A GREETING OF THE SPIRIT
A Greeting of the Spirit

Selected Poetry of John Keats with Commentaries

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THE BELKNAP PRESS OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England
2022
TO JOHN KEATS

One word more, for one cannot help seeing our own affairs in every point of view - Should any one call my dedication to Chatterton affected I say answer as followeth:

“Were I dead Sir I should like a Book dedicated to me –’
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A GREETING OF THE SPIRIT
Writing to his brother and sister-in-law in America, 14 October 1818, John Keats assures them of his resilience after two influential, harsh reviews of his first ventures. “This is a mere matter of the moment,” he says, with a poet’s undefeated alliterative lilt,

– I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death. Even as a Matter of present interest the attempt to crush me in the Chro Quarterly has only brought me more into notice and it is a common expression among book men ‘I wonder the Quarterly should cut its own throat’.] (MsK 1.39.146; K 209)

The unpretentious I think I shall, the temporality of after my death: hope tinged with modesty. By 1883, Poet Laureate Alfred Tennyson would endorse Keats’s among the English Poets with this upgrade: “He would have been among the very greatest of us if he had lived. There is something of the innermost soul of poetry in almost everything he ever wrote.” Keats, he declared, “promised securely more than any English poet since Milton” (Hallam Tennyson 2:286, 504).

Promise. Keats is ever this poet, because his career scarcely exceeded four years: from 5 May 1816, with a sonnet in a newspaper, to 21 July 1820, when Tó
*Autumn* was reprinted in the *Chronicle* (the host volume had appeared a few weeks before). This is the legend of “Keats”: flushed early with talent, crushed (but not extinguished) by early abuse, cherished by a coterie, winning posthumous praise in zig-zags, secured in durable fame. The “romance” of Keats is persistence through (by means of; pressing beyond) disappointments, an ability to turn dead ends into back channels, resourceful inventiveness at every turn. Had he been able to attend a university, had there been an “English major” in his day, Keats would have been a star student, pursuing an interdisciplinary program of philosophy, science, medicine, ethics—all the while writing poetry and talking with poets, reading everything. He ached to be a poet.

Poets may be born, but they are also made by the world into which they are born. For Keats, books were vital. His reading included some eighteenth-century writers (Pope’s translations of Homer, Ann Radcliffe’s gothic novels, James Thomson’s retro-Spenserian satirical romance, *The Castle of Indolence*). His chief loves were Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden. “Shakspeare and the paradise Lost every day become greater wonders to me –I look upon fine Phrases like a Lover —” (MsK 1.58.287; *K* 264). Keats also *writes* fine phrases, loving what words can tell and what they can do. An essayist that Keats admired, William Hazlitt, called such energy *Gusto*, “imagination” taking “a double relish of its objects, an inveterate attachment to the things [it] describes, and to the words describing them.” This is Keats’s energy. With an “instinct for fine words,” he “rediscovered the delight and wonder that lay enchanted in the dictionary,” said J. R. Lowell (“Keats” 325). Keats’s own enchanted word-works live in memorable circulation:

“Much have I travel’d in the realms of gold”
“negative capability”
“the ardour of pursuit”
“diligent indolence”
“A thing of beauty is a joy for ever”
“camelion Poet”
“tender is the night”
“Beauty is truth, truth Beauty”
“Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness”
“Fanatics have their dreams”
“I am leading a posthumous existence”
“I always made an awkward bow”
Some of these phrasings are so well known that we may not realize that their melodies were unheard before John Keats. Charles Lamb praised Keats’s talent for “prodigal phrases . . . each a poem in a word” (Examiner p. 495). While their contexts are important (inflections, qualifications, and ironies), it says much about Keats’s brilliance that these wordings have been so prodigal, so radiant in general circulation.

By the century’s end, this was “Keats”: “the power of concentrating all the far-reaching resources of language on one point, so that a single and apparently effortless expression rejoices the æsthetic imagination at the moment when it is most expectant and exacting, and at the same time astonishes the intellect with a new aspect of truth,” said Robert Bridges (xci–xcii), deeming him Shakespeare’s equal this way. Bridges would become Poet Laureate (after Tennyson), and he had been a doctor, a profession for which Keats trained; he could appreciate this visceral fiber in Keats’s poetic genius. When, in 1928, Herbert Read argued that word-power is poetry’s very definition, he gave Keats automatic honors. “In Poetry the words are born or re-born in the act of thinking” (xi). Whether or not you agree to the distinction Read makes between poetry and prose, what is notable is Keats’s legibility in his list of unmarked examples of such power in an “affair of one word, like Shakespeare’s ‘incarnadine’, or of two or three words, like ‘shady sadness’, ‘incense-breathing Morn’, ‘a peak in Darien’, ‘soft Lydian airs’, ‘Mount Abora’, ‘star-inwrought’” (xi).1 Like Shakespeare, Keats also invented words as he needed them (as testified by this book’s index, which lists dozens).

No wonder Keats is often called “a poet’s poet”: he writes with an extraordinary sensitivity to the emotional, psychological, and intellectual resonances of verse, achieved through exquisite technical skill. And so I arrive at my title, A Greeting of the Spirit. This is a phrase from Keats’s letter to a friend, surmising that “every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer — being in itself a nothing.” Ethereal things, he proposes, range from Things real “such as existences of Sun Moon & Stars and passages of Shakspeare” to the Nothings which are elevated by that “ardent pursuit.” Between these poles is the span of spirited imagination:

\[
\text{Things semireal such as Love, the Clouds \&c which require a greeting of the Spirit to make them wholly exist – [.] (13 March 1818; MsK 1.3.81)}
\]

A greeting: a great call to poetic imagination and our invitation for reading Keats. Ever immersed in words, as a means for thinking, as sounds with surprises,
and as lettered figures, Keats is a poet for everyone ready to be caught by writing that is challenging and heartbreaking, funny and stimulating, formal and intimate, satisfying in the intelligent pleasures of concentrated analysis and revelatory in wider vibrations.

Life Distilled: John Keats (1795–1821)

“No young man believes that he shall ever die,” wrote Hazlitt in 1827, a little more than six years after Keats was no more. “Death, old age, are words without a meaning, that pass by us like the idle air which we regard not.” How otherwise it was for Keats, who had seen and endured plenty of death when he petitioned in *Sleep and Poetry*, the capstone of his debut volume, “Oh, for ten years, that I may overwhelm / Myself in poesy” (pp. 96–97). This was written in late 1816, published the next spring. Not granted even half this span, he still achieved a remarkably full poetic life, seeming in brief years to “write old”—so Elizabeth Barrett Browning measures the amazing intensity:

By Keats’s soul, the man who never stepped  
In gradual progress like another man,  
But, turning grandly on his central self,  
Ensphered himself in twenty perfect years  
And died, not young, — (the life of a long life  
Distilled to a mere drop, falling like a tear  
Upon the world’s cold cheek to make it burn  
For ever;) by that strong excepted soul,  
I count it strange, and hard to understand,  
That nearly all young poets should write old.3

Long life distilled into a burning drop is a perfect conceptual biography, beautifully figured by the embrace of parentheses. A generation on, Oscar Wilde opened his *Lecture on the English Renaissance* (9 January 1882) by hailing in Keats’s poetry an epochal force for a modern “artistic renaissance of England”: “He was the forerunner of the pre-Raphaelite school, and so of the great romantic wave” (30). Quite an accolade from one who quipped in 1889, “Books of poetry by young writers are usually promissory notes that are never met.” He completed this sentence with an admission that every now and then “one comes across a volume that is so far above the average that one can hardly resist the fascinating temptation of recklessly prophesying a fine future for the author” (*Pall Mall Gazette*). Wilde meant twenty-four-year-old Yeats’s *The Wan-
derings of Oisin (“strongly influenced by Keats”), but it could just as well have designated Keats’s 1820 volume, also published at age twenty-four, holding The Eve of Saint Agnes, Hyperion, Lamia, Isabella, and the “Great Odes” that are synonymous with his fame.

Distilled indeed. Keats’s lifetime publications total fifty-four poems, forty-five in his three volumes, others in periodicals, along with a couple of unsigned reviews. The census of a long life would find all these slotted as “early works,” “juvenilia.” Comparisons are striking. At twenty-five, Chaucer, Spenser, Dryden, and Swift had written nothing about which we know. Shakespeare had racked up only The Comedy of Errors and Love’s Labour’s Lost; Ben Jonson, The Isle of Dogs; Marvell, some courtly Greek and Latin poems. Wordsworth had one sonnet and two slender volumes of descriptive poetry (thirty-four and fifty-seven pages, respectively), read today mostly by specialists; the landmark Lyrical Ballads didn’t come until age twenty-eight. The first publication of Victorian sage Carlyle, born just weeks after Keats and surviving him by six decades, came in 1824, on the cusp of age thirty: a translation of Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister. What if Keats had the gift of even those “ten years,” let alone Carlyle’s and Wordsworth’s decades?

This mystery vibrates along Keats’s several talents. Poetry, yes. His eye was also on drama; steeped in Shakespeare, he might have written tragedies for the times, or comedies from his keen observation of personalities and social behavior, not only in deft outlines but also in nuances of action and conversation. Student of history, politics, science, and medicine, he might have become a forceful reviewer and essayist, joining Hazlitt on “the liberal side of things” (L 2:14). An astute, disinterested observer of the character of his friends and of public actors, he might have become a modern novelist. To quote a famous ode: Unheard melodies!

John Keats was the eldest of four children, their father the proprietor of a suburban London livery-stable. He was nine when this father died from a riding accident. His mother was doting but erratic, and John was devastated when, in the turmoil of a second marriage quickly secured and soon ended, she left the children with her mother. Four years later (four long years in boy-time), she returned, wracked by tuberculosis. John took charge of her care, guarded her door, and in 1810, when he was fourteen, watched her die. This trauma would replay in the adored, adoring, inconstant (sometimes fatally) women in his poetry, early and late. The love of his life, Fanny Brawne, was destined for this sorority, constant as she was. (It didn’t help that Fanny was also his mother’s name.)

The boys attended progressive Enfield Academy. Bright and appetitive, Keats thrived, reading like a demon, tutored by the headmaster’s son, Charles Cowden
Boys yearn to run outdoors; Keats’s paradise was books: “the quantity that he read was surprising. He must . . . have exhausted the school library,” recalled Clarke (CR 123). He nurtured Keats’s interests in literature, music, theater, and liberal politics. Then the legal guardian appointed by their grandmother, businessman Richard Abbey, intent to train the boys for a livelihood and keep young Fanny (his ward) from their influence, put an end to Enfield. In the summer of 1811, Tom and George went to his countinghouse, and John, not yet sixteen, was apprenticed, for a five-year term, to a brutal Edmonton surgeon in the days before an anesthesia. When Keats could, he would walk the three miles back to Enfield to visit Clarke, usually with “a book to read, or . . . one to be exchanged” (125). He kept another lifeline to Enfield, continuing the project he had undertaken to translate Virgil’s epic of war and empire, The Aeneid, the word-care sharpening his Latin literacy and the poetic rendition deepening his feel for meter and sensitivity to verbal nuance.

He was also moonlighting, writing poetry, and plotting a way out of his misery and loneliness in Edmonton. In October 1815, he persuaded Abbey to enroll him for medical study at Guy’s Hospital in south London. He was soon working as a surgeon’s dresser, still reading away (Homer, Virgil, Tasso, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Chatterton, and contemporaries Leigh Hunt, Wordsworth, Byron)—and writing poetry: on impulse, as escape, and in fantasy vocation. He was always close to his brothers, often his first readers, always impressed by his talent. He showed Clarke some poetry, hoping for help into print. When this didn’t happen, he ventured a sonnet to the weekly paper, The Examiner, signed “J K.” Editor Leigh Hunt took it. Seeing it published in May 1816 was far more a thrill to Keats than acing the rigorous qualification exam in July for medical practice. Clarke, a friend of Hunt, soon followed up with him with a folder of Keats’s poems; in October Hunt invited them to his cottage on Hampstead Heath. “As we approached” (Clarke recalled), Keats was pumped: “there was the rising and accelerated step, with gradual subsidence of all talk” (CR 133). This was foreplay to love at first sight. “We became intimate on the spot,” Hunt recalled; “I found the young poet’s heart as warm as his imagination. We read and walked together, and used to write verses of an evening upon a given subject” (Lord Byron &c 410). Coming of age on 31 October (his twenty-first birthday), Keats decided that poetry could be more than a vacation from medicine. It was a vocation.

Hunt introduced him around. Painter B. R. Haydon was quite taken with his talent, and soon brought him to Wordsworth’s notice. Then, in a pivotal essay in The Examiner, on 1 December, Hunt featured Keats as one of three new “Young Poets” to watch for, printing the sonnet “On First Looking into
Chapman’s Homer,” Keats’s second-only publication. With Hunt, another of the trio, Percy Bysshe Shelley, convinced his publisher to produce a volume. To preview and publicize this venture, Hunt put two more sonnets by Keats in early 1817 issues of The Examiner.

Keats designed Poems as a presentation portfolio, showing technical skill and versatility (poems long and short, songs, sonnets, verse-epistles). It was also a celebration of great poets and poetic greatness: Keats’s bookshelf. He was rushing a Bard Fraternity, full throttle. The title-page features a profile of a laurel-crowned poet, with a motto that tacitly speaks back to Wordsworth’s elegy in his “Immortality” Ode (1815), about the loss of “delight and liberty” after early childhood. The motto, from Spenser’s Fate of the Butterfly, reads: “What more felicity can fall to creature, / Than to enjoy delight with liberty.”

Keats would hail poetry’s durable gifts, ever present, but Spenser’s Fate of the Butterfly holds a fuller story: this creature’s delight is destined for a spider’s web. Keats’s epigraph is a slight, grim in-joke, because he knew that his Hunt-fanned debut would be webbed in culture wars. The seemingly incidental word “liberty” was quite potent in the day, byword for opposition to tyranny, especially the monarchical institution. The motto of the French Revolution was Liberty, Fraternity, Equality. Hunt’s fierce oppositional polemics in The Examiner had drawn prosecutorial ire, earning him a steep fine of £500 for “seditious libel” on the Prince of Wales as well as a serious prison term (1813–1815). Keats was not naïve about dedicating Poems “To Leigh Hunt. Esq.”

Hunt was also everywhere in its pages. The unit titled “Sonnets” held “Written on the day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison” (III), and offered further praise in “Great spirits” (XIV). The volume’s first formal poem used a line from Hunt’s controversial Story of Rimini (1816) in place of a title: “Places of nestling green for Poets made” (p. 1). In such a retreat, the (in)famous adulterous lovers Paulo and Francesca (of Rimini) tryst. Dante’s Inferno sees them in hell. Hunt weaves a tragic romance of erotic liberty, indulged in secret against the patriarchal tyranny that bartered and tricked Francesca into a loveless, politically advantageous marriage (to Paulo’s older brother). “Z” (the reviewer-scourge of Blackwood’s) was outraged at Hunt’s “sentimental” cast on sin: “Many a one reads Rimini as a pleasant romance, and closes it without having the least suspicion that he has been perusing a tale pregnant with all the horrors of the most unpardonable guilt.”

The Examiner was a voice, the voice, for social and political reform. Even the essay on “Young Poets” spoke revolution—in poetry: the eighteenth-century regime of regular rhymes and meters was over! Keats bore this into Poems with a panache of liberties: couplets scarcely anchored by lambent rhymes of falling meter (wandering/pondering), a high frequency of free enjambments (syntax...
Poems,

by

John Keats.

"What more felicity can fall to creature,
Than to enjoy delight with liberty."

Fair of the Butterfly.—Spenser.

London:
Printed for
C. & J. Ollier, 3, Welbeck Street,
Cavendish Square.
1817.

Figure 1: Title page, Poems, with Keats’s inscription to Wordsworth (1817). Wordsworth never replied and left most of the pages uncut (that is, unread). The publisher designed a full coding of the volume as “poetry,” from the title and epigraph from Edmund Spenser, to the profile of a Poet Laureate (evoking both Shakespeare and Spenser, England’s unofficial first Poet Laureate). Published on 3 March 1817, Poems was priced at 6 shillings, and eventually remaindered. Courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
running over lines), irregular meters everywhere, demotic diction galore. *Sleep and Poetry* was a Hunt-themed essay on the “new school of poetry,” one conspicuously at play in Keats’s new poetry, sparked with satire on the *foppery and barbarism, musty laws,* and *wretched rule* of neoclassical poetics (162–206). This manifesto was a brave and risky debut. Haydon hailed it as a bolt of lightning. Hunt loved it. Byron (who loved Pope) did not, despising the smart-ass upstart. The review-Hunters were too ready. *Blackwood’s Z.* had taken a first shot at Hunt’s “Cockney School of Poetry” (October 1817), his epigraph naming the next target, in a rhyme of mock hyperbole:

Keats,
The Muses’ son of promise; and of what feats
He yet may do.

*Cockney* was a house-brand slur, class contempt with a whiff of effeminacy.7 Even before this jab, Keats’s publishers, irritated by low sales, wanted no more of (or from) him. The third of Hunt’s “Young Poets,” J. H. Reynolds, introduced Keats to his publisher, the entrepreneurial firm of Taylor and Hessey. Keats soon had a contract for *Endymion: A Poetic Romance,* the longest poem he would ever write, ever publish. It was a credentialing project sparked by a compact with Shelley to finish “4000 Lines” by the end of 1817.8 Eager for a test a trial of my Powers of Imagination (MsK 1.13.42), Keats fired up and finished on time. While he awaited page-proofs, he was thrilled by the debut of Hazlitt’s lectures on the English poets on 13 January 1818. Speaking “On Poetry in General,” Hazlitt hailed a “universal language which the heart holds with nature and itself”:

Many people suppose that poetry is something to be found only in books, contained in lines of ten syllables, with like endings: but wherever there is a sense of beauty, or power, or harmony, as in the motion of a wave of the sea, in the growth of a flower that “spreads its sweet leaves to the air, and dedicates its beauty to the sun,”—there is poetry, in its birth. *(Lectures 2)*

Hazlitt’s quotation riffs on Romeo’s worried father comparing his love-bitten son to an infected bud thwarted of blooming (*Romeo and Juliet* I.i). Weeding out the pathology and turning Shakespeare’s lambent iambic pentameter into natural prose, Hazlitt replants the words for fresh, liberal poetic harvest. As the packed houses at his lectures made clear, it was a good time for poetry:
publishers’ lists were growing, success paid handsomely, and everyone was reading it.

Yet for all the excitement, as Keats proofread *Endymion* through this winter, he saw immature fever, and said so in his Preface, stating his intent for better endeavors. Instead, the candor primed the anti-Hunt reviews. Out in May 1818 and quickly into reviewers’ claws, *Endymion* was ridiculed for its frou-frou fable, its extravagant rhymes and conceits, its lax meters, its obscenities (which reviews still quoted), and the low-hanging fruit of a gratuitous anti-monarchical rant at the top of Book III. Z. mocked an “imperturbable drivelling idiocy” (*Blackwood’s* III:520), and the more widely read *Quarterly* branded it as “unintelligible . . . tiresome and absurd . . . nonsense” (205). Keats shrugged. “My own domestic criticism has given me pain without comparison beyond what Blackwood or the Quarterly could possibly inflict,” he told publisher James Hessey. He was independent: “no external praise can give me such a glow as my own solitary reperception & ratification of what is fine” (8 October 1818; *K* 206–207). Keats coined the word *reperception* for this self-discipline. It would come to characterize his poetic way.

Keats, writes Ernest de Selincourt, “is the most striking example of a poet self-educated and disciplined by his own severe and strenuous mental effort. . . . he continually reviewed his art in the light” of his growing ideas; “his mind is continually reacting upon his art, diagnosing its weaknesses, . . . and strengthening its natural growth” (“Warton” 4–5). *Review, reacting, reperception:* Keats’s next plan for a long poem, conceived in 1818, was just such an effort. This is *Hyperion*, named for the last Titan to be defeated by the ascendant Olympians. The plan was to hail the rise of Apollo, Hyperion’s successor, a gorgeous new-generation god of knowledge, poetry, medicine—a portfolio dear to Keats. Yet for all this investment, there were evident problems. The determined main course of Apollo-poetry served a lot of Romance candy. Far more compelling, strengthening for sure, was Keats’s poetry of the Titans’ pained bewilderment at their lost divinity, with sustained intensity in yet unfallen Hyperion, knowing the doom of his brothers. When Keats’s own brother Tom, wasting from tuberculosis, died in December, the master plan for Apollo’s victory thinned into evaporation. Or reperception.

Keats recharged with other genres, and across 1819 blazed out the poetry that would claim him fame: *The Eve of St. Agnes, La belle dame sans merci, Ode to a Nightingale, Ode on a Grecian Urn, Ode on Melancholy, To Autumn*. It is surprising to discover that these “Great Odes” (so called in Keats’s renown today) were no feature in the volume titled *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820)—by “John Keats/Author of *Endymion*” (no less!). The three title-poems
took up 104 of 199 pages, another 31 pages went to “Other Poems.” To Keats’s dismay, the last 57 pages held Hyperion, a Fragment, with an Advertisement at the front of the volume that excused him from responsibility for this inclusion, explaining its incomplete state as the result of the discouraging reviews of Endymion. Keats was furious (see Figure 9). It wasn’t the reviews; it was reperception. In fall 1819, he attempted a recast of the project as The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream. The dream is a poet’s, and this, too—his last major project—remained unfinished.

* * *

I must choose between despair and Energy—I choose the latter, Keats wrote to a friend in May 1819 (K 256). Energy fuels life as well as writing. *Talking of Pleasure, this moment I was writing with one hand, and with the other holding to my Mouth a Nectarine – good god how fine – It went down soft pulpy, slushy, oozy – all its deliciousness embonpoint melted down my throat* (September 1819; K 269). Writing and living, both with intensity. Early in 1820, this energy was felled by a major pulmonary hemorrhage. Medically literate, Keats saw his death warrant. By July, his doctors were advising winter in the warm south, Italy. Self-cartooning, Keats tells Haydon in mid-August, “I am afraid I shall pop off just when I [sic] mind is able to run alone” (L 2:320). He had just sent John Taylor his “Testament,” still pausing for a name-pun – *pay my Taylor the few pounds I owe him* – before rendering a last sentence with a formal flourish of inverted syntax and perfect iambic pentameter: *My Chest of Books divide among my friends—* (2:319). Hoping to be among the English Poets, Keats would place his books among his friends. No pun, *My Chest* was sadly double bound. *My dear Taylor*, he had written just the day before, *My Chest is in so nervous a State, that . . . writing a Note half suffocates me . . . every line I write encreases the tightness of the Chest* (13 August; ALS Morgan). Ten days on, a last letter to dear friend William Haslam (23 August 1820) tells the tale again: “I could say much more than this half sheet would hold, but the oppression I have at the Chest will not suffer my Pen to be long-winded” (L 2:331). He could barely breathe, let alone write. He was losing everyone in England, not least his beloved fiancée Fanny Brawne: “I have coals of fire in my breast,” he wrote to his dear friend Brown about her on 1 November 1820, from Naples, a thousand miles away from both of them (L 2:352). In a last letter to Brown (30 November), Keats describes his life as a “post-humous existence,” and muses wryly about living in contradiction to his prized poetic value: “the knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem are great enemies to the recovery of the stomach.” In the best energy of friendship and poetry, he signs off with a witty self-regard, in briefer tetrameter: “I always made an awkward
bow” (K 433). This is ruefully gracious. Another bowing out is the despairing pentameter epitaph he dictated on his deathbed: *Here lies one whose name was writ in water.* Not even on water (ephemeral enough) but in water, the very medium invisible. Ironically, these words were engraved on an oft-visited tombstone.

The 1820 volume was praised, but it was no hit, remaindered and sold for pulp. Except for coterie admirers and the fable of Shelley’s *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats* (1821), which railed against the reviews for killing off a frail flower of genius, Keats was nearly forgotten for a quarter of a century: *smuffed out by an Article* was Byron’s wry epitaph in 1823 (Don Juan XI.LX), more widely quoted than any line in *Adonais*. Hunt did his best, and on St. Agnes Day 1835 (21 January), printed *The Eve of St. Agnes* entire, with a “loving commentary.” In 1848, R. M. Milnes’s *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats* gathered forty new or uncollected poems, and quite consequentially, eighty letters, most for the first time (Hunt’s 1828 memoir included a few). So began an appreciation of this sociable archive, as brilliant and lively as the poetry: letters to read, reread, share, *interread one another*, a verb Keats coined for his relay with two of his correspondents (MsK 1.64.313). By turns (often in the same letter), he is playful, ironic, sentimental, funny, thoughtful, passionate, candid, full of comments about poetic style, method, purposes, “flashing phrases which never desert the memory.” No surprise that striking passages have a poetic pulse; and no surprise, too, that some of Keats’s poetry was first communicated in letters—even as letters. Reborn in Milnes’s *Life*, relieved of Regency cultural wars, Keats found a new generation and new influence on the nation’s poets.

Yet frail “Keats” was still in the air, swatted at with Victorian gender-cudgels. Even friendlier accounts were dubious help. In 1853 Matthew Arnold described *Isabella* as a “treasure-house of graceful and felicitous words and images . . . vivid and picturesque turns of expression, by which the object is made to flash upon the eyes of the mind, and which thrill the reader with a sudden delight” (Preface to Poems xxii). Yet without the armature of substantive “action,” the returns for an iron age in need of sterner stuff seemed minimal. “The dialogue of the mind with itself” (vi) was Arnold’s diagnosis of the disease of modern poetry. Diagnosis aside, there is a potency in this reflexive phrasing, a poetic action in the mind’s conversation “with itself.” For twentieth-century modernism, this would be Keats’s brand, his name standing for nexus of sensuous vitality, skeptical ironic modernity, a thrilling intensity in imagery, energy in words—captivating at one turn, elusive, uncertain, doubtful, mysterious in the next. Keats had a wording for this, too: *Negative Capability.*
Energies displayed: dark Passages, Soul-making, Negative Capability, camelion Poet

In any age of “New Poetry,” poets like to plant their flags. Wordsworth issued testy defenses in Prefaces, Essays and Appendices; Shelley polished Prefaces and mounted a *Defence of Poetry*; Byron polemicized in public letters and Prefaces; Hunt wrote reams of essays, reviews, criticism; Coleridge produced an epic, *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (1817). Keats? He never drafted, let alone published, any position papers. His résumé as critic was a theater review, a literary review (both unsigned), and that self-incinerating Preface to *Endymion*. Even for what he sensed would be his last volume, he had no “intention . . . to have a Preface” (*L* 2:276), and crafted no “dedication” (as he had for his first two volumes). His thinking about poets, poetry, and poetic practice gets worked out in his poetry, and in lively correspondence with family, friends, and publishers. It is no little thing to hear the first important editor of Wordsworth’s epic autobiography, de Selincourt, say about Keats’s letters: “in them we can study the growth of a poet’s mind even more minutely than in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*; and their evidence is more authentic, in that they are less conscious, and are a spontaneous record of the present rather than a careful recollection of the past” (“Warton” 2).

The phrases in my subtitle are “signature” formulations and meditations, durable touchstones not only for Keats’s reputation but also for literary criticism over the last century. How striking that all are one-offs, produced in conversations and sociable letter-writing. In two letters, one from spring 1818 and one a year on, Keats presents key figures for his sense of life’s trials in the world: *dark Passages* and *a vale of Soul-making*. The first he mapped in a letter to Reynolds, at the end of an extended simile comparing life in the world to a “Mansion of Many Apartments” (3 May 1818; *K* 129–131). We begin in the *infant or thoughtless Chamber* (analogous to Paradise). On “the awakening of the thinking principle,” this becomes a *Chamber of Maiden-Thought*, a female-troped “de-light” that is “intoxicated,” to be sobered and regendered with a “sharpening of one’s vision into the heart and nature of Man,” with a visceral “convincing ones nerves” that “the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression.” This is not sin-logic, just maturing thought: reperception. This chamber opens inevitably into a labyrinth of *dark Passages*, a metaphor that Keats invests (with dividends) for worldly experience and its reading. In such passages, Wordsworth’s poetry proves far more existentially valuable than Milton’s theological illuminings: for all the erudition, Milton’s “Philosophy, human
divine, may be tolerably understood by one not much advanced in years,” Keats dares to say to Reynolds (K 130).

In Keats’s second great metaphor, written out in April 1819, dark passages are no pointless wilderness but a vale of Soul-making (MsK s2.261–263; K 250–251). If chrysteain religion (Keats’s reduced respelling) conceives of an immortal soul pent in mortal life’s vale of tears until its redemption by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven, Keats dismisses this plot as a little circumscribe[d] straightened notion. If the world is a “Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways,” this is the existential forge of Identity, the process of Soul-making. No surprise that a trope of reading is ready at hand. The world is a School, its primer is the human heart, the necessary agent to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul. In his letter of 3 May 1818, Keats insists that book-reading has to pass this test, too: “we read fine — things but never feel them to [the] full until we have gone the same steps as the Author.”

No help are Dogmas and superstitions (especially Milton’s) that supply prefab resting places and seeming sure points of Reasoning (K 131). The “mere wording” of “axioms in philosophy” has to be “proved upon our pulses” (nicely pulsed in this very sounding). Having read Hamlet forty times, Keats knows it as a Soul-making experience: “now I shall relish Hamlet more than I ever have done” (K 129). How great that his verb for rereading is unreluctant relish.

In late 1817 (Poems published, Endymion drafted), Keats coined his most famous formulation (often reiterated without knowing its actual provenance). “Several things dove-tailed in my mind”—what a great verb!—and “at once it struck me” what to value: “Negative Capability, that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (K 78).12 Keats saw this in Shakespeare’s dramatic power, felt its limitation in a Wordsworth too prone (he jests to Reynolds, February 1818) to “brood and peacock over” his speculations (Keats verbed the bird), leaving his reader feeling “bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist” (K 99). In a letter to Woodhouse, 17 October 1818, he coined this bullying into the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime, setting this as foil to his own poetical Character: a camelion Poet of no self... no Identity, no particular philosophy, but continually in for—and filling some other Body,” capable of (sometimes, unable to avoid) living in the intensity of a mood, a character, a disposition, the gusto of light and shade... foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated.13

He could sense this capacity even in severely theological Milton, in a throb of camelion imagination into Satan’s sensations as he hides out in a sleeping serpent to evade God’s spies.
his sleep

Disturb’d not, waiting close the approach of morn. (9.190–191)

Theology be damned in this sympathy for a former archangel so confined. Keats’s underlining conveys his amazed appreciation (KPL II:79–80):

Whose spirit does not ache at the smothering and confinement - the unwilling stillness - the "waiting close"? Whose head is not dizzy at the prosiable speculations of Satan in the serpent prison - no passage of poetry ever can give a greater pain of suffocation.

And no passage of prose can render greater payment to a camelion Milton. Keats greets Milton’s sympathy with his own: the agony of Satan’s unwilling stillness, the noun triple-ached with stasis, silence and slow time.14 He contributes his own sinuous participles, smothering, unwilling, waiting, with his fine echoing of confinement in serpent, a pun-relay of pent into prison, and an echo in pain. Compare Milton’s spirit-aching poetry here to a flat glossing later on (as if he needed to sober up): “the enemy of mankind, inclosed / In serpent, inmate bad” (9.494–495). Keats had no care to underline these lines.

“The only means of strengthening one’s intellect is to make up ones mind about nothing—to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts,” Keats said in September 1819 (K276), finding a new kind of poetic “identity.” He had put it this way on 19 March:

Though a quarrel in the Streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest Man shows a grace in his quarrel—By a superior being our reasoning 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.

(MsK 1.53.233)

Keats is large-minded enough, generous-souled enough, to imagine his own errors, including the liking of energetic debate as such a spectacle, thinking philosophically with poet-gusto. One can envision an eagle, but a truth, however finer in vision, is still kind of abstract. Such self-accounting helped Keats think harder about philosophy.

He saw two sides of Wordsworth, in dialectic: a poet reaching for certain Philosophy and a poet of dark Passages feeling the burden of the Mystery (K130).
Keats drew this last phrase from *Tintern Abbey*, where it is lodged, remarkably, in a subordinate clause:

that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lighten’d. (38–42)

Keats reads against the grain of Wordsworth’s dominant syntax, deep in the grain of his poetry. Lines 39–41 impose twenty words of weighted prepositional clauses against the declarative *Is lighten’d*. Not every poet can pace *unintelligible* into iambic pentameter. Wordsworth did, on the stressed halts of *mystery*, *heavy*, *weary*. Keats caught how the argument for “blessed mood” pulses through its antithesis. “We are in a Mist. We are now in that state – We feel ‘the burden of Mystery’ is his tribute, word-working *Mist* in *Mystery*. As Keats was writing this, his brother Tom, who’d been having a good day, started coughing up blood. It was Wordsworth’s *dark Passages*, not his *certain Philosophy*, that held Keats’s thoughts (*K* 129–131).

One word more / Words for thought

*One word more*: so Keats introduces his dedication of *Endymion* to Chatterton. One word stands for many in Keats’s reading. It goes wide and deep, always open to new turns. His spirited greetings animate words into poetic phenomena—and his own phenomenal poetry. He is keenly tuned to verbal and aural memories, inventive about new words, new ways of saying old ones. There are verbal felicities that seem like accidents, but in effect are so right that they seem like gifts of quiet genius. What a scientist who was Keats’s contemporary, Humphry Davy, said of the poetry of science is fine enough for Keats’s science of poetry: “words which are the immutable instruments of thought, are become the constant and widely-diffused nourishment of the mind, the preservers of its health and energy.” Keats is a phrase-receptor, a word-witness.

If the plotted trial of *Endymion* thinned in his esteem, its word-work was wonderfully generative. Keats was avant-garde, and it wasn’t for everyone, even well-disposed friends. In the summer of 1820, Shelley politely advised him against “treasures poured forth with indistinct profusion.” Keats pushed back, suggesting to Shelley that he might “discipline” his political spirit to “the Poetry, and dramatic effect”. “an artist must serve Mammon,” he insists; “be more
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