"I have no friends," said Lamia, "no, not one;  
My presence in wide Corinth hardly known:  
My parents' bones are in their dusty urns  
95 Sepulchred, where no kindled incense burns,  
Seeing all their luckless race are dead, save me,  
And I neglect the holy rite for thee.  
Even as you list invite your many guests;  
But if, as now it seems, your vision rests  
100 With any pleasure on me, do not bid  
Old Apollonius—from him keep me hid."  
Lycius, perplex'd at words so blind and blank,  
Made close inquiry; from whose touch she shrank,  
Feigning a sleep; and he to the dull shade  
105 Of deep sleep in a moment was betray'd.

It was the custom then to bring away,  
The bride from home at blushing shut of day,  
Veil'd, in a chariot, heralded along  
By strewn flowers, torches, and a marriage song,  
no With other pageants: but this fair unknown  
Had not a friend. So being left alone,  
(Lycius was gone to summon all his kin)  
And knowing surely she could never win  
His foolish heart from its mad pompousness,  
ii5 She set herself, high-thoughted, how to dress  
The misery in fit magnificence.  
She did so, but 'tis doubtful how and whence  
Came, and who were her subtle servitors.  
About the halls, and to and from the doors,  
120 There was a noise of wings, till in short space  
The glowing banquet-room shone with wide-arched grace.  
A haunting music, sole perhaps and lone  
Supportress of the faery-roof, made moan  
Throughout, as fearful the whole charm might fade.  
125 Fresh carved cedar, mimicking a glade  
Of palm and plantain, met from either side,  
High in the midst, in honour of the bride:  
Two palms and then two plantains, and so on,  
From either side their stems branch'd one to one  
150 All down the aisled place; and beneath all  
There ran a stream of lamps straight on from wall to wall.  
So canopied, lay an untasted feast

Teeming with odours. Lamia, regal drest,  
Silently paced about, and as she went,  
In pale contented sort of discontent,  
Mission'd her viewless<sup>8</sup> servants to enrich *invisible*  
The fretted<sup>8</sup> splendour of each nook and niche.  
Between the tree-stems, marbled plain at first,  
Came jasper pannels; then, anon, there burst  
Forth creeping imagery of slighter trees,  
And with the larger wove in small intricacies.  
Approving all, she faded at self-will,  
And shut the chamber up, close, hush'd and still,  
Complete and ready for the revels rude,  
When dreadful<sup>8</sup> guests would come to spoil her solitude. *terrifying*

The day appear'd, and all the gossip rout.  
O senseless Lycius! Madman! wherefore flout  
The silent-blessing fate, warm cloister'd hours,  
And show to common eyes these secret bowers?  
The herd approach'd; each guest, with busy brain,  
Arriving at the portal, gaz'd amain,<sup>8</sup> *intently*  
And enter'd marveling: for they knew the street,  
Remember'd it from childhood all complete  
Without a gap, yet ne'er before had seen  
That royal porch, that high-built fair demesne;<sup>8</sup> *estate*  
So in they hurried all, maz'd, curious and keen:  
Save one, who look'd thereon with eye severe,  
And with calm-planted steps walk'd in austere;  
'Twas Apollonius: something too he laugh'd,  
As though some knotty problem, that had daft<sup>8</sup> *baffled*  
His patient thought, had now begun to thaw,  
And solve and melt:—'twas just as he foresaw.

He met within the murmurous vestibule  
His young disciple. " 'Tis no common rule,  
Lycius," said he, "for uninvited guest  
To force himself upon you, and infest  
With an unbidden presence the bright throng  
Of younger friends; yet must I do this wrong,  
And you forgive me." Lycius blush'd, and led  
The old man through the inner doors broad-spread;  
With reconciling words and courteous mien<sup>8</sup> *appearance*  
Turning into sweet milk the sophist's<sup>8</sup> spleen. *scholar's*

Of wealthy lustre was the banquet-room,  
Fill'd with pervading brilliance and perfume:  
Before each lucid pannel fuming stood  
A censer fed with myrrh and spiced wood,  
Each by a sacred tripod held aloft,  
Whose slender feet wide-swerv'd upon the soft  
Wool-woofed<sup>8</sup> carpets: fifty wreaths of smoke *woven*  
From fifty censers their light voyage took  
To the high roof, still mimick'd as they rose

8. Adorned with fretwork (interlaced patterns).

Along the mirror'd walls by twin-clouds odorous.  
Twelve sphered tables, by silk seats insphered,  
High as the level of a man's breast rear'd  
is? On libbard's<sup>0</sup> paws, upheld the heavy gold *leopard's*  
Of cups and goblets, and the store thrice told  
Of Ceres' horn,<sup>s</sup> and, in huge vessels, wine  
Come from the gloomy tun with merry shine.  
Thus loaded with a feast the tables stood,  
iso Each shrining in the midst the image of a God.

When in an antichamber every guest  
Had felt the cold full sponge to pleasure press'd,  
By minist'ring slaves, upon his hands and feet,  
And fragrant oils with ceremony meet<sup>o</sup> *suitable*  
195 Pour'd on his hair, they all mov'd to the feast  
In white robes, and themselves in order placed  
Around the silken couches, wondering  
Whence all this mighty cost and blaze of wealth could spring.

Soft went the music the soft air along,  
200 While fluent Greek a vowel'd undersong  
Kept up among the guests, discoursing low  
At first, for scarcely was the wine at flow;  
But when the happy vintage touch'd their brains,  
Louder they talk, and louder come the strains  
205 Of powerful instruments: – the gorgeous dyes,  
The space, the splendour of the draperies,  
The roof of awful richness, nectarous cheer,  
Beautiful slaves, and Lamia's self, appear,  
Now, when the wine has done its rosy deed,  
210 And every soul from human trammels freed,  
No more so strange; for merry wine, sweet wine,  
Will make Elysian shades not too fair, too divine.

Soon was God Bacchus at meridian height;  
Flush'd were their cheeks, and bright eyes double bright:  
215 Garlands of every green, and every scent  
From vales deflower'd, or forest-trees branch-rent,  
In baskets of bright osier'd<sup>1</sup> gold were brought  
High as the handles heap'd, to suit the thought  
Of every guest; that each, as he did please,  
220 Might fancy-fit his brows, silk-pillow'd at his ease.

What wreath for Lamia? What for Lycius?  
What for the sage, old Apollonius?  
Upon her aching forehead be there hung  
The leaves of willow and of adder's tongue;<sup>2</sup>  
225 And for the youth, quick, let us strip for him  
The thyrsus,<sup>3</sup> that his watching eyes may swim  
Into forgetfulness; and, for the sage,

9. The horn of plenty, overflowing with the products of Ceres, goddess of grain.

1. Plaited. An "osier" is a strip of willow used in weaving baskets.

2. A fern whose spikes resemble a serpent's tongue.

3. The vine-covered staff of Bacchus, used to signify drunkenness.

Let spear-grass and the spiteful thistle wage  
War on his temples. Do not all charms fly  
230 At the mere touch of cold philosophy?<sup>4</sup>  
There was an awful<sup>o</sup> rainbow once in heaven: *awe-inspiring*  
We know her woof, her texture; she is given  
In the dull catalogue of common things.  
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,  
235 Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,  
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine<sup>5</sup> –  
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made  
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.

By her glad Lycius sitting, in chief place,  
240 Scarce saw in all the room another face,  
Till, checking his love trance, a cup he took  
Full brimm'd, and opposite sent forth a look  
'Cross the broad table, to beseech a glance  
From his old teacher's wrinkled countenance,  
245 And pledge<sup>6</sup> him. The bald-head philosopher  
Had fix'd his eye, without a twinkle or stir  
Full on the alarmed beauty of the bride,  
Brow-beating her fair form, and troubling her sweet pride.  
Lycius then press'd her hand, with devout touch,  
250 As pale it lay upon the rosy couch:  
Twas icy, and the cold ran through his veins;  
Then sudden it grew hot, and all the pains  
Of an unnatural heat shot to his heart.  
"Lamia, what means this? Wherefore dost thou start?  
255 Know'st thou that man?" Poor Lamia answer'd not.  
He gaz'd into her eyes, and not a jot  
Own'd<sup>o</sup> they the lovelorn piteous appeal: *acknowledged*  
More, more he gaz'd: his human senses reel:  
Some hungry spell that loveliness absorbs;  
260 There was no recognition in those orbs.  
"Lamia!" he cried – and no soft-toned reply.  
The many heard, and the loud revelry  
Grew hush; the stately music no more breathes;  
The myrtle<sup>7</sup> sicken'd in a thousand wreaths.  
265 By faint degrees, voice, lute, and pleasure ceased;  
A deadly silence step by step increased,  
Until it seem'd a horrid presence there,  
And not a man but felt the terror in his hair.  
"Lamia!" he shriek'd; and nothing but the shriek  
270 With its sad echo did the silence break.  
"Begone, foul dream!" he cried, gazing again  
In the bride's face, where now no azure vein  
Wander'd on fair-spaced temples; no soft bloom  
Misted the cheek; no passion to illumine

4. In the sense of "natural philosophy," or science. Benjamin Haydon tells in his *Autobiography* how, at a hard-drinking and high-spirited dinner party, Keats had agreed with Charles Lamb (to what extent jokingly, it is not clear) that Newton's *Optics*

"had destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to the prismatic colors."

5. Gnomes were guardians of mines.

6. Drink a toast to.

7. Sacred to Venus, hence an emblem of love.

275 The deep-recessed vision:— all was blight;  
Lamia, no longer fair, there sat a deadly white.  
"Shut, shut those juggling<sup>8</sup> eyes, thou ruthless man!  
Turn them aside, wretch! or the righteous ban  
Of all the Gods, whose dreadful images  
280 Here represent their shadowy presences,  
May pierce them on the sudden with the thorn  
Of painful blindness; leaving thee forlorn,  
In trembling dotage to the feeblest fright  
Of conscience, for their long offended might,  
285 For all thine impious proud-heart sophistries,  
Unlawful magic, and enticing lies.  
Corinthians! look upon that gray-beard wretch!  
Mark how, possess'd, his lashless eyelids stretch  
Around his demon eyes! Corinthians, see!  
290 My sweet bride withers at their potency."  
"Fool!" said the sophist, in an under-tone  
Gruff with contempt; which a death-nighing moan  
From Lycius answer'd, as heart-struck and lost,  
He sank supine beside the aching ghost.  
295 "Fool! Fool!" repeated he, while his eyes still  
Relented not, nor mov'd; "from every ill  
Of life have I preserv'd thee to this day,  
And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?"  
Then Lamia breath'd death breath; the sophist's eye,  
300 Like a sharp spear, went through her utterly,  
Keen, cruel, perçant,<sup>0</sup> stinging: she, as well *piercing*  
As her weak hand could any meaning tell,  
Motion'd him to be silent; vainly so,  
He look'd and look'd again a level—No!  
305 "A Serpent!" echoed he; no sooner said,  
Than with a frightful scream she vanished:  
And Lycius' arms were empty of delight,  
As were his limbs of life, from that same night.  
On the high couch he lay!—his friends came round—  
310 Supported him—no pulse, or breath they found,  
And, in its marriage robe, the heavy body wound.

July—Aug. 1819

1820

### To Autumn<sup>1</sup>

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless

8. Deceiving, full of trickery.

1. Two days after this ode was composed, Keats wrote to J. H. Reynolds: "I never liked stubble fields so much as now—Aye, better than the chilly green of the spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm—in the same way that some pictures look

warm—this struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it." For the author's revisions while composing "To Autumn," see "Poems in Process," in the appendices to this volume.



With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;  
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
15 Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;  
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,  
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook° *scythe*  
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:  
20 And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,  
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

3

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—  
25 While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,  
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;  
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn  
Among the river salallows,° borne aloft *willows*  
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
30 And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;° *region*  
Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft  
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

Sept. 19, 1819

1820

**The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream** Late in 1818, at about the end of his twenty-third year and while he was serving as nurse to his dying brother Tom, Keats planned to undertake an epic poem, modeled on *Paradise Lost*, that he called *Hyperion*. Greek mythology gave Keats its subject—the displacement of Saturn and his fellow Titans by a new generation of gods, Zeus and the other Olympians. But in engaging this topic Keats addressed the epic question at the center of *Paradise Lost*: how did evil come into the world and why? Keats in his story set out to represent an answer, not according to any one religious creed but in terms informed by his reading in comparative religion and mythology. The Titans had been fair and benign gods, and their rule had been a golden age of happiness. Yet at the beginning of the poem all the Titans except Hyperion, god of the sun, have been dethroned; and the uncomprehending Saturn again and again raises the question of how this injustice could have come to be.

2. To "winnow" is to fan the chaff from the grain.

3. An enclosed plot of farmland.

In book 3 of the original *Hyperion*, the scenes among the Titans are supplemented by the experience of the Olympian Apollo, still a youth but destined to displace Hyperion as the sun god among the heavenly powers. He lives in "aching ignorance" of the universe and its processes but is aware of his ignorance and thirsts for knowledge. Suddenly Apollo reads in the face of his tutor Mnemosyne—goddess of memory, who will be mother of the Muses and so of all the arts—the silent record of the defeat of the Titans and at once soars to the knowledge that he seeks: the understanding, both intoxicating and agonizing, that life involves process, that process entails change and suffering, and that there can be no creative progress except by the defeat and destruction of the preceding stage. Apollo cries out:

Knowledge enormous makes a God of me.  
Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions,  
Majesties, sovran voices, agonies,  
Creations and destroyings, all at once  
Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,  
And deify me. . . .

This opening out of Apollo's awareness to the tragic nature of life is what the Titans lacked. As the fragment breaks off, Apollo is transfigured—like one who should "with fierce convulse / Die into life"—not only into one who has earned the right to displace Hyperion as god of the sun, but also into the god of the highest poetry.

Keats abandoned this extraordinary fragment in April 1819. Late that summer, however, he took up the theme again, under the title *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*. This time his primary model is Dante, whom he had been studying in Henry Cary's verse translation of 1814. In *The Divine Comedy* all the narrated events are represented as a vision granted to the poet at the beginning of the poem. In the same way Keats begins *The Fall of Hyperion* with a frame story whose central event is that the poet-protagonist, in a dream, falls from a paradisaic landscape into a wasteland and there earns the right to a vision. That vision reincorporates the events narrated in the first *Hyperion*: Moneta (her Latin name suggests "the Admonisher"), who stands in the same relationship to the poet as, in the earlier tale, Mnemosyne stood to Apollo, permits, or challenges, this protagonist to remember, with her, her own memories of the fall of the Titans. By devising this frame story, Keats shifted his center of poetic concern from the narration of epic action to an account of the evolving consciousness of the epic poet, as he seeks to know his identity, to justify the morality of poetry, and to understand its place in the social world. The ordeal through which Apollo had become god of poetry is replaced in this second version of *Hyperion* by the ordeal of this one poet, who must prove himself able to endure the witnessing that Moneta demands of him and worthy of the power "To see as a God sees" (line 304).

A number of things caused Keats to abandon this attempt at *The Fall of Hyperion* at the sixty-first line of the second canto. (A fragment was published, against his wishes, in his 1820 volume of poems.) He wrote to Reynolds on September 21, 1819:

I have given up Hyperion. . . . Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful or rather artist's humour. I wish to give myself up to other sensations. English ought to be kept up. It may be interesting to you to pick out some lines from Hyperion and put a mark X to the false beauty proceeding from art, and one || to the true voice of feeling.

The two *Hyperion* fragments are impressive achievements, but as Keats with his acumen in self-criticism recognized, they have the air of artistic tours de force, written in an age in which the high artifice of the epic matter and style had ceased to be the natural voice of the poet. In the same letter Keats mentions having composed two days earlier the ode "To Autumn." In this, his last major poem, the poet had envisaged the circumstance of the cycle of life and death, and had articulated his experience in his own poetic voice.

## The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream

### *Canto 1*

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave  
A paradise for a sect; the savage too  
From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep  
Guesses at heaven: pity these have not  
s Trac'd upon vellum<sup>0</sup> or wild Indian leaf *parchment*  
The shadows of melodious utterance.  
But bare of laurel<sup>1</sup> they live, dream, and die;  
For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,  
With the fine spell of words alone can save  
10 Imagination from the sable charm  
And dumb<sup>0</sup> enchantment. Who alive can say *mute*  
"Thou art no poet; may'st not tell thy dreams"?  
Since every man whose soul is not a clod  
Hath visions, and would speak, if he had lov'd  
15 And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.  
Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse  
Be poet's or fanatic's will be known  
When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave.

Methought I stood where trees of every clime,  
20 Palm, myrtle, oak, and sycamore, and beech,  
With plantane, and spice blossoms, made a screen;  
In neighbourhood of fountains, by the noise  
Soft showering in mine ears, and, by the touch  
Of scent, not far from roses. Turning round,  
25 I saw an arbour with a drooping roof  
Of trellis vines, and bells, and larger blooms,  
Like floral-censers swinging light in air;  
Before its wreathed doorway, on a mound  
Of moss, was spread a feast of summer fruits,  
30 Which, nearer seen, seem'd refuse of a meal  
By angel tasted, or our mother Eve;<sup>2</sup>  
For empty shells were scattered on the grass,  
And grape stalks but half bare, and remnants more,  
Sweet smelling, whose pure kinds I could not know.  
35 Still was more plenty than the fabled horn<sup>3</sup>  
Thrice emptied could pour forth, at banqueting  
For Proserpine return'd to her own fields,<sup>4</sup>  
Where the white heifers low. And appetite  
More yearning than on earth I ever felt  
40 Growing within, I ate deliciously;  
And, after not long, thirsted, for thereby  
Stood a cool vessel of transparent juice,  
Sipp'd by the wander'd bee, the which I took,  
And, pledging all the mortals of the world,

1. The laurel, associated with Apollo, is the emblem of poetic fame.

2. In *Paradise Lost* 5.321ff. Eve serves the visiting angel Raphael with a meal of fruits and fruitjuices.

3. The cornucopia, or horn of plenty.

4. When Proserpine each year is released by her husband, Pluto, god of the underworld, for a sojourn on Earth, it is the beginning of spring.

45 And all the dead whose names are in our lips,  
Drank. That full draught is parent of my theme,<sup>5</sup>  
No Asian poppy,<sup>6</sup> nor elixir fine *opium*  
Of the soon fading jealous caliph;<sup>6</sup>  
No poison gender'd in close monkish cell  
50 To thin the scarlet conclave of old men,<sup>7</sup>  
Could so have rapt unwilling life away.  
Among the fragrant husks and berries crush'd,  
Upon the grass I struggled hard against  
The domineering potion; but in vain:  
55 The cloudy swoon came on, and down I sunk  
Like a Silenus<sup>8</sup> on an antique vase.  
How long I slumber'd 'tis a chance to guess.  
When sense of life return'd, I started up  
As if with wings; but the fair trees were gone,  
60 The mossy mound and arbour were no more;  
I look'd around upon the carved sides  
Of an old sanctuary with roof august,  
Builded so high, it seem'd that filmed clouds  
Might spread beneath, as o'er the stars of heaven;  
65 So old the place was, I remembered none  
The like upon the earth; what I had seen  
Of grey cathedrals, buttress'd walls, rent towers,  
The superannuations<sup>9</sup> of sunk realms, *ruins*  
Or nature's rocks toil'd hard in waves and winds,  
70 Seem'd but the faulture<sup>9</sup> of decrepit things *defects*  
To<sup>9</sup> that eternal domed monument. *compared to*  
Upon the marble at my feet there lay  
Store of strange vessels, and large draperies,  
Which needs had been of dyed asbestus wove,  
75 Or in that place the moth could not corrupt,<sup>9</sup>  
So white the linen; so, in some, distinct  
Ran imageries from a sombre loom.  
All in a mingled heap confus'd there lay  
Robes, golden tongs, censer, and chafing dish,  
80 Girdles, and chains, and holy jewelries.<sup>9</sup>

Turning from these with awe, once more I rais'd  
My eyes to fathom the space every way;  
The embossed roof, the silent massy range  
Of columns north and south, ending in mist  
85 Of nothing, then to eastward, where black gates  
Were shut against the sunrise evermore.  
Then to the west I look'd, and saw far off  
An image, huge of feature as a cloud,  
At level of whose feet an altar slept,

5. The drink puts the poet to sleep and effects the dream within a dream that constitutes the remainder of the fragment.

6. A council of caliphs, Muslim rulers, who plot to kill each other with a poisonous drink ("elixir").  
7. The College of Cardinals. This scenario of poisoning, like the preceding Orientalist reference to intrigue among the caliphs, recalls a stock setting

of the period's Gothic novels.

8. An elderly satyr, usually represented as drunk.

9. Matthew 6.20: "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt."

1. Offerings to the gods were spread on the floor of Greek temples.

90 To be approach'd on either side by steps,  
And marble balustrade,<sup>0</sup> and patient travail *banister*  
To count with toil the innumerable degrees.  
Towards the altar sober-pac'd I went,  
Repressing haste, as too unholy there;

95 And, coming nearer, saw beside the shrine  
One minist'ring;<sup>2</sup> and there arose a flame.  
When in mid-May the sickening east wind  
Shifts sudden to the south, the small warm rain  
Melts out the frozen incense from all flowers,  
100 And fills the air with so much pleasant health  
That even the dying man forgets his shroud;  
Even so that lofty sacrificial fire,  
Sending forth Maian<sup>3</sup> incense, spread around  
Forgetfulness of every thing but bliss,

105 And clouded all the altar with soft smoke,  
From whose white fragrant curtains thus I heard  
Language pronounc'd. "If thou canst not ascend  
These steps,<sup>4</sup> die on that marble where thou art.  
Thy flesh, near cousin to the common dust,  
110 Will parch for lack of nutriment—thy bones  
Will wither in few years, and vanish so  
That not the quickest eye could find a grain  
Of what thou now art on that pavement cold.  
The sands of thy short life are spent this hour,  
115 And no hand in the universe can turn  
Thy hour glass, if these gummed<sup>0</sup> leaves be burnt *aromatic*  
Ere thou canst mount up these immortal steps."  
I heard, I look'd: two senses both at once  
So fine, so subtle, felt the tyranny

120 Of that fierce threat, and the hard task proposed.  
Prodigious seem'd the toil; the leaves were yet  
Burning,—when suddenly a palsied chill  
Struck from the paved level up my limbs,  
And was ascending quick to put cold grasp  
125 Upon those streams<sup>0</sup> that pulse beside the throat: *arteries*  
I shriek'd; and the sharp anguish of my shriek  
Stung my own ears—I strove hard to escape  
The numbness; strove to gain the lowest step.  
Slow, heavy, deadly was my pace: the cold  
130 Grew stifling, suffocating, at the heart;  
And when I clasp'd my hands I felt them not.  
One minute before death, my iced foot touch'd  
The lowest stair; and as it touch'd, life seem'd  
To pour in at the toes: I mounted up,  
135 As once fair angels on a ladder flew  
From the green turf to heaven.<sup>5</sup>—"Holy Power,"  
Cried I, approaching near the horned shrine,<sup>6</sup>

2. Who identifies herself in line 226 as Moneta.

3. Maia was one of the Pleiades, a daughter of Atlas and (by Zeus) the mother of Hermes. She was the goddess of the month of May.

4. These steps that the poet must ascend were probably suggested by the stairs going up the steep side of the purgatorial Mount in Dante's *Purgatorio*.

*torio*.

5. The ladder by which, in a dream, Jacob saw angels passing between heaven and Earth (Genesis 28.12 and *Paradise Lost* 3.510-15).

6. As, e.g., in Exodus 27.2, "And thou shalt make the horns of [the altar] upon the four corners thereof." In his description of the temple and

"What am I that should so be sav'd from death?  
What am I that another death come not  
140 To choak my utterance sacrilegious here?"  
Then said the veiled shadow – "Thou hast felt  
What 'tis to die and live again before  
Thy fated hour. That thou hadst power to do so  
Is thy own safety; thou hast dated on  
145 Thy doom."<sup>7</sup> – "High Prophetess," said I, "purge off  
Benign, if so it please thee, my mind's film."<sup>8</sup>  
"None can usurp this height," return'd that shade,  
"But those to whom the miseries of the world  
Are misery, and will not let them rest.  
150 All else who find a haven in the world,  
Where they may thoughtless sleep away their days,  
If by a chance into this fane<sup>o</sup> they come, *temple*  
Rot on the pavement where thou rotted'st half."<sup>9</sup> –  
"Are there not thousands in the world," said I,  
155 Encourag'd by the sooth<sup>1</sup> voice of the shade,  
"Who love their fellows even to the death;  
Who feel the giant agony of the world;  
And more, like slaves to poor humanity,  
Labour for mortal good? I sure should see  
160 Other men here: but I am here alone."  
"They whom thou spak'st of are no vision'ries,"  
Rejoin'd that voice – "They are no dreamers weak,  
They seek no wonder but the human face;  
No music but a happy-noted voice –  
165 They come not here, they have no thought to come –  
And thou art here, for thou art less than they.  
What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe,  
To the great world? Thou art a dreaming thing;  
A fever of thyself – think of the earth;  
170 What bliss even in hope is there<sup>o</sup> for thee? *on Earth*  
What haven? Every creature hath its home;  
Every sole man hath days of joy and pain,  
Whether his labours be sublime or low –  
The pain alone; the joy alone; distinct:  
175 Only the dreamer venoms all his days,  
Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve.  
Therefore, that happiness be somewhat shar'd,  
Such things as thou art are admitted oft  
Into like gardens thou didst pass erewhile,  
Hb And suffer'd in<sup>o</sup> these temples; for that cause *allowed to enter*  
Thou standest safe beneath this statue's knees."  
"That I am favored for unworthiness,  
By such propitious parley medicin'd  
In sickness not ignoble, I rejoice,

its accoutrements, Keats deliberately mingles Hebrew, Christian, and pagan elements to represent the poet's passage through the stage represented by all religions, which are "dreams" made into the creed for "a sect" (lines 1–18).

7. I.e., you have postponed the time when you will be judged.

8. Cf. Milton's plea, following his account of his

blindness, for a celestial light that might "Shine inward": "Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence / Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight" (*Paradise Lost* 3.52–54).

9. I.e., where you halfway rotted.

1. Soothing, also truth-telling.

185 Aye, and could weep for love of such award."  
So answer'd I, continuing, "If it please,  
Majestic shadow, tell me: sure not all<sup>2</sup>  
Those melodies sung into the world's ear  
Are useless: sure a poet is a sage;  
190 A humanist, physician to all men.  
That I am none I feel, as vultures feel  
They are no birds when eagles are abroad.  
What am I then? Thou spakest of my tribe:  
What tribe?" – The tall shade veil'd in drooping white  
195 Then spake, so much more earnest, that the breath  
Mov'd the thin linen folds that drooping hung  
About a golden censer from the hand  
Pendent. – "Art thou not of the dreamer tribe?  
The poet and the dreamer are distinct,  
200 Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.  
The one pours out a balm upon the world,  
The other vexes it." Then shouted I  
Spite of myself, and with a Pythia's spleen,<sup>3</sup>  
"Apollo! faded, far flown Apollo!  
205 Where is thy misty pestilence<sup>4</sup> to creep  
Into the dwellings, through the door crannies,  
Of all mock lyrists, large self worshipers,  
And careless hectorers in proud bad verse.<sup>5</sup>  
Though I breathe death with them it will be life  
210 To see them sprawl before me into graves.<sup>6</sup>  
Majestic shadow, tell me where I am:  
Whose altar this; for whom this incense curls:  
What image this, whose face I cannot see,  
For the broad marble knees; and who thou art,  
215 Of accent feminine, so courteous."  
Then the tall shade in drooping linens veil'd  
Spake out, so much more earnest, that her breath  
Stirr'd the thin folds of gauze that drooping hung  
About a golden censer from her hand  
220 Pendent; and by her voice I knew she shed  
Long treasured tears. "This temple sad and lone  
Is all spar'd from the thunder of a war  
Foughten long since by giant hierarchy

2. Keats's friend Richard Woodhouse, whose manuscript copy of the poem is our principal source of the text, crossed out lines 187–210 with the marginal comment next to lines 197–99: "K. seems to have intended to erase this & the next 21 lines." Probably the basis for his opinion is the partial repetition of lines 187 and 194–98 in lines 211 and 216–20.

3. With the anger ("spleen") of the Pythia, the priestess who served at Delphi as the oracle of Apollo, the god of poetry.

4. Apollo was a sender of plagues, as well as the inspirer of prophecy and poetry. He was also the god of medicine. Keats's medical studies gave him special reason to be interested in this figure and the roles he combined.

5. This has been conjectured as referring to Byron, or else to several contemporaries, including

Shelley and Wordsworth. But the poetic types, not individuals, are what matter to Keats's argument.

6. In lines 147–210 we find a series of progressive distinctions: (1) between humanitarians who feel for "the miseries of the world" and people who are "thoughtless" sleepers (lines 147–53); (2) within the class of humanitarians, between those who actively "benefit . . . the great world" and the poets who are "vision'ries" and "dreamers" (lines 161–69); (3) and within the class of poets, between those who are merely dreamers and those who are sages and healers (lines 187–202). As in the colloquy between Asia and Demogorgon (see Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* 2.4.1–128, p. 802), the interchange here may be taken to represent, in dramatized form, a process of inner analysis and self-discovery on the part of the questing poet.

Against rebellion: this old image here,  
225 Whose carved features wrinkled as he fell,  
Is Saturn's;<sup>7</sup> I, Moneta, left supreme  
Sole priestess of his desolation." –  
I had no words to answer; for my tongue,  
Useless, could find about its roofed home  
230 No syllable of a fit majesty  
To make rejoinder to Moneta's mourn.  
There was a silence while the altar's blaze  
Was fainting for sweet food: I look'd thereon  
And on the paved floor, where nigh were pil'd  
235 Faggots of cinnamon, and many heaps  
Of other crisped spice-wood – then again  
I look'd upon the altar and its horns  
Whiten'd with ashes, and its lang'rous flame,  
And then upon the offerings again;  
240 And so by turns – till sad Moneta cried,  
"The sacrifice is done, but not the less  
Will I be kind to thee for thy good will.  
My power, which to me is still a curse,  
Shall be to thee a wonder; for the scenes  
245 Still swooning vivid through my globed brain  
With an electral changing misery  
Thou shalt with those dull mortal eyes behold,  
Free from all pain, if wonder pain thee not."  
As near as an immortal's sphered words  
250 Could to a mother's soften, were these last:  
But yet I had a terror of her robes,  
And chiefly of the veils, that from her brow  
Hung pale, and curtain'd her in mysteries  
That made my heart too small to hold its blood.  
255 This saw that Goddess, and with sacred hand  
Parted the veils. Then saw I a wan face,  
Not pin'd<sup>o</sup> by human sorrows, but bright blanch'd *exhausted*  
By an immortal sickness which kills not;  
It works a constant change, which happy death  
260 Can put no end to; deathwards progressing  
To no death was that visage; it had pass'd  
The lily and the snow; and beyond these  
I must not think now, though I saw that face –  
But for her eyes I should have fled away.  
265 They held me back, with a benignant light,  
Soft mitigated by divinest lids  
Half closed, and visionless<sup>o</sup> entire they seem d *blind*  
Of all external things – they saw me not,  
But in blank splendor beam'd like the mild moon,  
270 Who comforts those she sees not, who knows not  
What eyes are upward cast. As I had found  
A grain of gold upon a mountain's side,  
And twing'd with avarice strain'd out my eyes  
To search its sullen entrails rich with ore,

7. Cf. the "shattered visage" of the fallen statue in Shelley's "Ozymandias" (p. 768).



275 So at the view of sad Moneta's brow,  
I ached to see what things the hollow brain  
Behind enwombed: what high tragedy  
In the dark secret chambers of her skull  
Was acting, that could give so dread a stress  
280 To her cold lips, and fill with such a light  
Her planetary eyes; and touch her voice  
With such a sorrow. "Shade of Memory!"  
Cried I, with act adorant at her feet,  
"By all the gloom hung round thy fallen house,  
285 By this last temple, by the golden age,  
By great Apollo, thy dear foster child,  
And by thy self, forlorn divinity,  
The pale Omega" of a wilher'd race,  
Let me behold, according as thou said'st,  
290 What in thy brain so ferments to and fro."—  
No sooner had this conjuration pass'd  
My devout lips, than side by side we stood,  
(Like a stunt bramble by a solemn pine)  
Deep in the shady sadness of a vale,<sup>9</sup>  
295 Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,  
Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star.  
Onward I look'd beneath the gloomy boughs,  
And saw, what first I thought an image huge,  
Like to the image pedestal'd so high  
300 In Saturn's temple. Then Moneta's voice  
Came brief upon mine ear,—"So Saturn sat  
When he had lost his realms."—Whereon there grew  
A power within me of enormous ken,<sup>8</sup> *range of vision*  
To see as a God sees, and take the depth  
305 Of things as nimbly as the outward eye  
Can size and shape pervade. The lofty theme  
At those few words hung vast before my mind,  
With hall unravel'd web. I set mysell  
Upon an eagle's watch, that I might see,  
310 And seeing ne'er forget. No stir of life  
Was in this shrouded vale, not so much air  
As in the zoning<sup>0</sup> of a summer's day *course*  
Robs not one light seed from the feather'd grass,  
But where the deaf leaf fell there did it rest:  
315 A stream went voiceless by, still deaden'd more  
By reason of the fallen divinity  
Spreading more shade: the Naiad<sup>0</sup> mid her reeds *water nymph*  
Press'd her cold finger closer to her lips.  
Along the margin sand large footmarks went  
320 No farther than to where old Saturn's feet  
Had rested, and there slept, how long a sleep!  
Degraded, cold, upon the sodden ground

8. Tilt- final letter of the Greek alphabet.

9. This had been the opening line of the original *Hyperion*. The rest of the poem is a revised version of part of that first narrative, with the poet now

represented as allowed to envision the course of events that Moneta recalls in her memory (lines 282, 289-90).

His old right hand lay nerveless, listless, dead,  
Unceptred; and his realmless<sup>1</sup> eyes were clos'd,  
325 While his bow'd head seem'd listening to the Earth,  
His antient mother,<sup>2</sup> for some comfort yet.

It seem'd no force could wake him from his place;  
But there came one who with a kindred hand  
Touch'd his wide shoulders, after bending low  
330 With reverence, though to one who knew it not.  
Then came the griev'd voice of Mnemosyne,<sup>3</sup>  
And griev'd I hearken'd. "That divinity  
Whom thou saw'st step from yon forlornest wood,  
And with slow pace approach our fallen King,  
335 Is Thea,<sup>4</sup> softest-natur'd of our brood."  
I mark'd the goddess in fair statuary  
Surpassing wan Moneta by the head,<sup>5</sup>  
And in her sorrow nearer woman's tears.  
There was a listening fear in her regard,  
340 As if calamity had but begun;  
As if the vanward clouds<sup>6</sup> of evil days  
Had spent their malice, and the sullen rear  
Was with its stored thunder labouring up.  
One hand she press'd upon that aching spot  
345 Where beats the human heart; as if just there,  
Though an immortal, she felt cruel pain;  
The other upon Saturn's bended neck  
She laid, and to the level of his hollow ear  
Leaning, with parted lips, some words she spake  
350 In solemn tenor and deep organ tune;  
Some mourning words, which in our feeble tongue  
Would come in this-like accenting; how frail  
To that large utterance of the early Gods! –  
"Saturn! look up – and for what, poor lost King?<sup>7</sup>  
355 I have no comfort for thee, no – not one:  
I cannot cry, *Wherefore thus steepest thou?*  
For heaven is parted from thee, and the earth  
Knows thee not, so afflicted, for a God;  
And ocean too, with all its solemn noise,  
360 Has from thy sceptre pass'd, and all the air  
Is emptied of thine hoary majesty.  
Thy thunder, captious<sup>0</sup> at the new command, *quarrelsome*  
Rumbles reluctant o'er our fallen house;  
And thy sharp lightning in unpracticed hands  
365 Scorches and burns our once serene domain.

1. Saturn's eyes, when open, express the fact that he has lost his realm.

2. Saturn and the other Titans were the children of heaven and Earth.

3. As in 2.50, Keats substitutes for "Moneta" the "Mnemosyne" of the first *Hyperion*. This may be a slip but more likely indicates an alternative name for Moneta, in her role as participant in, as well as commentator on, the tragic action.

4. Sister and wife of Hyperion.

5. I.e., Thea was a head taller than Moneta.

6. The front line of clouds.

7. Keats several times recalls King Lear in representing the condition of Saturn. Keats's contemporaries may have thought, too, of George III, mad, blind, and dethroned by his son, who had become prince regent.

With such remorseless speed still come new woes  
That unbelief has not a space to breathe.<sup>8</sup>  
Saturn, sleep on: – Me thoughtless,<sup>9</sup> why should I  
Thus violate thy slumbrous solitude?  
370 Why should I ope thy melancholy eyes?  
Saturn, sleep on, while at thy feet I weep."

As when, upon a tranced summer night,  
Forests, branch-charmed by the earnest stars,<sup>1</sup>  
Dream, and so dream all night, without a noise,  
375 Save from one gradual solitary gust,  
Swelling upon the silence; dying off;  
As if the ebbing air had but one wave;  
So came these words, and went; the while in tears  
She press'd her fair large forehead to the earth,  
380 Just where her fallen hair might spread in curls,  
A soft and silken mat for Saturn's feet.  
Long, long, those two were postured motionless,  
Like sculpture builded up upon the grave  
Of their own power. A long awful time  
385 I look'd upon them; still they were the same;  
The frozen God still bending to the earth,  
And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet;  
Moneta silent. Without stay or prop  
But my own weak mortality, I bore  
390 The load of this eternal quietude,  
The unchanging gloom, and the three fixed shapes  
Ponderous upon my senses a whole moon.  
For by my burning brain I measured sure  
Her silver seasons shedded on the night,  
395 And every day by day methought I grew  
More gaunt and ghostly. Oftentimes I pray'd  
Intense, that death would take me from the vale  
And all its burthens. Gasping with despair  
Of change, hour after hour I curs'd myself:  
400 Until old Saturn rais'd his faded eyes,  
And look'd around, and saw his kingdom gone,  
And all the gloom and sorrow of the place,  
And that fair kneeling Goddess at his feet.  
As the moist scent of flowers, and grass, and leaves  
405 Fills forest dells with a pervading air  
Known to the woodland nostril, so the words  
Of Saturn fill'd the mossy glooms around,  
Even to the hollows of time-eaten oaks,  
And to the windings in the foxes' hole,  
410 With sad low tones, while thus he spake, and sent  
Strange musings to the solitary Pan.

8. That disbelief has not an instant to catch its breath.

9. I.e., how thoughtless I am!

1. The grander version in the first *Hyperion*,

1.72ff., reads: "As when, upon a tranced summer-night / Those green-rob'd senators of mighty woods, / Tall oaks, branch-charmed by the earnest stars, / Dream."

"Moan, brethren, moan; for we are swallow'd up  
And buried from all godlike exercise  
Of influence benign on planets pale,  
415 And peaceful sway above man's harvesting,  
And all those acts which deity supreme  
Doth ease its heart of love in. Moan and wail.  
Moan, brethren, moan; for lo! the rebel spheres  
Spin round, the stars their antient courses keep,  
420 Clouds still with shadowy moisture haunt the earth,  
Still suck their fill of light from sun and moon,  
Still buds the tree, and still the sea-shores murmur.  
There is no death in all the universe,  
No smell of death—there shall be death<sup>2</sup>—Moan, moan,  
425 Moan, Cybele,<sup>3</sup> moan, for thy pernicious babes  
Have chang'd a God into a shaking palsy.  
Moan, brethren, moan; for I have no strength left,  
Weak as the reed—weak—feeble as my voice—  
O, O, the pain, the pain of feebleness.  
430 Moan, moan; for still I thaw—or give me help:  
Throw down those imps<sup>4</sup> and give me victory.  
Let me hear other groans, and trumpets blown  
Of triumph calm, and hymns of festival  
From the gold peaks of heaven's high piled clouds;  
435 Voices of soft proclaim,<sup>0</sup> and silver stir *proclamation*  
Of strings in hollow shells; and let there be  
Beautiful things made new for the surprize  
Of the sky children."—So he feebly ceas'd,  
With such a poor and sickly sounding pause,  
440 Methought I heard some old man of the earth  
Bewailing earthly loss; nor could my eyes  
And ears act with that pleasant unison of sense  
Which marries sweet sound with the grace of form,  
And dolorous accent from a tragic harp  
445 With large limb'd visions.<sup>5</sup> More I scrutinized:  
Still fix'd he sat beneath the sable trees,  
Whose arms spread straggling in wild serpent forms,  
With leaves all hush'd: his awful presence there  
(Now all was silent) gave a deadly lie  
450 To what I erewhile heard: only his lips  
Trembled amid the white curls of his beard.  
They told the truth, though, round, the snowy locks  
Hung nobly, as upon the face of heaven  
A midday fleece of clouds. Thea arose  
455 And stretch'd her white arm through the hollow dark,  
Pointing some whither: whereat he too rose  
Like a vast giant seen by men at sea  
To grow pale from the waves at dull midnight.<sup>6</sup>

2. The passing of the Saturnian golden age (paralleled by Keats with the fable of the loss of Eden) has introduced suffering, and will also introduce death.

3. The wife of Saturn and mother of the Olympian gods, who have overthrown their parents.

4. I.e., his rebellious children, the Titans.

5. I.e., the narrator could not attach this speech, like that of a feebly complaining old mortal, to the visible form of the large-limbed god who uttered it.

6. I.e., like a giant who is seen at sea to emerge, pale, from the waves.

They melted from my sight into the woods:  
460 Ere I could turn, Moneta cried—"These twain  
Are speeding to the families of grief,  
Where roof'd in by black rocks they waste in pain  
And darkness for no hope."—And she spake on,  
As ye may read who can unwearied pass  
465 Onward from the antichamber<sup>o</sup> of this dream, *entry room*  
Where even at the open doors awhile  
I must delay, and glean my memory  
Of her high phrase: perhaps no further dare.

*Canto 2*

"Mortal, that thou may'st understand aright,  
I humanize my sayings to thine ear,  
Making comparisons of earthly things;  
Or thou might'st better listen to the wind,  
5 Whose language is to thee a barren noise,  
Though it blows legend-laden through the trees.  
In melancholy realms big tears are shed,  
More sorrow like to this, and such-like woe,  
Too huge for mortal tongue, or pen of scribe,  
io The Titans fierce, self-hid, or prison-bound,  
Groan for the old allegiance once more,  
Listening in their doom for Saturn's voice.  
But one of our whole eagle-brood still keeps  
His sov'reignty, and rule, and majesty;  
is Blazing Hyperion on his orb'd fire  
Still sits, still snuffs the incense teeming up  
From man to the Sun's God: yet unsecure;  
For as upon the earth dire prodigies<sup>o</sup>  
Fright and perplex, so also shudders he:  
20 Nor at dog's howl, or gloom-bird's even screech,  
Or the familiar visitings of one  
Upon the first toll of his passing bell:<sup>o</sup>  
But horrors portion'd<sup>o</sup> to a giant nerve *proportioned.*  
Make great Hyperion ache. His palace bright,  
25 Bastion'd with pyramids of glowing gold,  
And touch'd with shade of bronzed obelisks,  
Glares a blood red through all the thousand courts,  
Arches, and domes, and fiery galleries:  
And all its curtains of Aurorian clouds  
so Flush angerly: when he would taste the wreaths  
Of incense breath'd aloft from sacred hills,  
Instead of sweets, his ample palate takes  
Savour of poisonous brass, and metals sick.

7. Cf. the angel Raphael's words as he begins to recount to Adam the history of the rebellion in heaven: "what surmounts the reach / Of human sense, I shall delineate so, / By lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms" (*Paradise Lost* 5.571–73).

8. Terrifying omens.

9. Lines 20–22 might be paraphrased: "Not, how-

ever, at such portents as a dog's howl or the evening screech of the owl or with the well-known feelings ['visitings'] of someone when he hears the first stroke of his own death knell." It had been the English custom to ring the church bell when a person was close to death, to invite hearers to pray for his departing soul.

Wherefore when harbour'd in the sleepy west,  
35 After the full completion of fair day,  
For rest divine upon exalted couch  
And slumber in the arms of melody,  
He paces through the pleasant hours of ease,  
With strides colossal, on from hall to hall;  
40 While, far within each aisle and deep recess,  
His winged minions" in close clusters stand *followers*  
Amaz'd, and full of fear; like anxious men  
Who on a wide plain gather in sad troops,  
When earthquakes jar their battlements and towers.  
45 Even now, while Saturn, rous'd from icy trance,  
Goes, step for step, with Thea from yon woods,  
Hyperion, leaving twilight in the rear,  
Is sloping to the threshold of the west.  
Thither we tend."—Now in clear light I stood,  
50 Reliev'd from the dusk vale. Mnemosyne  
Was sitting on a square edg'd polish'd stone,  
That in its lucid depth reflected pure  
Her priestess-garments. My quick eyes ran on  
From stately nave to nave, from vault to vault,  
55 Through bowers of fragrant and enwreathed light,  
And diamond paved lustrous long arcades.  
Anon rush'd by the bright Hyperion;  
His flaming robes stream'd out beyond his heels,  
And gave a roar, as if of earthly fire,  
60 That scar'd away the meek ethereal hours  
And made their dove-wings tremble: on he flared

July-Sept. 1819

1857

This living hand, now warm and capable<sup>1</sup>

This living hand, now warm and capable  
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold  
And in the icy silence of the tomb,  
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights  
5 That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood,  
So in my veins red life might stream again,  
And thou be conscience-calm'd. See, here it is—  
I hold it towards you.

1819

1898

1. The manuscript breaks off at this point.  
1. These lines, first published in H. B. Forman's edition of Keats's poems in 1898, were written on a sheet that later formed part of the draft of Keats's unfinished satire *The Jealousies*. They have been a key text in late-20th-century critical and theoretical discussions of interpretation. Readings range from the personal and autobiographical—Keats addressing a loved one (Fanny Brawne) or his post-

humorous readers (e.g., users of this Norton anthology)—to the fictionalized and dramatic (e.g., a fragment of a speech intended for the deranged Ludolph toward the end of Keats's and Charles Brown's never-produced tragedy *Otho the Great*). In their lyric character the lines are included in anthologies of love poetry. In their dramatic character they are described by critics as, for example, "ghoulishly aggressive."

**Letters** Keats's letters serve as a running commentary on his life, reading, thinking, and writing. They are, in his career, the equivalent of the essays, prefaces, and defenses of poetry produced by his contemporaries. His early reputation as a poet of pure luxury, sensation, and art for art's sake has undergone a radical change since, in the twentieth century, critics began to pay close attention to the letters. For Keats thought hard and persistently about life and art, and any seed of an ethical or critical idea that he picked up from his contemporaries (in particular, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Wordsworth) instantly germinated and flourished in the rich soil of his imagination. What T. S. Eliot said about the Metaphysical poets applies to Keats in his letters: his "mode of feeling was directly and freshly altered by [his] reading and thought." And like Donne, he looked not only into the heart but, literally, "into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tract." A number of Keats's casual comments on the poet and on poetry included here—especially those dealing with "negative capability" and the kind of imaginative identification with someone or something outside ourselves that we now call empathy—have become standard points of reference in aesthetic theory. But Keats regarded nothing that he said as final; each statement constituted only a stage in his continuing exploration into what he called "the mystery."

The text printed here is that of the edition of the *Letters* by Hyder E. Rollins (1958), which reproduces the original manuscripts precisely.

#### LETTERS

#### To Benjamin Bailey<sup>1</sup>

[THE AUTHENTICITY OF THE IMAGINATION]

[November 22, 1817]

My dear Bailey,

\* \* \* O I wish I was as certain of the end of all your troubles as that of your momentary start about the authenticity of 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 consecutive reasoning:—and yet it must be—Can it be that even

1. One of Keats's closest friends. Keats had stayed with him the month before at Oxford, where Bailey was an undergraduate.

2. At the close of "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Keats also grapples with these categories. Where Keats uses "truth" we might substitute the words *real* or *reality*.

3. The song was "O Sorrow," from book 4 of

*Endymion*.

4. In Milton's *Paradise Lost* 8.452-90 Adam dreams that Eve has been created and awakes to find her real. Adam also describes an earlier prefigurative dream in the same work, 8.283-311.

5. Consecutive reasoning—reasoning that moves by logical steps.

the greatest Philosopher ever ~~when~~ arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections—However it may be, O for a Life of Sensations<sup>6</sup> 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<sup>7</sup>—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<sup>8</sup> 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 repeti[ti]on 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, fe[l]t 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<sup>9</sup>—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. I am glad to hear you are in a fair Way for Easter—you will soon get through your unpleasant reading and then!—but the world is full of troubles and I have not much reason to think myself pesterd with many—I think Jane or Marianne has a better opinion of me than I deserve—for really and truly I do not think my Brothers illness connected with mine—you know more of the real Cause than they do—nor have I any chance of being rack'd as you have been<sup>10</sup>—you perhaps at one time thought there was such a thing as Worldly Happiness to be arrived at, at certain periods of time marked out—you have of necessity from your disposition been thus led away—I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness—I look not for it if it be not in the present hour—nothing startles me beyond the Moment. The setting sun will always set me to rights—or if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existince and pick about the Gravel. The first thing that strikes me on hea[r]ing a Misfortune having befallen another is this. "Well it cannot be helped.—he will have the pleasure of trying the resourses of his spirit, and I beg now my dear Bailey that hereafter should you observe any thing cold in me not to [put] it to the account of heartlessness but abstraction—for I assure you I sometimes feel not the influence of a Passion or Affection during a whole week—and so long this

6. Probably not only sense experiences but also the intuitive perceptions of truths, as opposed to truth achieved by consecutive reasoning.

7. Cf. the "Pleasure Thermometer" in *Endymion* 1.777ff. (p. 885).

8. Heavenly.

9. An echo of Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of

Immortality," line 187.

10. Keats's friends Jane and Mariane Reynolds feared that his ill health at this time threatened tuberculosis, from which his brother Tom was suffering. Bailey had recently experienced pain (been "racked") because of an unsuccessful love affair.



sometimes continues I begin to suspect myself and the genuineness of my feelings at other times—thinking them a few barren Tragedy-tears. \* \* \*

Your affectionate friend  
John Keats—

## To George and Thomas Keats

[NEGATIVE CAPABILITY]

[December 21, 27 (?), 1817]

My dear Brothers

I must crave your pardon for not having written ere this. \* \* \* I spent Friday evening with Wells' & went the next morning to see *Death on the Pale horse*. It is a wonderful picture, when West's age is considered; But there is nothing to be intense upon; no woman one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality, the 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—<sup>1</sup> I dined with Haydon<sup>4</sup> 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,<sup>5</sup> 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<sup>6</sup> & 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<sup>7</sup> walked with me & back from the Christmas pantomime.<sup>8</sup> 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*,<sup>9</sup> that is when man is capable of being in uncer-

1. Charles Wells, a former schoolmate of Tom Keats.

2. Benjamin West (1738-1820), painter of historical pictures, was an American who moved to England and became president of the Royal Academy. The *Christ Rejected* mentioned a few sentences farther on is also by West.

3. Keats's solution to a problem at least as old as Aristotle's *Poetics*: why do we take pleasure in the aesthetic representation of a subject that in life would be ugly or painful?

4. Keats's close friend Benjamin Haydon, painter of large-scale historical and religious pictures.

5. Smith was one of the best-known literary wits of the day; the others mentioned were men of letters or of literary interests.

6. Edmund Kean, noted Shakespearean actor. His popularity in the early 19th century was contentious because he made no secret of his humble class origins. Keats had written an article on Kean

for the *Champion*.

7. Charles Armitage Brown, John Hamilton Reynolds, and Charles Wentworth Dilke were all writers and friends of Keats. Keats interrupted the writing of this letter after the dash; beginning with "Brown & Dilke" he is writing several days after the preceding sentences.

8. Christmas pantomimes were performed each year at Drury Lane and Covent Garden theaters.

9. This famous and elusive phrase has been much discussed. Keats coins it so as to distinguish between, on the one hand, a poetry that is evidently shaped by the writer's personal interests and beliefs and, on the other hand, a poetry of impersonality that records the writer's receptivity to the "uncertainties" of experience. This second kind of poetry, in which a sense of beauty overcomes considerations of truth versus falsehood, is that produced by the poet of "negative capability." Cf. Keats's dislike, in his letter to John Hamilton Reyn-

tainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium<sup>1</sup> 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.

Shelley's poem<sup>2</sup> is out & there are words about its being objected too, as much as Queen Mab was. Poor Shelley I think he has his Quota of good qualities, in sooth la!! Write soon to your most sincere friend & affectionate Brother

John

To John Hamilton Reynolds<sup>3</sup>

[WORDSWORTH'S POETRY]

[February 3, 1818]

My dear Reynolds,

\* \* \* It may be said that we ought to read our Contemporaries, that Wordsworth &c should have their due from us. but for the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist—Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them till he makes a false coinage and deceives himself—Many a man can travel to the very bourne<sup>4</sup> of Heaven, and yet want confidence to put down his halfseeing. Sancho<sup>5</sup> will invent a Journey heavenward as well as any body. 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 large~~ 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<sup>7</sup> in particular—Why should we be of the tribe of Manasseh, when we can wander with Esau?<sup>8</sup> why should we kick

olds, February 3, 1818, of "poetry that has a palpable design upon us" (p. 943).

1. The Latin *penetralia* signified the innermost and most secret parts of a temple.

2. *Laon and Cythna* (1817), whose treatment of incest created scandal and which had to be withdrawn by the author. Shelley revised and republished it as *The Revolt of Islam* (1818). In *Queen Mab* (1813) Shelley had presented a radical program for the achievement of a millennial earthly state through the elimination of "kings, priests, and statesmen."

1. A close friend who was at this time an insurance

clerk and also an able poet and man of letters.

2. Boundary.

3. Sancho Panza, the earthy squire in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*.

4. I.e., sulks and refuses to interact with.

5. Leigh Hunt, a poet who earlier had strongly influenced Keats's style.

6. I.e., why should we carry on a conventional way of life (as did the tribe of Manasseh in Old Testament history) when we can become adventurers (like Esau, who sold his birthright in Genesis 25.29–34 and became an outlaw).

against the Pricks, when we can walk on Roses? Why should we be owls, when we can be Eagles? Why be teased with "nice Eyed wagtails," when we have in sight "the Cherub Contemplation"?—Why with Wordsworths "Matthew with a bough of wilding in his hand" when we can have Jacques "under an oak &c"—The secret of the Bough of Wilding will run through your head faster than I can write it—Old Matthew spoke to him some years ago on some nothing, & because he happens in an Evening Walk to imagine the figure of the old man—he must stamp it down in black & white, and it is henceforth sacred—I don't mean to deny Wordsworth's grandeur & Hunt's merit, but I mean to say we need not be teased with grandeur & merit—when we can have them uncontaminated & unobtrusive. Let us have the old Poets, & robin Hood Your letter and its sonnets gave me more pleasure than will the 4th Book of Childe Harold & the whole of any body's life & opinions. \* \* \*

Your sincere friend and Coscribbler

John Keats.

### To John Taylor<sup>1</sup>

[KEATS'S AXIOMS IN POETRY]

[February 27, 1818]

My dear Taylor,

Your alteration strikes me as being a great improvement—the page looks much better. \* \* \* It is a sorry thing for me that any one should have to overcome Prejudices in reading my Verses—that affects me more than any hypercriticism on any particular Passage. In *Endymion* I have most likely but moved into the Go-cart from the leading strings. 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 thereby 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. However it may be with me I cannot help looking into new countries with "O for a Muse of fire to ascend!"—If *Endymion* serves me as a Pioneer perhaps I ought to be content. I have great reason to be content, for thank God I can read and perhaps

7. Milton, "Il Penseroso," line 54. "Nice Eyed wagtails": from Hunt's *Nymphs*.

8. Shakespeare's *As You Like It* 2.1.31. The Wordsworth phrase is from his poem "The Two April Mornings." A "wilding" is a wild apple tree.

9. A reference to two sonnets on Robin Hood, written by Reynolds, which he had sent to Keats.

1. Canto 4 of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was being eagerly awaited by English readers.

1. Partner in the publishing firm of Taylor and Hessey, to whom Keats wrote this letter while

*Endymion* was being put through the press.

2. Go-carts were the wheeled walkers in which 19th-century toddlers learned to walk. Leading-strings were the harnesses with which they were guided and supported while they learned. Keats's point appears to be that as a poet he has not advanced and may even have regressed in *Endymion*.

3. Altered from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Prologue, line 1.

understand Shakspeare to his depths, and I have I am sure many friends, who, if I fail, will attribute any change in my Life and Temper to Humbleness rather than to Pride—to a cowering under the Wings of great Poets rather than to a Bitterness that I am not appreciated. I am anxious to get *Endymion* printed that I may forget it and proceed. \* \* \*

Your sincere and oblig<sup>d</sup> friend  
John Keats—

P.S. You shall have a sho[r]t *Preface* in good time—

### To John Hamilton Reynolds

[MILTON, WORDSWORTH, AND THE CHAMBERS OF HUMAN LIFE]

[May 3, 1818]

My dear Reynolds.

\* \* \* Were I to study physic or rather Medicine again,—I feel it would not make the least difference in my Poetry; when the Mind is in its infancy a Bias is in reality a Bias, but when we have acquired more strength, a Bias becomes no Bias. Every department of knowledge we see excellent and calculated towards a great whole. I am so convinced of this, that I am glad at not having given away my medical Books, which I shall again look over to keep alive the little I know thitherwards; and moreover intend through you and Rice to become a sort of Pip-civilian.<sup>1</sup> An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people—it takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery:<sup>2</sup> a thing I begin to understand a little, and which weighed upon you in the most gloomy and true sentence in your Letter. The difference of high Sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this—in the latter case we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings<sup>3</sup> and with all [the] horror of a Case bare shoulderd Creature—in the former case, our shoulders are fledged<sup>4</sup> and we go thro' the same Ftr air and space without fear. \* \* \*

You say "I fear there is little chance of any thing else in this life." You seem by that to have been going through with a more painful and acute test zest the same labyrinth that I have—I have come to the same conclusion thus far. My Branchings out therefrom have been numerous: one of them is the consideration of Wordsworth's genius and as a help, in the manner of gold being the meridian Line of worldly wealth,—how he differs from Milton.<sup>5</sup>—And here I have nothing but surmises, from an uncertainty whether Miltons apparently less anxiety for Humanity proceeds from his seeing further or no than Wordsworth: And whether Wordsworth has in truth epic passions, and martyrs himself to the human heart, the main region of his song—In regard to his genius alone—we find what he says true as far as we have experienced and we can

1. Apparently "a small-scale layman." James Rice, a lawyer, was one of Keats's favorite friends.

2. Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," line 38.

3. Recalls the description of Satan's flight through Chaos (Milton, *Paradise Lost* 2.933-34).

4. Grow wings.

5. I.e., as gold is the standard of material wealth (in the way that the meridian line of Greenwich

Observatory, England, is the reference for measuring degrees of longitude), so Milton is the standard of poetic value, by which we may measure Wordsworth.

6. In the Prospectus to *The Recluse*, Wordsworth, laying out his poetic program, had identified "the Mind of Man" as "My haunt, and the main region of my song" (lines 40–41).

judge no further but by larger experience—for axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses: We read fine things but never feel them to [the] full until we have gone the same steps as the Author.— I know this is not plain; you will know exactly my meaning when I say, that now I shall relish Hamlet more than I ever have done—Or, better—You are sensible no man can set down Venery as a bestial or joyless thing until he is sick of it and therefore all philosophizing on it would be mere wording. Until we are sick, we understand not;—in fine, as Byron says, "Knowledge is Sorrow"; and I go on to say that "Sorrow is Wisdom"—and further for aught we can know for certainty! "Wisdom is folly." \* \* \*

I will return to Wordsworth—whether or no he has an extended vision or a circumscribed grandeur—whether he is an eagle in his nest, or on the wing— And to be more explicit and to show you how tall I stand by the giant, I will put down a simile of human life as far as I now perceive it; that is, to the point to which I say we both have arrived at—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,<sup>7</sup> 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 head heart and nature of Man—of convincing ones nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, 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 ballance 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—though I think it has depended more upon the general and gregarious advance of intellect, than individual greatness of Mind—From the Paradise Lost and the other Works of Milton, I hope it is not too presuming, even between ourselves to say, his Philosophy, human and divine, may be tolerably understood by one not much advanced in years, In his time englishmen were just emancipated from a great superstition—and Men had got hold of certain points and resting places in reasoning which were too newly born to be doubted, and too much oppressed opposed by the Mass of Europe not to be thought ethereal and authentically divine—who could gainsay his ideas on virtue, vice, and Chastity in Comus, just at the time of the dismissal of Codpieces<sup>8</sup> and a hundred other disgraces? who would not rest satisfied with his

7. Sexual indulgence.

8. *Manfred* 1. 1.10: "Sorrow is knowledge."

9. I.e., innocent thought, with the implication (as

in "maiden voyage") of a first undertaking.

1. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the codpiece was a flap, often ornamental, that covered an open-

hintings at good and evil in the *Paradise Lost*, when just free from the inquisition and burning in Smithfield? The Reformation produced such immediate and great benefits, that Protestantism was considered under the immediate eye of heaven, and its own remaining Dogmas and superstitions, then, as it were, regenerated, constituted those resting places and seeming sure points of Reasoning—from that I have mentioned, Milton, whatever he may have thought in the sequel, appears to have been content with these by his writings—He did not think into the human heart, as Wordsworth has done—Yet Milton as a Philosop[h]er, had sure as great powers as Wordsworth—What is then to be inferr'd? O many things—It proves there is really a grand march of intellect—, It proves that a mighty providence subdues the mightiest Minds to the service of the time being, whether it be in human Knowledge or Religion— \* \* \* Tom has spit a leetle blood this afternoon, and that is rather a damper—but I know—the truth is there is something real in the World Your third Chamber of Life shall be a lucky and a gentle one—stored with the wine of love—and the Bread of Friendship— \* \* \*

Your affectionate friend  
John Keats.

### To Richard Woodhouse<sup>1</sup>

[A POET HAS NO IDENTITY]

[October 27, 1818]

My dear Woodhouse,

Your Letter gave me a great satisfaction; more on account of its friendliness, than any relish of that matter in it which is accounted so acceptable in the "genus irritabile". The best answer I can give you is in a clerklike manner to make some observations on two principle points, which seem to point like indices into the midst of the whole pro and con, about genius, and views and atchievements and ambition and coetera. 1st As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto,<sup>3</sup> be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen.<sup>4</sup> What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion<sup>5</sup> Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side ol things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation.<sup>6</sup> A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in

ing in the front of men's breeches. In Milton's masque the chastity of a young lady is put to the proof by the evil enchanter Comus.

2. An open place northwest of the walls of the City of London where, in the 16th century, heretics were burned.

3. Later on.

4. Keats's younger brother, then eighteen, who was dying of tuberculosis.

1. A young lawyer with literary interests who early recognized Keats's talents and prepared, or preserved, manuscript copies of many of his poems

and letters.

2. "The irritable race," a phrase Horace had applied to poets (*Epistles* 2.2.102).

3. Hazlitt had defined gusto in his 1816 essay as "power or passion" (p. 538).

4. Iago is the villain in Shakespeare's *Othello* and Imogen the virtuous heroine in his *Cymbeline*.

5. The chameleon is a lizard that camouflages itself by changing its color to match its surroundings.

6. I.e., without affecting our practical judgment or actions. Cf. Keats's discussion of the poet of

existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none; no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. If then he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more? Might I not at that very instant [have] been cogitating on the Characters of saturn and Ops? It is a wretched thing to confess; but is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature—how can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to to press upon me that, I am in a very little time an[ni]hilated—not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of children: I know not whether I make myself wholly understood: I hope enough so to let you see that no dependence is to be placed on what I said that day.

In the second place I will speak of my views, and of the life I purpose to myself—I am ambitious of doing the world some good: if I should be spared that may be the work of maturer years—in the interval I will assay to reach to as high a summit in Poetry as the nerve bestowed upon me will suffer. The faint conceptions I have of Poems to come brings the blood frequently into my forehead—All I hope is that I may not lose all interest in human affairs—that the solitary indifference I feel for applause even from the finest Spirits, will not blunt any acuteness of vision I may have. I do not think it will—I feel assured I should write from the mere yearning and fondness I have for the Beautiful even if my night's labours should be burnt every morning and no eye ever shine upon them. But even now I am perhaps not speaking from myself; but from some character in whose soul I now live. I am sure however that this next sentence is from myself. I feel your anxiety, good opinion and friendliness in the highest degree, and am

Your's most sincerely  
John Keats

### To George and Georgiana Keats<sup>1</sup>

[THE VALE OF SOUL-MAKING]

[February 14-May 3, 1819]

My dear Brother & Sister—

® " I have this moment received a note from Haslam in which he expects the death of his Father who has been for some time in a state of insensibility—

"negative capability" in his letter to George and Thomas Keats begun on December 21, 1817 (p. 942).

7. Instead of "in for," Keats may have intended to write "informing."

8. Characters in Keats's *Hyperion*. Woodhouse had recently written Keats to express concern at a remark by the poet that, because former writers had preempted the best poetic materials and styles, there was nothing new left for the modern poet.

9. Perhaps "so to press upon me."

1. Keats's brother and his wife, who had emigrated to Louisville, Kentucky, in 1818. This is part of a long letter that Keats wrote over a period of several months, and into which he transcribed several of his poems, including "Ode to Psyche." The date of this first extract is March 19.

2. William Haslam, a young businessman and close friend.

his mother bears up he says very well—I shall go to [town] tommorrow to see him. This is the world—thus we cannot expect to give way many hours to pleasure—Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting—While we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into he the wide arable land of events—while we are laughing it sprouts [it] grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck—Even so we have leisure to reason on the misfortunes of our friends; our own touch us too nearly for words. Very few men have ever arrived at a complete disinterestedness<sup>3</sup> of Mind: very few have been influenced by a pure desire of the benefit of others—in the greater part of the Benefactors of & to Humanity some meretricious motive has sullied their greatness—some melodramatic scenery has facinated them—From the manner in which I feel Haslam's misfortune I perceive how far I am from any humble standard of disinterestedness.—Yet this feeling ought to be carried to its highest pitch, as there is no fear of its ever injuring society—which it would do I fear pushed to an extremity—For in wild nature the Hawk would loose his Breakfast of Robins and the Robin his of Worms The Lion must starve as well as the swallow—The greater part of Men make their way with the same instinctiveness, the same unwandering eye from their purposes, the same animal eagerness as the Hawk—The Hawk wants a Mate, so does the Man—look at them both they set about it and procure on[e] in the same manner—They want both a nest and they both set about one in the same manner—they get their food in the same manner—The noble animal Man for his amusement smokes his pipe—the Hawk balances about the Clouds—that is the only difference of their leisures. This it is that makes the Amusement of Life—to a speculative Mind. I go among the Feilds and catch a glimpse of a stoat<sup>4</sup> or a fieldmouse peeping out of the withered grass—the creature hath a purpose and its eyes are bright with it—I go amongst the buildings of a city and I see a Man hurrying along—to what? The Creature has a purpose and his eyes are bright with it. But then as Wordsworth says, "we have all one human heart"—there is an ellectric fire in human nature tending to purify—so that among these human creature[s] there is continually some birth of new heroism—The pity is that we must wonder at it: as we should at finding a pearl in rubbish—I have no doubt that thousands of people never heard of have had hearts completely disinterested: I can remember but two—Socrates and Jesus—their Histories evince it—What I heard a little time ago, Taylor observe with respect to Socrates, may be said of Jesus—That he was so great as man that though he transmitted no writing of his own to posterity, we have his Mind and his sayings and his greatness handed to us by others. It is to be lamented that the history of the latter was written and revised by Men interested in the pious frauds of Religion. Yet through all this I see his splendour. Even here though I myself am pursueing the same instinctive course as the veriest human animal you can think of—I am however young writing at random—straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness—without knowing the bearing of any one assertion of any one opinion. Yet may I not in this be free from sin? May there not be superior beings amused with any graceful, though instinctive attitude my mind [may] fall into, as I am entertained with the alertness of a Stoat or the anxiety of a Deer? Though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest Man

3. Transcendence of self-interest, of one's selfish instincts.

4. A weasel.

5. "The Old Cumberland Beggar," line 153.



shows a grace in his quarrel—By a superior being our reasoning[s] may take the same tone—though erroneous they may be fine—This is the very thing in which consists poetry; and if so it is not so fine a thing as philosophy—For the same reason that an eagle is not so fine a thing as a truth—Give me this credit—Do you not think I strive—to know myself? Give me this credit—and you will not think that on my own accou[n]t I repeat Milton's lines

"How charming is divine Philosophy  
Not harsh and crabbed as dull fools suppose  
But musical as is Apollo's lute"—<sup>6</sup>

No—no for myself—feeling grateful as I do to have got into a state of mind to relish them properly—Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced—Even a Proverb is no proverb to you till your Life has illustrated it— \* \* \*

\* \* \* I have been reading lately two very different books Robertson's *America* and Voltaire's *Siecle De Louis xiv*.<sup>7</sup> It is like walking arm and arm between Pizarro and the great-little Monarch.<sup>8</sup> In How lementabl[e] a case do we see the great body of the people in both instances: in the first, where Men might seem to inherit quiet of Mind from unsophisticated senses; from uncontamination of civilisation; and especially from their being as it were estranged from the mutual helps of Society and its mutual injuries—and thereby more immediately under the Protection of Providence—even there they had mortal pains to bear as bad; or even worse than Baliffs,<sup>9</sup> Debts and Poverities of civilised Life—The whole appears to resolve into this—that Man is originally "a poor forked creature"<sup>1</sup> subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to hardships and disquietude of some kind or other. If he improves by degrees his bodily accommodations and comforts—at each stage, at each accent there are waiting for him a fresh set of annoyances—he is mortal and there is still a heaven with its Stars abov[e] his head. The most interesting question that can come before us is, How far by the persevering endeavours of a seldom appearing Socrates Mankind may be made happy—I can imagine such happiness carried to an extreme—but what must it end in?—Death—and who could in such a case bear with death—the whole troubles of life which are now frittered away in a series of years, would the[n] be accumulated for the last days of a being who instead of hailing its approach, would leave this world as Eve left Paradise—But in truth I do not at all believe in this sort of perfectibility—the nature of the world will not admit of it—the inhabitants of the world will correspond to itself—Let the fish philosophise the ice away from the Rivers in winter time and they shall be at continual play in the tepid delight of summer. Look at the Poles and at the sands of Africa, Whirlpools and volcanoes—Let men exterminate them and I will say that they may arrive at earthly Happiness—The point at which Man may arrive is as far as the paralel state in inanimate nature and no further—For instance suppose a rose to have sensation, it blooms on a beautiful morning it enjoys itself—but there comes a cold wind, a hot sun—it can not escape it, it cannot destroy its annoyances—they are as native to the world as itself: no more can man be happy in

6. *Coms*, lines 475–77.

7. Two books of history, Voltaire's *Le Siecle de Louis XIV* (1751) and William Robertson's *The History of America* (1777). In this second extract from the journal-letter, Keats is writing toward the end of April (on the 21st or 28th).

8. Francisco Pizarro, the Spanish explorer whose

exploits are described in Robertson's *America*. The "Monarch" is Louis XIV of France.

9. Bailiffs: officers of the law whose duties included making arrests for had debts.

1. Shakespeare's *King Lear* 3.4.95–97. Lear says of "Poor Tom," "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art."

spite, the world[ly] elements will prey upon his nature—The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is "a vale of tears" from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven—What a little circumscribe[d] straightened notion! Call the world if you Please "The vale of Soul-making" Then you will find out the use of the world (I am speaking now in the highest terms for human nature admitting it to be immortal which I will here take for granted for the purpose of showing a thought which has struck me concerning it) I say "*Soul making*" Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence—There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions—but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. Intelligences are atoms of perception—they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God—how then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them—so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each ones individual existence? How, but by the medium of a world like this? This point I sincerely wish to consider because I think it a grander system of salvation than the chrysteain religion—or rather it is a system of Spirit-creation<sup>2</sup>—This is effected by three grand materials acting the one upon the other for a series of years—These three Materials are the *Intelligence*—the *human heart* (as distinguished from intelligence or Mind) and the *World* or *Elemental space* suited for the proper action of *Mind and Heart* on each other for the purpose of forming the *Son/ or Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity*. I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive—and yet I think I perceive it—that you may judge the more clearly I will put it in the most homely form possible—I will call the *world* a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read—I will call the *human heart* the *horn Book* used in that School—and I will call the *Child ahle to read, the Soul* made from that *school* and its *hornbook*. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! Not merely is the Heart a Horn-book, It is the Minds Bible, it is the Minds experience, it is the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity—As various as the Lives of Men are—so various become their souls, and thus does God make individual beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the sparks of his own essence—This appears to me a faint sketch of a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity—I am convinced that many difficulties which christians labour under would vanish before it—There is one wh[i]ch even now Strikes me—the Salvation of Children—In them the Spark or intelligence returns to God without any identity—it having had no time to learn of, and be altered by, the heart—or seat of the human Passions—It is pretty generally suspected that the christian scheme has been copied from the ancient persian and greek Philosophers. Why may they not have made this simple thing even more simple for common apprehension by introducing Mediators and Personages in the same manner as in the hethen mythology abstractions are personified—Seri-

2. Keats is struggling for an analog<sup>1</sup> that will embody his solution to the ancient riddle of evil, as an alternative to what he understands to be the Christian view: that evil exists as a test of the individual's worthiness of salvation in heaven, and this world is only a proving ground for a later and better life. Keats proposes that the function of the human experience of sorrow and pain is to feed and discipline the formless and unstocked "intelligence"

that we possess at birth and thus to shape it into a rich and coherent "identity," or "soul." This result provides a justification ("salvation") for our suffering in terms of our earthly life: i.e., experience is its own reward.

3. A child's primer, which used to consist of a sheet of paper mounted on thin wood, protected by a sheet of transparent horn.

ously I think it probable that this System of Soul-making—may have been the Parent of all the more palpable and personal Schemes of Redemption, among the Zoroastrians the Christians and the Hindoos. For as one part of the human species must have their carved Jupiter; so another part must have the palpable and named Mediator and saviour, their Christ their Oromanes and their Vishnu<sup>4</sup>—If what I have said should not be plain enough, as I fear it may not be, I will [put] you in the place where I began in this series of thoughts—I mean, I began by seeing how man was formed by circumstances—and what are circumstances?—but touchstones of his heart—? and what are touchstones?—but proofings of his heart?<sup>5</sup>—and what are proofings of his heart but fortifiers or alterers of his nature? and what is his altered nature but his soul?—and what was his soul before it came into the world and had These provings and alterations and perfectionings?—An intelligences—without Identity—and how is this Identity to be made? Through the medium of the Heart? And how is the heart to become this Medium but in a world of Circumstances?—There now I think what with Poetry and Theology you may thank your Stars that my pen is not very long winded — \* \* \*

This is the 3d of May & every thing is in delightful forwardness; the violets are not withered, before the peeping of the first rose; You must let me know every thing, how parcels go & come, what papers you have, & what Newspapers you want, & other things—God bless you my dear Brother & Sister

Your ever Affectionate Brother

John Keats—

## To Fanny Brawne

[FANNY BRAWNE AS KEATS'S "FAIR STAR"]

[July 25, 1819]

My sweet Girl,

I hope you did not blame me much for not obeying your request of a Letter on Saturday: we have had four in our small room playing at cards night and morning leaving me no undisturb'd opportunity to write. Now Bice and Martin are gone I am at liberty. Brown to my sorrow confirms the account you give of your ill health—You cannot conceive how I ache to be with you: how I would die for one hour for what is in the world? I say you cannot conceive; it is impossible you should look with such eyes upon me as I have upon you: it cannot be. Forgive me if I wander a little this evening, for I have been all day employ'd in a very abstr[act] Poem<sup>1</sup> and I am in deep love with you—two things which must excuse me. I have, believe me, not been an age in letting you take possession of me; the very first week I knew you I wrote myself your vassal; but burnt the Letter as the very next time I saw you I thought you manifested some dislike to me. If you should ever feel for Man at the first sight what I did for you, I am lost. Yet I should not quarrel with you, but hate myself if such a thing were to happen—only I should burst if the thing were not as fine

4. The deity who creates and preserves the world, in Hindu belief. Oromanes (Ahriman) was the principle of evil, locked in a persisting struggle with Ormazd, the principle of good, in the Zoroastrian

religion of ancient Persia.

5. I.e., experiences by which the human heart is put to the test.

1. Probably *The Fall of Hyperion*.

as a Man as you are as a Woman. Perhaps I am too vehement, then fancy me on my knees, especially when I mention a part of you Letter which hurt me; you say speaking of Mr. Severn<sup>2</sup> "but you must be satisfied in knowing that I admired you much more than your friend." My dear love, I cannot believe there ever was or ever could be any thing to admire in me especially as far as sight goes—I cannot be admired, I am not a thing to be admired. You are, I love you; all I can bring you is a swooning admiration of your Beauty. I hold that place among Men which snub-nos'd brunettes with meeting eyebrows do among women—they are trash to me—unless I should find one among them with a fire in her heart like the one that burns in mine, You absorb me in spite of myself—you alone: for I look not forward with any pleasure to what is call'd being settled in the world; I tremble at domestic cares—yet for you I would meet them, though if it would leave you the happier I would rather die than do so. I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute. I hate the world: it batters too much the wings of my self-will, and would I could take a sweet poison from your lips to send me out of it. From no others would I take it. I am indeed astonish'd to find myself so careless of all cha[r]ms but yours—remembring as I do the time when even a bit of ribband was a matter of interest with me. What softer words can I find for you after this—what it is I will not read. Nor will I say more here, but in a Postscript answer any thing else you may have mentioned in your Letter in so many words—for I am distracted with a thousand thoughts. I will imagine you Venus tonight and pray, pray, pray to your star like a Hethen.<sup>3</sup>

Your's ever, fair Star,  
John Keats.

### To Percy Bysshe Shelley<sup>1</sup>

[LOAD EVERY RIFT WITH ORE]

[August 16, 1820]

My dear Shelley,

I am very much gratified that you, in a foreign country, and with a mind almost over occupied, should write to me in the strain of the Letter beside me. If I do not take advantage of your invitation it will be prevented by a circumstance I have very much at heart to prophesy<sup>2</sup>—There is no doubt that an english winter would put an end to me, and do so in a lingering hateful manner, therefore I must either voyage or journey to Italy as a soldier marches up to a battery. My nerves at present are the worst part of me, yet they feel soothed when I think that come what extreme may, I shall not be destined to remain in one spot long enough to take a hatred of any four particular bed-posts. I am glad you take any pleasure in my poor Poem;<sup>3</sup>—which I would

2. Joseph Severn, who later looked after Keats in Rome during his final illness.

3. See Keats's sonnet "Bright star" (p. 898) for parallels to this and other remarks in the present letter.

1. Written in reply to a letter urging Keats (who was ill) to spend the winter with the Shelleys

in Pisa.

2. His own death.

3. Keats's *Endymion*, Shelley had written, contains treasures, "though treasures poured forth with indistinct profusion." Keats here responds with advice in kind.

willingly take the trouble to unwrite, if possible, did I care so much as I have done about Reputation. I received a copy of the *Cenci*,<sup>4</sup> as from yourself from Hunt. There is only one part of it I am judge of; the Poetry, and dramatic effect, which by many spirits now a days is considered the mammon. A modern work it is said must have a purpose,<sup>5</sup> which may be the God — *an artist* must serve Mammon — he must have "self concentration" selfishness perhaps. You I am sure will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity and be more of an artist, and "load every rift"<sup>6</sup> of your subject with ore. The thought of such discipline must fall like cold chains upon you, who perhaps never sat with your wings furl'd for six Months together. And is not this extraordinary talk for the writer of *Endymion*? whose mind was like a pack of scattered cards — I am pick'd up and sorted to a pip.<sup>7</sup> My Imagination is a Monastery and I am its Monk — you must explain my metaphor<sup>8</sup> to yourself. I am in expectation of Prometheus<sup>9</sup> every day. Could I have my own wish for its interest effected you would have it still in manuscript — or be but now putting an end to the second act. I remember you advising me not to publish my first-blights, on Hampstead heath — I am returning advice upon your hands. Most of the Poems in the volume I send you' have been written above two years, and would never have been publish'd but from a hope of gain; so you see I am inclined enough to take your advice now. I must express once more my deep sense of your kindness, adding my sincere thanks and respects for M<sup>r</sup> Shelley. In the hope of soon seeing you I remain

most sincerely yours,  
John Keats —

## To Charles Brown<sup>1</sup>

[KEATS'S LAST LETTER]

Rome. 30 November 1820.

My dear Brown,

'Tis the most difficult thing in the world to me to write a letter. My stomach continues so bad, that I feel it worse on opening any book, — yet I am much better than I was in Quarantine.<sup>2</sup> Then I am afraid to encounter the proing and conning of any thing interesting to me in England. I have an habitual feeling of my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence. God knows how it would have been — but it appears to me — however, I will not speak of that subject. I must have been at Bedhampton nearly at the time you were writing to me from Chichester\* — how unfortunate — and to pass

4. Shelley's blank-verse tragedy, *The Cenci*, had been published in the spring of 1820.

5. Wordsworth had said this in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. For "Mammon" see Matthew 6.24 and Luke 16.13: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

6. From Spenser's description of the Cave of Mammon in *The Faerie Queene* 2.7.28: "With rich metall loaded every rift."

7. Perfectly ordered; all tile suits in the deck matched up ("pips" are the conventional spots on playing cards).

8. Metaphysics.

9. *Prometheus Unbound*, of which Shelley had promised Keats a copy.

1. Keats's volume of 1820, including *Lamia*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and the odes. When Shelley drowned he had this small book open in his pocket.

2. Written to Keats's friend Charles Armitage Brown from the house on the Spanish Steps, in the Pia//a di Spagna, where Keats was being tended in his mortal illness by the devoted Joseph Severn.

3. When it landed at Maples, Keats's ship had been quarantined for ten miserably hot days.

4. Bedhampton and Chichester are both near the harbor town of Portsmouth, where Keats had embarked for Naples two months before.

on the river too! There was my star predominant!<sup>4</sup> I cannot answer any thing in your letter, which followed me from Naples to Rome, because I am afraid to look it over again. I am so weak (in mind) that I cannot bear the sight of any hand writing of a friend I love so much as I do you. Yet I ride the little horse,—and, at my worst, even in Quarantine, summoned up more puns, in a sort of desperation, in one week than in any year of my life. There is one thought enough to kill me—I have been well, healthy, alert &c, walking with her<sup>5</sup>—and now—the knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem are great enemies to the recover)<sup>1</sup> of the stomach. There, you rogue, I put you to the torture,—but you must bring your philosophy to bear—as I do mine, really—or how should I be able to live? Dr Clarke is very attentive to me; he says, there is very little the matter with my lungs, but my stomach, he says, is very bad. I am well disappointed in hearing good news from George,—for it runs in my head we shall all die young. I have not written to x x x x yet,<sup>6</sup> which he must think very neglectful; being anxious to send him a good account of my health, I have delayed it from week to week. If I recover, I will do all in my power to correct the mistakes made during sickness; and if I should not, all my faults will be forgiven. I shall write to x x x to-morrow, or next day. I will write to x x x x in the middle of next week. Severn is very well, though he leads so dull a life with me. Remember me to all friends, and tell x x x x I should not have left London without taking leave of him, but from being so low in body and mind. Write to George as soon as you receive this, and tell him how I am, as far as you can guess;—and also a note to my sister—who walks about my imagination like a ghost—she is so like Tom.<sup>7</sup> I can scarcely bid you good bye even in a letter. I always made an awkward bow.

God bless you!

John Keats.

4. I.e., that was my usual luck. Cf. Shakespeare's *The Winters Tale* 1.2.202-03: "It is a bawdy planet, that will strike / Where 'tis predominant."

5. Fanny Brawne.

6. Charles Brown, whose manuscript transcription is the only text for this letter, substituted

crosses for the names till Keats's friends to conceal their identities.

7. Keats's youngest brother, whom Fanny, his only sister, closely resembled, had died of tuberculosis on December 1, 1818. George was John Keats's younger brother.

## MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY 1797-1851

Percy Shelley wrote of his young wife, in the Dedication to *Laon and Cythnu*:

They say that thou wert lovely from thy birth,  
Of glorious parents, thou aspiring Child.

The "glorious parents" were William Godwin, the leading reformer and radical philosopher of the time, and Mary Wollstonecraft, famed as the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft had died as the result of childbed fever incurred when she gave birth to Mary. Four years later Godwin married a widow, Mary Jane Clairmont, who soon had more than she could cope with trying to manage a family of five children of diverse parentage, amid increasing financial difficulties. Mary bitterly resented her stepmother but adored her father, who, she later said, "was