

# NOTE TO USERS

This reproduction is the best copy available.

**UMI**<sup>®</sup>



A

NEGATIVE CAPABILITIES:

KEATSIAN THRESHOLDS FROM "KING LEAR" TO "VAMPYR"

by

AMY LEAL

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,

The City University of New York

2005

UMI Number: 3169947

Copyright 2005 by  
Leal, Amy

All rights reserved.

### INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

**UMI**<sup>®</sup>

---

UMI Microform 3169947

Copyright 2005 by ProQuest Information and Learning Company.

All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest Information and Learning Company  
300 North Zeeb Road  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

© 2005

Amy Leal

All Rights Reserved

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

5/10/05  
Date

Morris Dickstein  
Chair of Examining Committee

5/10/05  
Date

M. F. Kaplan  
Executive Officer

Morris Dickstein

Fred Kaplan

Mary Ann Caws

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## Acknowledgements

I began my speculations on John Keats's concept of Negative Capability whilst in a fiction writing workshop my freshman year at Sarah Lawrence College. My teacher was the late Jerome Badanes, a beloved don who matched an extensive knowledge of literature with a keen editorial sense and a generous heart. He first directed me to Keats's December 1817 letter to George and Tom Keats and encouraged me to question the collected wisdom of everything. I am grateful to him for his guidance and will continue to miss him.

At the CUNY Graduate Center, Morris Dickstein reawakened my queries about Negative Capability in a class on Keats that inspired me to press on further. He has read what Keats might have called the "innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials" in the writing of a dissertation, and I am grateful to him for his continued support and direction. The incomparable Angus Fletcher inspired me with his explorations into liminality, and Mary Ann Caws has led me to the "penetralium of mystery" and back again many times. I thank her for listening to all my "wild surmises" on Keats and for always responding with humor and insight. Fred Kaplan has been a model and an inspiration as well, helping me to voyage through the strange seas of thought throughout the writing of this dissertation.

I would also like to thank the Center for Humanities for awarding me a Mellon fellowship and enabling me to be a part of the lively and insightful "Writing Lives" seminar. My CUNY Writing Fellowship has also given me the time and funds to finish up the dissertation, and I thank the CUNY Graduate Center for their support. I am also grateful to the advice and direction of the librarians and curators at the Keats-Shelley

House in Rome, the Keats House in Hampstead, the London Metropolitan Archives, the New York Public Library, and the Houghton Library.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the continued support of my friends and family. The encouragement and insights of Garret Keizer, my former high school teacher and long-time friend, have gotten me through many a rough spot, and Marilyn Weber's kindness and wit have kept me from ending my graduate career in "despondency and madness." My mother read Keats along with me, spent many hours over the phone discussing his enigmatic death, and encouraged me to keep going. I am also grateful to my father, who was my first model of a writer and reader and remains an inspiration to me. My brother George taught me how to read and imagine in the first place and is still the smartest person I know. I am also grateful to all the family, friends, teachers, students, and strangers who helped out my husband and I after our fire and enabled me sift through the ashes of my former research to rewrite my dissertation.

Finally, I'd like to thank my husband, who sifted alongside me and told me to write a Keats dissertation in the first place. His family has been unfailingly supportive, and without his love and insight, this dissertation would not have been written. David has made me certain "of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination," and I dedicate this to him.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements / iv

Introduction / 1

Shakespearean Hieroglyphics / 40

Negative Capability and Positive Negation / 82

Keats and Suspicion: The Negative Aspect of Negative Capability / 140

The Penetralium of Mystery / 182

Bibliography / 239

## Negative Capabilities: Introduction

Who was it passed her there on a horse all will,  
 What figure of capable imagination?  
 Whose horse clattered on the road on which she rose,  
 As it descended, blind to her velvet and  
 The moonlight? Was it a rider intent on the sun,  
 A youth, a lover with phosphorescent hair,  
 Dressed poorly, arrogant of his streaming forces,  
 Lost in an integration of the martyrs' bones,  
 Rushing from what was real; and capable?

—Wallace Stevens

### I

When the twenty-two year old John Keats sat down to write his brothers a letter in December 1817, little did he know he was formulating a poetic axiom that critics would consistently misread over the next two centuries. The concept of Negative Capability that he defines in that letter has not only inspired countless scholars, novelists, playwrights, and poets ranging from T. S. Eliot to Anne Carson, but also a literary journal by the same name, zines, psychological studies of identity formation, treatises on Christianity and Buddhism, scientific articles, convocations, science fiction and fantasy stories by Dan Simmons, Tim Powers, and Philip Pullman, and a host of other writings—and yet the concept's meaning in all of these incarnations remains elusive. The *NTC Dictionary of Literary Terms* admits that “what Keats meant by negative capability has

not been clearly established,” although “most interpretations equate Negative Capability with objectivity, aesthetic distance, and impersonality” (147). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms* is a bit more certain, characterizing a writer with Negative Capability as one who “is ‘outside’ of and detached from what he is writing about, has expelled himself from it” (927); likewise, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines it as “the selflessness of one who has no character” (825). The latter definition is what most people mean when they speak of Negative Capability, but it is not necessarily the one Keats intended.

This reading of the term as a lack of self has had a long history: critics have variously described it as the ability to have “no personality” (Finney 1936); “the very opposite of egotistical sublime” (Douglas Bush 1937); the poet’s “annihilat[ion]” of “himself by a sympathetic identification with his subject” (Walter Jackson Bate 1939); the capacity of being a “self-abnegating observer” (Fogle 1949); “the power to have no self” (Wasserman 1953); a “lack of identity” (Gittings 1954); “the capacity for annulling self” (Ward 1963); “the ability for the mind to detach itself from its own identity” (De Man 1966); “selflessness” (Beyer 1969); “self-oblivion” (Patterson 1970); a category opposed to “the Wordsworthian or Egotistical Sublime” (John Jones 1970); the opposite of “Pride and egotism” (Sperry 1973); “a purging away of the interfering self” (Bromwich 1986); the ability “to annihilate the self...for the purposes of artistic creation” (Jonathan Bate 1986); “the power to move through...identities” (Edmunson 1995); an “unselfish principle” (Roe 1997); the opposite of “strong identity” (Motion 1997) and, more recently, “disinterested poetic consciousness” (Newey 2001) and “a capacity...to efface the self (Kucich 2001).

After reading the long list of critics who have read “Negative Capability” as the ability to negate the self, it is surprising to turn to Keats’s original December 1817 letter and see that at no point in his definition of the term does he employ the concept of an anti-egotistical sublime:

[21 December] 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....

[?27 December] ...I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, and at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium 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.

Oddly enough, it is the critics’ definition of Negative Capability, not Keats’ own, which has been popularized. Although Finney was the first biographer-critic to define a negatively capable poet as the opposite of “an egotistic or subjective poet” (474) in 1936,

the most influential of these Negative Capability promulgators has been Walter Jackson Bate, whom Harold Bloom calls “the precursor of all Keats criticism subsequent to him” (*Keats* i). In his biography of Keats, Bate subtly weaves Keats’ review of Kean written just prior to his December 1817 letter with his letters written a year later:

Using what we know of the background [to this letter], we could paraphrase these famous sentences as follows. In our life of uncertainties, where no one system or formula can explain everything—where even a word is at best, in Bacon’s phrase, a “wager of thought”—what is needed is an imaginative openness of mind and heightened receptivity to reality in its full and diverse concreteness. This, however, involves negating one’s own ego.

*(John Keats 249)*

One understands the critical impulse of critics from Finney to Roe to stitch together several of Keats’s often disjointed letters to form a coherent artistic credo. Yet patching together conceptions Keats formulates in a series of letters is dangerous with such a dialectical thinker. “My head is sometimes in such a whirl in considering the million likings and antipathies of our Moments,” he tells Reynolds during his Scottish tour, “that I can get into no settled strain in my Letters.” Not only does he change his poetic axioms from poem to poem and letter to letter, he also frequently changes his stance on a given subject within the same piece of writing, as Bate himself points out when discussing Keats’ “scullion-Mercury” letter. According to Keats, “every point of thought is the centre of an intellectual world,” for “the two most uppermost thoughts in a Man’s mind are the two poles of his World he revolves on them,” and yet this necessarily means that

Keats has “not one Idea of the truth of any of [his] speculations—[he] shall never be a Reasoner because” he does not desire “to be in the right” (*Letters of John Keats* I: 243). Like Montaigne or Shakespeare, Keats “portray[s] passing,” and the truth of his speculations is a truth of the moment: “What a happy thing it would be if we could settle our thoughts, make our minds up on any matter in five Minutes and remain content,” he tells Rice; “but Alas! This can never be” (*Letters* I: 254).

Keats’s Negative Capability letter does not set forth his artistic commandments of intensity, beauty and truth, and the *mysterium* so much as illustrate the “innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-horn perception of Beauty” (*Letters* I: 265). As such, it is less productive to take everything written in it as Keatsian aesthetic law and more useful to examine it in terms of what he was thinking at the moment and how far his speculations on art and writing had come at the time. The ideas contained within his December 1817 letter to his brothers do, indeed, serve as the basis for much of his later thinking on composition, but before examining the ways in which his thoughts on Negative Capability metamorphose over time and influence his poetry, one must take the letter at its word and try to examine what it is saying on its own terms. Though Keats’s idea of Negative Capability is undoubtedly related to his later thoughts on the annihilation of the self, it represents an earlier (though not necessarily inferior) speculation whose emphasis is quite different from the one most critics attribute to it. It does express Keats’s disgust with Hunt’s “driveling” egotism in the *Examiner*, but the letter does not detail selfless creation so much as an attempt to see how such works can

be “havens of intensesness” (*Letters* I: 265) by their ability to remain in a liminal *mysterium*.

If one focuses on the Negative Capability letter itself without relying on the content of later letters to explicate it, one finds that Keats does not define Negative Capability as opposed to an “egotistical sublime.” Indeed, in June 1818 he writes to Bailey, “I am not old enough or magnanimous enough to annihilate [sic] self” (*Letters* I: 292). It is true that in a later epistle, Keats describes a “chameleon Poet” such as himself or Shakespeare as having “no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair” (*Letters* I: 387)—but while a chameleon Poet undoubtedly *has* Negative Capability, Negative Capability does not, in Keats’ definition, *mean* the ability to negate oneself. Keats tells us what it means: “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason”—a state of suspension between certainty and ignorance, doubt and assurance, in which the artist can make “a wild surmise” with an engaged imagination. It is the purpose of this introduction to use Keats’s December 1817 writings to capture something of the state of his thinking on poetry at that moment, thereby restoring his intended meaning of “Negative Capability:” a threshold state of “half-knowledge” that “obliterates consideration” even as it excites “a depth of speculation.”

## II

Looking at Keats's Negative Capability letter closely reveals some of the intensity of thought and activity in his life at the end of 1817 that serve as the backdrop to his aesthetic speculations. He reveals in the letter that as of late, he has been going to tragedies and pantomimes, writing theatre reviews, attending art exhibitions, reading Hazlitt's art and literary criticism, dining with friends old and new, longing for the company of Kean, contemplating the worth of Shelley's work against the buffeting of the world, re-reading a vast amount of Shakespeare and the latest work of Coleridge, and formulating aesthetic theories of art and literature inspired by Shakespeare's works in general and *King Lear* in particular. Indeed, the number of subjects broached in a mere eighteen or so sentences (if one takes the liberty of reading a few of his double dashes as end-stops) is dizzying. Any explanation of Keats's December 1817 letter to his brothers must follow the associative whimsy of the poet's mind before approaching anything like an interpretation, and thus may itself verge on the vertiginous. But as the term "Negative Capability" has become as widely influential as it is misread, it deserves nothing less than a close examination.

Keats begins his letter to his brothers by apologizing "for not having written ere this." He certainly had a good excuse: in preparation for his article (perhaps two) on Kean, he had been re-reading a vast amount of Shakespeare, and these plays frame the letter literally and epistemologically. It is through speculating on Shakespeare's intensity—embodied in the acting of Kean he has just seen and critiqued—and musing on Hazlitt's criticism and Coleridge's *Sibylline Leaves* that Keats begins to formulate his idea of Negative Capability. After Keats's initial apology, Jeffrey omitted some words,

indicated by “& &,” we can only make “wild surmise[s]” about what he left out of his transcription, but perhaps as much as “a page or two” (*Letters I*: 191). As Rollins remarks in his edition of Keats’s letters,

the Kentucky businessman felt no obligation to make literal, complete copies. He was, I imagine, bored by the task, and he considered many of Keats’s details too personal or trivial or dull to copy in full. Accordingly, he changed words or phrases that he disliked or did not understand or could not decipher; he reserved the order of sentences, reformed spelling, punctuation, grammar. Worse yet, with no warning he omitted words, sentences, paragraphs, at times whole pages.

(*Letters I*: 20)

Thus, the extant version of Keats’s Negative Capability letter contains a host of textual problems, including the very real possibility that it is woefully incomplete and inaccurate. Did Keats, for example, write “fine insolated verisimiliture” as Jeffrey records, or “fine isolated verisimilitude?” One does not encounter “verisimilitude” (or “verisimiliture”) anywhere else in Keats’s writings, indicating that he uses it in a very particular sense in this context, apparently to mean something other than simply a manifestation of truth—it is the appearance of truth, or *merely* the appearance of truth. Keats’s letters are riddled with misspellings and portmanteaux words, and “insolated verisimiliture” is not wholly implausible as his intention (an encapsulated appearance of truth in miniature?), especially since “-ure” denotes action or process; elsewhere, Keats suggests power in abeyance by making a noun out of a verb (“the feel of not to feel it”) and vice versa. Similarly, one must speculate about “Penetralium of mystery” that Colvin calls “an admirable phrase!—if only *penetralium* were Latin” (*John Keats* 48). Either Keats or his

transcriber has changed the plural *penetralia* into the grammatically incorrect singular—but while Keats was not a Latin scholar, he did win a prize for translating *The Aeneid* at Clarke's school and passed his Society of Apothecaries examination (according to the rather spiteful Stephens, who failed it the first time; see *Keats Circle* II: 211) largely on the strength of his familiarity with classical Latin.

One can only speculate what the missing section of Keats's December 1817 letter to his brothers contains. Perhaps it included personal details about Keats's epistolary indolence that the transcriber found distasteful, or a reference to Cripps or other trivia, or perhaps a punning allusion (such as he often employed at the beginning of letters) that might well have eluded Jeffrey. The letter resumes again after an apparent digression: "I saw Kean return to the public in Richard III," Keats writes, "& finely he did it" after a "sudden illness" that had kept him from playing the role from Monday November twenty-fourth to Monday December fifteenth, the performance to which Keats alludes in his Negative Capability letter (*Poetical Works and Other Writings* 228). Kean's reappearance at this time prompts Keats's theatrical reviews and much of his thinking on Negative Capability, for the actor was an antidote to the post-Newtonian times later bewailed in *Lamia*:

Do not all charms fly  
 At the mere touch of cold philosophy?  
 There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:  
 We know her woof, her texture; she is given  
 In the dull catalogue of common things.  
 Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,

Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,  
 Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—  
 Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made  
 The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade. (*Complete Poems*  
 357)

At the “Immortal dinner” party on the twenty-eighth of December—perhaps the day after Keats finished his *Negative Capability* letter—Haydon describes Lamb’s intoxicated “merry and witty” asides to “Wordsworth’s deep and solemn intonations of oratory” like “the fun and wit of the fool in the intervals of Lear’s passion.” Lamb then pounces on Haydon for putting Newton into his painting,

“a fellow who believed nothing unless it was as clear as the three sides of a triangle!” And then he and Keats agreed he had destroyed all the poetry of the rainbow by reducing it to a prism. It was impossible to resist them, and we drank “Newton’s health, and confusion to mathematics!” (*Journals of Haydon* II: 173)

In a post-Newtonian world, there is little room for “Keats’ rich fancy of satyrs and fauns and doves and white clouds” that “wound up the stream of conversation” (*Ibid.*) Kean, in contrast, offers Keats a respite from the era of “rule and line,” exemplified by Blake’s vision of “Newton” blind to visionary seas and Byron’s anti-poetic “Princess of Parallelograms.”<sup>1</sup> Keats objects to “merely versifying wits” (including Byron’s model, Pope) who measure couplets out on an abacus, as Hunt describes them in his essay on “Young Poets.” Kean, in contrast, “tease[s]” Keats “out of thought” and out of an

---

<sup>1</sup> “I thank you again for your efforts with my Princess of Parallelograms, who has puzzled you more than the Hypothenuse...her proceedings are quite rectangular, or rather we are two parallel lines prolonged to infinity side by side but never to meet” (*Selected Letters* 340).

unenchanting age, “making all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relation to Beauty and Truth,” as he writes in his Negative Capability letter at that time.

One can feel the intensity of Keats’s need to plunge himself into wild surmises at Drury Lane to escape the “dull catalogue of common things” in his concluding paragraph to his essay “On Kean as a Shakespearean Actor” that he also wrote in December 1817:

Kean! Kean! Have a carefulness of thy health, an in-nursed respect for thy own genius, a pity for us in these cold and enfeebling times! Cheer us a little in the failure of our days! For romance lives but in books. The goblin is driven from the heath, and the rainbow is robbed of its mystery! (*Poetical Works and Other Writings* 232)

“Cold Philosophy” might have the power to “empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine,” but Kean is capable of extracting “veins of gold from” the “huge mine” of Shakespeare’s *Richard* plays, thereby refurbishing the store of Keats’s inspiration. In his Negative Capability letter, Keats remembers Kean’s ability to dispel “disagreeables” when he writes of his disappointment with West’s painting that has no intensity “in which to bury its repulsiveness” (*Letters* I: 192). Kean is able to do this because he has the power of a physician who can divine the processes of the human body through assessing its outward symptoms: he has an “intense power of anatomizing the passion of every syllable” of Shakespeare’s language (“On Edmund Kean” 231).<sup>2</sup> In this he follows Shakespeare himself, who “anatomize[s] Regan” to “see what breeds about her heart”—a passage that Keats underlines and marginally scores in his Folio edition (III.vi.75—35). Keats

---

<sup>2</sup> In these descriptions, Keats perhaps draws upon his experiences at Guy’s Hospital. Note the similarity in wording to another (unsigned) article now ascribed to Reynolds that describes Kean’s ability to expose “The workings of *Richard’s* mind...as it were by the hand of the anatomist” (“On Kean in *Richard*” 242).

admires in Kean what he admires in Shakespeare and strives to emulate in his own verse: the creation of “fine phrases” and “hieroglyphics of beauty,” or the “fine isolated verisimilitude[s] caught from the Penetralium of Mystery” that he describes in his Negative Capability letter to his brothers.

While Reynolds is on holiday with his fiancée Eliza Drewe, Keats steps in for him at *The Champion* and writes theatre reviews (Motion 213). He explains to his brothers in his December 1817 letter, “at the request of Reynolds I went to see [Kean’s] Luke in Riches—the critique is in today’s champion.”<sup>3</sup> Along with his essay in *The Champion*, Keats sends *The Examiner* to his brothers for their amusement, in which he says they “will find very proper lamentation on the obsolescence of Christmas Gambols & pastimes: but it [is] mixed up with so much egotism of that driveling nature where pleasure is entirely lost.” Hunt had written two essays that December for them called “Christmas and Other Old National Merry-Makings Considered with Reference to the Nature of the Age, and to the Desirableness of Their Revival” (801-803 and 817 to 819). Keats’s description of Hunt’s “driveling” egotism seems to offer fodder for those critics ready to delineate Negative Capability—exemplified by the “Shakespearean actor,” Kean—as opposed to the “Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime,” yet in a review written at the same time as his December 1817 letter to his brothers, Keats complicates this notion by describing Kean as being like Wordsworth, “one of our intellectual monopolists.” He was obviously influenced by Wordsworth’s idea of the human mind being the “main

---

<sup>3</sup> This was an adaptation of Massinger’s “City Madame” by Sir James Bland Burges that was performed on December eighteenth 1817. Forman dryly describes it as “a very properly forgotten piece” (*Poetical Works* 228., n1). Keats was familiar enough with Massinger to draw a parallel between him and Burton in his marginalia to *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, but dislikes Burges’s adaptation: Kean played the amoral part of Luke “as far as the stage will admit, to perfection” (“On Edmund Kean” 228). The mention of his review is important in dating Keats’s Negative Capability letter to his brothers as other than December 1818, the date Jeffrey assigns to it—by which time Tom was already dead.

region” of his song, and builds a fane to Psyche in his poetry, though his opinion of the elder bard changed over time.

It seems several things dovetailed in Keats’s mind at this point in his *Negative Capability* letter: the recent crack-down on libel, Hunt’s persecution by Lord Ellenborough in 1813, and the revoking of the Habeas Corpus law on March 4, 1817 following an assassination attempt on the Prince Regent. At first glance, these seemingly incidental details seem to have little to do with one another and even less to do with Negative Capability, but are interwoven in Keats’s mind into a complex web of allusion and association that frames his musings on Shakespeare, intensity, and beauty and truth. The suppression of speech during this “Drear-Nighted December” makes Keats begin musing on the revolutionary potential of writing, and as he questions poetry’s purposes and powers, he develops his ideas of “Beauty,” “Truth,” “intensity,” and “half knowledge.”

Mention of Hunt’s articles on Christmas gambols leads Keats to discuss another article in *The Examiner* he thinks his brothers might find of interest, the account of Hone’s trial for libel in Guildhall, London, from December 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup>, 1817 (“The King Against William Hone” 1). Keats’s syntax while describing the trial is rather Elizabethan, reminiscent of something out of Sir Thomas Browne:

Hone the publisher’s trial, you must find very amusing; as Englishmen very encouraging—his *Not Guilty* is a thing, which not to have been, would have dulled still more Liberty’s Emblazoning—Lord Ellenborough has been paid his own coin—Wooler and Hone have done us an essential service.

Lord Ellenborough was the lord chief justice who had sentenced Leigh Hunt and his brother to prison in February 1813, and although Keats has begun to break with “*Libertas*” and his leafy luxuries at this time, he still finds the besting of Lord Ellenborough politically encouraging. William Hone’s trial, however, has significance for Keats beyond paying Lord Ellenborough “his own coin.”<sup>4</sup> The persecution for blasphemous libel in 1817 seems to be a reversion back to the trials of the end of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century (such as that of John Thelwall) and the intermittent revoking and restoring of the Habeas Corpus laws.

Like Thelwall in his intended defense (suppressed at the urging of his lawyer),<sup>5</sup> Keats also views the revoking of the Habeas Corpus Act as marking the end of an era and describes it in terms that anticipate Nietzsche’s Last Man, though his tone is one of satire rather than tragedy. A cowed and comfortable rhetoric of policed thought has replaced the Romantic apocalyptic transformation of language. “In our unimaginative days,” Keats writes in his December 1817 review of Kean,

*Habeas Corpus*’d as we are, out of all wonder, uncertainty and fear;—in these fireside, delicate, gilded days,—these days of sickly safety and comfort, we feel grateful to Mr. Kean for giving us some excitement by his old passion in one of

---

<sup>4</sup> William Hone was a satirist whose work for *The Reformist’s Register* came under fire by the government for blasphemous libel—namely, “The Late John Wilkes’s Catechism,” “The Sinecurist’s Creed and “The Political Litany.” Keats’s support of Hunt underlines his own commitment to poetic freedom and makes the Hone trial of vital importance for him. Indeed, Keats’s own cryptic and not altogether successful “Cap and Bells; Or, The Jealousies” satirizes the Regent along with Lord Byron and [Whitbread.] Ward observes, “Apparently Keats’s elation at his acquittal, and possibly the example of Smith himself, moved him to write a parody of his own mocking the Tories—that cryptic sonnet called “Nebuchadnezzar’s Dream,” which echoes some political criticism he had managed to slip into *Endymion*.” (148). The verdict of his trial not only represented a triumph for satirically-minded writers, but all English citizens in general, as Hone indicates in his defense.

<sup>5</sup> “If you love the fruit, lay not the axe to the vital fibres.... The representation in Parliament is already gone; — the Habeas Corpus Act is no more, and the provisions of Magna Charta have mouldered imperceptibly away.” (“Natural and Constitutional Right of Britons” 69-70).

the old plays. He is a relict of romance;—a Posthumous ray of chivalry, and always seems just arrived from the camp of Charlemagne. (*Ibid.* 227)

Here Keats glances at both Hunt as well as the government he opposes; as Motion points out, “fireside” was a “touchstone” for Hunt (214). Hunt’s idea of poetry as a mere “pleasure” had begun to irritate Keats, and his own poetry in the coming year will grapple with the “solitary morbidities” Hunt criticizes in Wordsworth and prompts Keats to lament in *Sleep and Poetry* (Roe 39). Although Keats sees innovative writing as “a bold revision of traditional imagery, involving classical mythology, romance, and chivalry— all with Huntian connotations” (Kandl 9), his artistic palate has become cloyed with a surfeit of Huntian luxuries and mannered mawkishness at the time he writes about Shakespearean acting and Negative Capability, and his former mentor’s journalism seems mere drivel to him now. Musing on Kean, however, makes disagreeable ideas about Hunt’s excesses and government suppression evaporate for Keats.

Kean restores “some excitement” to his complacently unenchanted age by infusing it with artistic intensity that is, paradoxically, more revolutionary because it does not manifest a cant of newness and freedom such as one finds in Hunt’s writings, but partakes of an “old passion” such as Keats admires in the works of Shakespeare. The “Shakespearean” Kean “is a relict of romance” who nonetheless “always seems just arrived from the camp of Charlemagne.” Through reading Shakespeare and “the old plays,” Keats has begun to divine that the most revolutionary of works are not necessarily those that proclaim an ideology of revolution. “The greatness of works of art lies solely in their power to let those things be heard which ideology conceals,” Adorno writes in “Lyric Poetry and Society” (58). In his *annus mirabilis* of 1818-1819, Keats’s poetry

will eschew both the language of the Tories and the poetical pronouncements of Hunt to become a genuine protest against the status quo by refusing to be dictated by it. His idea of Negative Capability is an expression of an aesthetics not confined by reason, fact, or dogma, and his remarks on “the excellence of every art” toward the end of 1817 are an even more radical statement of freedom of expression than his 1817 volume of poetry—one not shackled by gagging acts or Huntian ideology.<sup>6</sup>

The next detail of Keats’s letters to his brothers advances these ideas further. After telling his brothers that he has “had two very pleasant evenings with Dilke yesterday & today; & am at this moment just come from him & feel in the humour to go on with this, began in the morning, & from which he came to fetch me,” Keats writes that he has recently gone with Wells to see an apocalyptic painting by Benjamin West, President of the Royal Academy. Perhaps he hoped to see in this painting a genuine expression of “The Spirit of the Age” (despite the fact that the American figurehead of the Academy was born in 1738 and hailed from an earlier era), a sense of the end of time and a revivification of the arts such as Keats himself expressed in the lovers’ resurrection in “Endymion,” or later, in Apollo’s rebirth in “Hyperion.” What he finds, however, disappoints him. The painting is a product of the “fireside, delicate, gilded days” of “sickly safety and comfort” he had bewailed in his review of Kean; it has been “*Habeas Corpus*’d...out of all wonder, uncertainty and fear” (227):

---

<sup>6</sup> Significantly, the letter will end with another seemingly anachronistic detail about the poetry of someone else in Hunt’s circle, Shelley: after distilling his concept of Negative Capability down to a “sense of Beauty” that “overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration,” Keats writes, “Shelley’s poem is out & there are words about its being objected too [sic] as much as Queen Mab was. Poor Shelley! I think he has his Quota of good qualities, in sooth la!” Shelley appears at this point in the letter not simply because in his poetry, “the sense of Beauty” does not “[overcome] every other consideration” (Keats will later chide him for not being “more of an artist” and less of a polemicist), but because his verse is also a response to the suppression of speech and has its “Quota of good qualities, in sooth la!”

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 [sic] 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<sup>7</sup> & you will find this exemplified [sic] 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—

West's "Death on a Pale Horse" may be "wonderful...when West's age is considered," but it is nonetheless bland. Hazlitt rather amusingly describes West's painting in a review that undoubtedly influences Keats's criticisms: "Death's...flesh is not stony or cadaverous, but is crusted over with a yellow glutinous paste, as if it had been baked in a pye" (138) and "The horse on which he rides is not 'pale,' but white. There is no gusto, no imagination in West's colouring" (138). It does not revivify, but ossifies.

In attempting to circumscribe what is limitless and manifest nothingness, West fails to observe Burke's dictum in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* that "To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in

---

<sup>7</sup> S.R. Swaminathan claims that in his December 1817 Letter to George and Tom Keats, "Keats is referring not to Shakespeare's play but to Benjamin West's painting of the storm scene in *King Lear* for Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery," despite the fact that later in the letter, Keats refers to Shakespeare himself when he formulates his idea of Negative Capability. Keats does not write of liking West elsewhere; indeed, he complains to Haydon, "It is a pity that People should by associating themselves with the finest things, spoil them," such as "Millman [who] has damned old drama—West has damnest wholesale" (*Letters* I: 252). Given Keats's tendency to slip between authors and readers as well as between art and poetry when he formulates poetic axioms, the point becomes somewhat immaterial for this discussion: if Keats thinks that West's painting of *Lear* was successful, it would be because West has successfully divined the spirit of the play—its intensity arising out of its relation to Beauty and Truth that creates "fine isolated verisimilitudes caught from the Penetralium of Mystery."

general to be necessary” (99). West is unable to remain “content with half knowledge” or mystery, and thus he falls short of a negatively capable painting. He does not recognize that intensity in poetry as well as painting often arises out of an intentional obscurity.

Angus Fletcher notes:

On the one hand, poets, like painters, may delight in the softening of outline because it permits an intensification of medium: thus Turner’s mastery of the indistinct expresses a technical interest in medium....On the other hand, and this is perhaps the fundamental and more substantial point, poets have wished to subtilize, to dissolve, to fragment, to blur the hard material edge, because poetry hunts down the soul, with its obscure passions, feelings, other-than-cognitive forms. (*Colors of the Mind* 169)

Benjamin West lacks this ability “to blur the hard material edge” in his painting “Death on the Pale Horse” and thereby robs his work of its obscurity and intensity. He reads no ambiguity in the allegorically obscure “Book of Revelations.” “Above all,” Keats writes to his brother and sister-in-law, “they are a shallow people who take everything literal.” West attempts to embody the bodiless, thereby contradicting his subject with his treatment of it. As Hazlitt noted elsewhere in his review, “The less definite the conception, the less bodily, the more vast, unformed, and insubstantial, the nearer does it approach to some semblance of” death (“On The Pale Horse” 137). Da Vinci wondered in his *Notebooks*, “How do you paint the wind?” and determined that you do so by showing its effects—its “power over all things.” West did not come to the same conclusion and desired to show Death itself.

The catalogue for his exhibition explains that painting, unlike poetry, must strive to depict its subject clearly at all times, even when its subject is something that belies direct representation. Keats follows Hazlitt in seeing no difference between the two forms of art as far as representing the incomprehensible: both do best to employ “a few abrupt and rapid gleams of description” to limn the “edges of a general mass of awful obscurity,” something West fails to do. Later on, Keats will admire an unpolished engraving by Carlo Lasinio, “The Triumph of Death,” at Haydon’s: “I do not think I ever had a greater treat out of Shakespeare—full of Romance and the most tender feeling...but Grotesque to a curious pitch” that is “even finer to me than more accomplish’d works—as there was so much room for Imagination” (*Keats and His World* 96). He admires this work because it incites “a depth of speculation” in its viewers by its very incompleteness.

It is in thinking about West in the Negative Capability letter that Keats begins to reflect on the characteristics of artistic excellence: intensity, beauty, and truth that vaporize disagreeables, incite speculation, and inspire passion. Keats is clear that these are the characteristics of great works of art and literature; yet what he means by his definition is less clear. Part of the difficulty in determining what Keats intends by “the excellence of every art” or “Negative Capability” lies in his tendency to sketch “a few abrupt and rapid gleams of description” (such as his rapid movement in the first section of the letter from his theatre reviews, Hunt’s Christmas essay, Hone’s trial, Dilke’s company, West’s painting, and *King Lear*) as well as his idiosyncratic—almost idiolallial—use of words. When one attempts to delineate the meaning of key terms in Keats’s letters, one finds that they “o’erbrim” with multiple—and sometimes ambiguous, contradictory, or unstable—meanings. Indeed, the critical tendency to reach “after fact

and reason” itself is at odds with the concept of Keats’s Negative Capability, which accounts in part for the *NTC Dictionary of Literary Terms* disclaimer that “what Keats meant by negative capability has not been clearly established” (147). Keats’s style is one of profuseness. Because he prefers to “load every rift’ of [his] subject with ore” (*Letters* II: 323), connotations (and sometimes denotations) swell and plump his words “with ripeness to the core” and often elude the critical Will-to-Define and conflate. One might do best, then, to discuss what Keats meant by “excellence,” “speculation,” “beauty,” “truth,” “disagreeables,” and so forth in the associative clusters Keats himself establishes in his Negative Capability letter.

One of Keats’s multivalenced words is “intensity,” a term that is obviously influenced by, but not tantamount to, Hazlitt’s “gusto.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Keats uses “gusto” to describe the passion of Kean’s acting in his December 1817 review, and he undoubtedly had Hazlitt’s essays in mind when he saw West’s painting. Yet Keats’s use of “intensity” in his Negative Capability letter and elsewhere differs subtly from Hazlitt’s “gusto.” According to Hazlitt, Shakespeare’s works abound in gusto; however, “The power he delights to show is not intense, but discursive.” For Keats, Shakespeare’s “excellence” is nothing if not “intense.” He “look[s] upon” his “fine Phrases like a Lover” sees in them a condensation of power, a loading of every rift with ore.

Keats uses “gusto” in his review of Kean’s “Shakespearean” acting, but discards it in favor of “intensity” in his discussion of Shakespeare himself. Perhaps this is because “gusto” seems to connote a visceral enthusiasm for Hazlitt, a zest or “taste” for art: to

---

<sup>8</sup> Hazlitt himself seems to have been influenced by such writers as Fielding, who wrote in *Joseph Andrews*, “It hath been thought a vast commendation of a painter to say his figures seem to breathe; but surely, it is a much greater and nobler applause, *that they appear to think*” (62). Hazlitt inverts the construction when he writes of Titan: “Not only do his heads seem to think, his bodies seem to feel.”

have “gusto,” a work must inspire in “The eye...a taste or appetite for what it sees” that makes one relish another view and savor the sight. Keats’s “intensity,” in contrast, connotes an inner tension of mind as well as body. Keats uses the word to describe not an out-of-body pleasure or *ekstasis* so much as an interior tension between knowing and not-knowing as well as having and not-having. “Intensity” for Keats is incarnation as much as it is speculation; it is a “material sublime,” a feeling in both senses of the word. Keats’s “intensity” partakes of the body as well as the soul, for like Kean, he is “learned in the spiritual portion of” Shakespeare’s lines as well as in their “sensual grandeur” (*John Keats: The Major Works* 345-6). For Keats, a work with “intensity” creates a “momentous depth of speculation” as well as a sensory and sensuous reaction in those who experience it. R. S. White argues that “Intensity” in Keats

Seems to be the process by which the reader (or perceiver) is irresistibly drawn into the life of the work of art, the point at which *its* reality becomes our own, and we are participating in its action and fully awakened feelings. Such a process allows us little scope for coolly judging the work whilst we are sharing in its feeling-states, and ‘depth of speculation’ is merely awakened rather than answered. (177)

Yet reading as well as writing for Keats is not simply a process of savoring lines or images with gusto; as Woodhouse records, “My judgment (he says,) is as active while I am actively writing as my imagin<sup>n</sup>—In fact all my faculties are strongly excited & in their full play” (*Keats Circle* I: 128-129). A “depth of speculation” is *excited* in him by a great work of art, and if the questions it awakens are not answered, that is because “Things cannot to the will / Be settled, but they tease us out of thought” (*Complete*

*Poems* 181). The greatest poets for Keats are those who do not simply inspire a visceral reaction in their readers, but who are able to reside in speculative thresholds and exhibit intensity that is power in abeyance: “Those that have power to do and will do none / That do not do the thing they most do show,” Shakespeare writes in Sonnet 94, “They rightly do inherit heaven’s graces.” Feeling, speculation, surmises, intensity, and imagination are states of mind and body that seldom come unaccompanied in Keats while he is writing or reading inspired verses. Significantly, Keats underlines (sometimes twice, with a line down the margin) all passages in *The Tempest* that speak of an idea “beating” in the mind like heartbeat: “For still ‘tis beating in my mind,” Miranda muses; Prospero warns, “Do not infest your mind with beating on / The strangeness of this business” and speaks of wanting “To still [his] beating mind.” Stevens also picks up on this conceit in his “World as Meditation:” “But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun / On her pillow? The thought of it kept beating in her like her heart” (381). Keats experiences the intensity and speculation of art “feelingly” the way Gloucester experiences a virtual Dover Beach. Benjamin West, conversely, “does not see, / Because he will not feel.”

Figures in a painting should not only seem to feel, as Hazlitt says of Titian’s heads; they should also provoke a physical reaction in their viewers. In West’s painting, however, Keats sees “no women one feels mad to kiss” (*Letters* I: 192) whose bodies swell into reality and into the arms of their beholder. The unpleasant aspects of West’s painting cannot “bury their repulsiveness” in such intensity and excite neither passion nor speculation in the spectator, merely repugnance. In contrast, it is the intensity of *King Lear* that impresses Keats, despite the fact that much of it is of a negative kind. Keats

admires the “energies fine” of boxing matches and was an able pugilist himself, as Clarke affirms in his description of Keats’s “highly pugnacious disposition” that was as entertaining to his spectators as a good play. Later, Keats describes having to “choose between despair & Energy,” and will “choose the latter” (*Letters* II: 113). Likewise, “Though a quarrel in streets is a thing to be hated,” Keats tells his brother and sister-in-law, “the energies displayed in them are fine (*Letters* II: 80-81) much as the manifest energy in *Lear* makes it worth “burn[ing] through,” as he writes in his sonnet. Cordelia and Edgar’s exile, Kent’s dismissal, Edmund’s machinations, Lear’s descent into madness, and Gloucester’s blinding all are “disagreeables” encountered in the text that Shakespeare’s intensity, beauty, and truth negate. Like the term Negative Capability itself, which slips between writer, reader, and poetry as well as between poetry and painting, the evaporating “disagreeables” Keats speaks of at this point in his letter seem to refer to the work in question, its creator, as well as its audience and applies equally well to other media.

These disagreeables also include the agonies of Keats’s own “vale of Soul-Making” out of which the play’s intensity “doth tease” him, however temporarily. Keats uses this peculiar plural form of “disagreeable” not only in his Negative Capability letter, but also when he writes to Hunt, “Before I come to the Nymphs I must get through all disagreeables” (*Letters* I: 138) and when he tells Taylor, “Another time I shall be more bent to all sort of troubles and disagreeables” (*Letters* I: 270). However painful the experience of reading about their tragedy, Keats finds solace in the play for his own agonies: “I never quite despair and I read Shakspeare—indeed I think I shall never read any other book much...I am very near agreeing with Hazlitt that Shakspeare is enough

for us” (*Letters* I: 143). While nursing his dying brother a year later, Keats underlines “poore Tom!” in his Folio edition of *Lear* and dates it: “Sunday Evening Oct. 4.1818,” indicating that he finds personal application for the play. He also describes escaping into his own abstract compositions to relieve his misery: “There is an awful warmth about my heart like a load of immortality” (*Letters* II: 370). Poetry becomes both a balm and a scourge for Keats’s own sorrows, and *King Lear* is a “bitter-sweet” consolation.

After speculating on West and *King Lear*, Keats writes, “I dined with Haydon the sunday [sic] after you left, & had a very pleasant day,” perhaps because Haydon—whose favorite epistolary word seems to have been “fury”—presented a contrast in his mind with West: what Haydon lacked in technique, he made up for in intensity (although not an intensity, perhaps, always arising out of a close relationship to Beauty and Truth).

Keats then summarizes for his brothers:

I dined too (for I have been out too much lately) with Horace Smith & met his two Brothers with Hill & Kingston & one Du Bois, they only served to convince me, how superior humour is to wit in respect to enjoyment—These men say things which make one start, without making one feel, they are all alike; their manners are alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their very eating & drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter—They talked of Kean & his low company —Would I were with that company instead of yours said I to myself!

Once again, the Shakespearean Kean is at the back of his mind, serving as an aesthetic censure of the empty wit of his companions. The difference between wit and humor seems to be a difference of surface play and depth for Keats and relates to the poetic

axioms he formulated later that winter. Hazlitt makes a similar distinction in his December 1817 essay “On Wit and Humour” that Keats had just read: “Wit hovers round the borders of the light and trifling” (*Complete Works* VI: 15). This is not to say that Keats did not admire wit.<sup>9</sup> He often makes a good “pun mote” in his letters, and on the boat to Rome, he “conjured up more puns, in a sort of desperation, than in any year of [his] life.” He wrote proto-Joycean bawdy letters filled with puns and neologisms, and he was not above penning silly verses to his sister or drinking songs. When he finally reached a cushioned chair after toiling up the Scottish highlands with Brown, for example, he cried, “O Bottom, thou art translated!”

Keats also ardently admired the wit of Shakespeare as well as *Tom Jones*. Indeed, in his essay “On Wit and Humor,” Hazlitt singles out Lear and the Fool as “the sublimest instance...of passion and wit united” (*Ibid.* 24). And yet one could say that the Fool’s paradoxes and Hamlet’s graveyard humor are both witty and gnomic, not only “making one feel,” but also making one think. The wit of Horace Smith and his friends, in contrast, merely “makes one start” and exemplifies a kind of mannered expression that Keats abhors. Smith’s wit is as far from true humor as West’s painting is from *King Lear*. His quipping lacks intensity or genius and merely shocks—it is a reaching after effect that does not manifest Negative Capability. “Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity,” Keats writes to Taylor two months later; “it should strike a Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance.” For Keats, humor, like poetry, must come “as naturally as the leaves to a tree” or “it had better not come at all.”

---

<sup>9</sup> Keats was apparently in a better mood on September 21, 1819 when he recounted one of Horace Smith’s puns to his brother and sister-in-law: “Horace Smith said to one who ask’d him if he knew Hook ‘Oh yes Hook and I are very intimate’” (*Letters* II: 208).

At a later dinner party, Keats mocked the debauched mannerism of his contemporaries—who “know fashionables” and “have a mannerism in their very eating & drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter”—by working two glasses of claret at once. Yet despite admitting that he has “been out too much lately” with people who “will never do” for friends, Keats also says resignedly, “& yet I am going to Reynolds, on Wednesday.” The lure of the *litterati* seems too tempting for Keats (or perhaps he simply felt uncomfortable turning down invitations). It is just as well for us that he did, for it is the encounter with minds so unlike his own that stimulated his thinking in a contrary direction and ultimately inspired him to delineate what goes “to form a Man of Achievement.”

Apparently, Jeffrey again omitted something at this point in his transcription of Keats’s letter just before he discusses seeing the “Christmas pantomime” with Brown and Dilke (*Letters* I: 193) that would be of extreme interest to anyone attempting to trace the inception of his idea of Negative Capability, even if the excluded portion contained mere trivia—for even the seemingly incidental details Keats gives in this letter “dovetail” into his concept of “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts” and “half knowledge.” What we do have, however, has direct bearing on Keats’s poetic axiom. He writes of attending a Christmas pantomime with Brown and Dilke that makes him think about performance and intensity. This pantomime was not idle amusement for Keats; he was filling in for Reynolds at *The Champion*, but the performance baffles Keats’s critical abilities until he seizes Shakespeare as a measure of artistic achievement. Keats’s use of a quotation from *Macbeth* in the review, however, is a little forced, as is nearly everything else in the piece. This is because he is decidedly out of his element writing about pantomimes, and

his review of it is a strange amalgam of a breezy discursion, puppet advice column, and proto-Dickensian satire on Dr. Johnson and Pope.<sup>10</sup> Keats has no idea what to say about the performance itself:

As to the pantomime, be it good or bad, a child should write a critique upon it.

We were pleased knowing how much better it ought to be—a child’s is the eulogy—and that not merely in pantomimes. (*Poetical Works* 256)

Every great elegy becomes at some point a self-elegy, but Keats’s “eulogy” of the less-than-great Don Giovanni cannot help “knowing how much better” a review “it ought to be”—and perhaps indicates that his plan “to get employment in some of our elegant Periodical Works” might have given him some trouble (*Letters* II: 174).

Dilke walked back with Keats after the pantomime, talking with him about successful and unsuccessful performances on stage and inevitably conjuring up Kean and Shakespeare in Keats’s mind. There seems to have been some friendly disagreement between the two of them on this subject, perhaps because Dilke himself was going to go into journalism and had been formulating his own ideas about what constitutes a powerful performance. Keats’s later comments on Dilke as a “Godwin perfectibility man” (*Letters* I: 397) and “Godwin-methodist” (*Letters* II: 213) have often been cited to explain the tone of this “disquisition” that led to Keats’s formulation of Negative Capability:

Dilke...cannot feel he has a personal identity unless he has made up his mind about everything. The only means of strengthening one’s intellect is to make up

---

<sup>10</sup> “Stephanio” is Steevens, Johnson’s co-editor of Shakespeare’s plays (a copy of which Keats brought with him to the Isle of Wight in April 1817); “Malonius” is Edward Malone; “Theobaldio” is “the original hero of *The Dunciad* (*Poetical Works* 254); and “Warburtorcio” is the “author of the Commentary on Pope’s *Essay on Man* and of a dissertation on the hero of *The Dunciad*.”

one's mind about nothing—to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts. Not a select party. The genus is not scarce in population. All stubborn arguers you meet with are of the same brood— They never begin a subject they have not preresolved upon. They want to hammer their nail into you and if you turn the point, still they think you wrong. Dilke will never come at a truth as long as he lives; because he is always trying at it. He is a Godwin-methodist. (*Letters II*: 213)

This remark certainly has a bearing on Keats's ideas of "half knowledge," but it comes nearly two years after his *Negative Capability* and is prefaced by the remark: "Brown complained very much in his Letter to me of yesterday of *the great alteration* the Disposition of Dilke has undergone—He thinks of nothing but 'Political Justice' and his Boy" (*Letters II*: 213; emphasis added). In the winter of 1817-1818, however, Dilke is not yet "entirely swallowed up in his boy" and Godwin dogma—whose adherents, Nicholas Roe points out, irritated Hazlitt, Lamb, and Coleridge with their "fierceness and *dogmaticism* of conversation" (246). Furthermore, Keats writes a month after his *Negative Capability* letter, "I and Dilk [sic] are getting [to be] capital Friends" (*Letters I*: 76) and in February 1818, "I am a good deal with Dilke and Brown, we are very thick; they are very kind to me" (*Letters I*:107).

This is not to say that Dilke did not already manifest some of those qualities that would prompt Charles Lamb to call him "a Dilkish blockhead," but that in December 1817 Keats was still getting to know Dilke and his kind wife Maria, to whom the Keatses wrote a mock love letter. His discussions with Dilke were at this point more disquisitions than disputes—though perhaps his need to qualify here does not bode well for their future

interactions. At the beginning of his Negative Capability letter, Keats writes of having had

two very pleasant evenings with Dilke yesterday & today; & am at this moment just come from him & feel in a humour to go on with this, began in the morning, & from which he came to fetch me. I spent Friday evening with Wells & went the next morning to see *Death on the Pale horse*...

Speaking with Dilke has put him “in a humour” to continue his letter and speculate on the flaws of Wells and the strengths of *King Lear*. Likewise, their disquisitions on the Christmas pantomime influenced Keats’s January 1818 review of it, and their “proing and conning” (as Keats fondly termed it in a letter to his sister) enabled him to synthesize his dialectical musings over the past few days—on Coleridge’s 1817 *Sibylline Leaves* and *Biographia Literaria*, Kean’s acting, Hunt’s excess, Hone’s libel, Hazlitt’s gusto, West’s blandness, Shakespeare’s intensity, Smith’s empty wit, and Drury Lane’s pantomimes—into his concept of Negative Capability.

### III

If one sets aside for a moment later letters and poems of Keats and examines the idea of Negative Capability on its own terms, one finds it to be an oxymoron composed of one word denoting absence or denial and another denoting capacity or ability. He describes it as an attribute that Shakespeare preeminently and persons of superior ability generally have and defines it as the faculty of residing in a state of incertitude and partial knowledge without succumbing to the need for proof or explanations. Murry writes that Keats’s “conception of Negative Capability” refers to “a quality of the man and not of his

work” (*Keats and Shakespeare* 42), yet Keats defines Negative Capability as the artist’s threshold state of half-knowledge while creating — “when Man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” — as well as the result of such composition, the “fine isolated verisimilitude[s] caught from the Penetralium of mystery.”

Unless Keats imagines he is privy to Coleridge’s perceptions as he composes, he cannot know that Coleridge does not write down certain apparent truths because they awaken in him a disquieting need for fact and reason; rather, Keats reads in Coleridge’s work here and there “fine isolated verisimilitudes” seemingly seized from the *mysterium* that Coleridge nonetheless lets “go by,” such as the line Keats slightly misquotes from *Christabel* in his review of Kean: “a sight to dream of, not to tell!”<sup>11</sup> In the second half of the poem, Coleridge cannot resist explaining away some of the seductive and terrifying ambiguity of this line that Keats admired so much: we learn that it refers to nothing more or less than a “bosom cold” and “old.” As with West’s too-too solid Death that contains none of the obscurity Burke claims necessary for the sublime, Coleridge’s Geraldine is more beautiful and terrible when we are uncertain whether her bosom is vision out of a fantasy or a specter from a nightmare.

The term Negative Capability refers to the quasi-mystical stance of the artist in the act of creation—when one does not fully see where one’s creation will end up, but takes things as they come—as well as the product of such a mind, the “fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery.” The first sense of Negative Capability is akin to Keats’s idea “That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to

---

<sup>11</sup> Keats’s misquotation is not necessarily a sign he has not read Coleridge attentively, but rather that the phrase has become “proved upon [his] pulses” like the “haunting” line from *King Lear* he misquotes to Reynolds: “Do you not hear the sea?”

a tree it had better not come at all;” the second to his remark quoted above that “A melodious passage in poetry is full of pleasures both sensual and spiritual. The spiritual is felt when the very letters and points of characted language show like the hieroglyphics of beauty;—the mysterious signs of an immortal freemasonry! ‘A thing to dream of, not to tell!’” For both creator and created, writer and reader, *Negative Capability* is the ability to remain “content with half knowledge,” to reside within a threshold of knowing and not knowing.

Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium* defines this threshold as *philosophia* and links it to the daemon *Eros*, for Love, he pronounces in *The Symposium*, is an analogous threshold state of having and not having. A philosopher must be wise enough to know what questions to ask, and yet ignorant enough to need to ask them; a lover must have an object of desire, and yet must lack that beloved object in order *to* desire. “For wisdom is a beautiful thing,” Socrates comments, “and Love is of the beautiful; and therefore Love is also a philosopher, or lover of wisdom, and being a lover of wisdom, is in a mean between the wise and the ignorant” (370-371). *Eros* strives for Beauty; *philosophia*, for Truth. As Motion points out, under Bailey’s influence, Keats had been steeped in Plato just prior to writing his Negative Capability letter (188), and whether or not this letter directly alludes to Plato’s *Symposium*, its conception of poetic thresholds as well as its linking of Beauty and Truth shares much with Socrates’ discussion of *Eros*. Plato seems to have been much discussed among the Keats circle that winter. On February 22, 1818, Keats’s friend Benjamin Bailey writes to John Taylor about Plato using phrasing similar to that within Keats’s Negative Capability letter:

Plato had “the vision and the faculty divine.” He looked into “adyta,” the “penetralia,” the inmost recesses of Truth; and wanted but the eye of Revelation to see clearly into the mysteries of Christianity, which he saw shadowed in the twilight. In the greatest truths, in a word, Plato saw correctly. (*Keats Circle* I: 7)

Earlier in his December 1817 letter, Keats writes of how “The excellence of every art is in its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship to Beauty & Truth;” he concludes his discussion of Negative Capability by reiterating, “with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.” Art’s intensity derives from its relationship to Beauty and Truth that are the goals of *Eros* and *philosophia*, two threshold states of the heart and mind. Keats’s later gnomic conception, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” could be condensed into one word in Greek: *kalon*, meaning both “the beautiful” as well as “the noble” (Davis xvii); both philosophers and lovers, says Socrates, desire “the beautiful and noble” as well as “the good” and true (Plato 371).<sup>12</sup>

Keats calls this negatively capable state of mind and heart “speculation” and opposes it to “consideration.” “Speculation” seems to derive some of its meaning for Keats from its etymological connection to the Latin words for mirror, *speculum*, as well as *speculatio*, “exploration, observation,” as in the “wild surmise” of “Stout Cortez.” As such, it is neither a wholly passive nor wholly active state, but an oxymoronic joining of

---

<sup>12</sup> Keats read about the *kalon* in Voltaire’s *Philosophical Dictionary* and requested Madame Dacier’s translation of Plato in Rome for solace during his final illness. Although Keats famously lamented, “O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!” and “the cold touch of philosophy” in *Lamia* makes “all charms fly,” these comments apply more to a thinker like Newton than to Socrates, of whom Keats wrote to George and Georgiana, “I have no doubt that thousands of people never heard of have had hearts comp[le]tely disinterested: I can remember but two: Socrates and Jesus” (*Letters* II: 229), and later wonders “How far by the persevering endeavors of a seldom appearing Socrates Mankind may be made happy” (249). See also Borges’ “The Nightingale of Keats” in *Other Inquisitions: 1937-1952* (121-124) and Vendler the *Odes of John Keats* (133-135) for readings of Keats as a Platonist.

the two (as in “*Negative Capability*” or “diligent indolence”) into a non-irritable state of half-knowledge. “A question,” Keats writes in one of his letters, “is the best beacon towards a little speculation.” Thus, to “excite” speculation, he asks but does not answer questions in his poems, thereby inspiring a “half-slumbering” threshold state in which the mind, like a *speculum*, reflects and responds without irritation and ventures forth without definitely knowing where the enterprise will end up. “Consideration,” in contrast, seems to mean “deliberation” for Keats, an adherence to rigid principles of thought that, for a true poet, “the sense of Beauty obliterates.”

According to Keats, Coleridge’s flaws as a poet stem from his lack (or perhaps lapses) of being able to remain in a threshold state between knowing and not knowing: “Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge.” Coleridge, unlike Socrates’ philosopher, is not content to remain in a wavering state between knowing and not knowing. He often attempts to “pierce the *adyta* of causation” (*Biographia Literaria* 107) that literally is not to be entered. Coleridge catches a “finely...brief” (“Marginalia to the Shakespeare Folio” 335) appearance of truth from the inner sanctum of the *mysterium* only to let it go because he is unable to remain in a state in which he does not know everything. In a criticism that perhaps inspired Keats’s *Negative Capability* letter, John Wilson accused Coleridge of being one “who presumptuously came forward to officiate as High-Priest at mysteries beyond his ken—and who carried himself as if he had been familiarly admitted into the *Penetralia* of Nature, when in truth he kept perpetually stumbling at the very Threshold” (cited in *Coleridge the Visionary* 305-6). Coleridge could not, in other words, often

remain content with the two meanings of the word “verisimilitude:” “the appearance of truth” or “*merely* the appearance, but not the reality, of truth.” Instead, he tends to resolve the uncertainties of his text and thereby lets the verisimilitude “go by.”

Yet Coleridge himself was not unaware of this fault. He famously commented in *Table Talk*,

Mrs. Barbauld once told me that she admired the Ancient Mariner very much, but that there were two faults in it,—it was improbable, and had no moral. As for the probability, I owned that that might admit some question; but as to the want of a moral, I told her that in my own judgment it had too much; and that the only, or chief fault, if I might say so, was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of pure imagination. It ought to have had no more moral than the *Arabian Nights*’ tale of the merchant’s sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well and throwing the shells aside, and lo! a genie starts up and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant *because* one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie’s son.

It may be true that, as Keats wrote in another letter, “we hate poetry that has a palpable design on us,” but it is not so much “moral sentiment” in *The Ancient Mariner* as the “*obtrusion of*” that “moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause or action in a work of pure imagination” that makes the work flawed. Keats had requested a copy of Coleridge’s *Sibylline Leaves* a month before composing his Negative Capability letter and undoubtedly had it in mind when he wrote to his brothers. He was also familiar

with *Biographia Literaria* and its discussions of “our *myriad-minded* Shakspear.”

Stillinger seems mystified that the writer who first noted Shakespeare’s protean qualities should “exemplify the lack of Negative Capability” (23)—but that is because he has also fallen into the trap of “mak[ing] the customary connection between the letter to his brothers of later December 1817 and Keats’s remarks to Woodhouse ten months later...on ‘the poetical Character’” (24). In fact, Keats does not accuse Coleridge of exemplifying an “egotistical sublime,” but merely of lacking Negative Capability. Coleridge’s “irritable reaching after fact & reason”—or, as the elder statesman himself says, after “a principle or cause of action”—explains away some of the gnomic mystery of *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and thereby constitutes its flaw for *both* poets.

Shakespeare’s Negative Capability, in contrast, consists in his ability to reside comfortably within thresholds, creating uncertain, mysterious, and doubtful situations as well as gnomic utterances—or “fine isolated verisimilitudes”—without explaining away all their mysteries. Angus Fletcher defines the “gnomic as a mysterious, enigmatic, and pithy phrase or sentence” that “derives upon the secret aspect of knowledge,” and cites Keats’ “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” as well as the first line of *Hamlet*, “Who’s there?”, as two examples of gnomics (*Colors of the Mind* 102). The oxymoronic “mysterious function” (*Ibid.* 103) of these gnomics is their Negative Capability. The entire first act of *Hamlet* is a series of them, as when the spelled watchman remarks, “For this relief much thanks. ‘Tis bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart.” Shakespeare lets this eerie statement stand without providing facts about Francisco’s life or reasons for his sickness at heart, for that would ruin the mysterious and suggestive effect of the words.

For Keats, a genuine poet creates according to what beauty requires rather according to what reason dictates. The best art has intensity, which for Keats seems to mean both an internal tension (Poetry is “might half slumbering on its arm”) and a swelling into life. An artist’s intensity comes from his or her ability to adhere to the sense of beauty and truth rather than to reason and deliberation; correspondingly, intensity in a painting, play, or poem comes from its manifestation of this beauty and truth. The more intensity art has, the more its disagreeable aspects “evaporate.” In the case of *King Lear*, the acid vehemence of Lear’s curses and the agony of his tragedy are dissolved by the play’s intensity and its adherence to beauty and truth. In contrast, Keats does not like West’s painting because it neither arouses his emotions nor excites his thoughts—it is flat and forced rather than vital and intense, dull and uninciting rather than intriguing and inspiring.

This work re-defines Negative Capability as the aesthetic threshold it was meant to be—a state of “half-knowledge” Socrates calls *philosophia*—and applies it to Shakespeare, Coleridge, Brontë, Tennyson, and Henry James. While I draw on the work of liminal theorists from Plato to Victor Turner, I primarily use Keats’ own writings to argue that Negative Capability is a concept of aesthetic thresholds rather than a negation of the self. My first chapter, “Shakespearean Hieroglyphics,” proleptically addresses Keatsian thresholds in Shakespeare, revealing the “hieroglyphics of Beauty” and threshold intensities of *King Lear*. When Shakespeare alters the story of Lear from his source, he removes all motivation for the king’s unexplained testing of his daughters and thereby creates, if not what Coleridge would call a “motiveless malignity,” then at least a motiveless perversity. We also see his *Negative Capability* when he has Goneril say of

her father, “The best and soundest of his time hath bin but rash,” without explaining what she means by reviewing his entire history or subjecting his slips to proto-Freudian analysis (indeed, in many ways, post-Freudian literature is opposed to Negative Capability). This Shakespearean “hieroglyphic” intimates something essential about Lear’s character without wasting words and precious stage time explaining whence his actions sprung and what they might mean. Keats remarks on this “fine isolated verisimilitude:” “How finely is the brief of Lear’s character sketched out in this conference” (“Marginalia” 335). Finally, in writing a play about “nothing” and describing an essential linguistic absence in his play, Shakespeare engages in a *creatio ex nihilo* akin to Keats’s *Negative Capability*.

My second chapter, “Negative Capability and Positive Negation,” illuminates Coleridge’s inability to remain “content with half-knowledge” in his poetry and his tendency to “pluck the heart out of” Shakespeare’s “Penetralium of mystery” in his criticism. Yet Coleridge comprehends the “myriad-minded” Shakespeare more than any of Keats’s contemporaries with the possible exception of Hazlitt, and if he “let[s] go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery,” he nonetheless arrives “at the very bourne of heaven” and sees “sight[s] to dream of, not to tell!” The sublimely fragmented “Christabel,” in turn, becomes the explicit, fully-resolved Sapphic seductions of Le Fanu’s “Carmilla” and thence into Dreyer’s liminal “Vampyr,” both of which I discuss in relation to Coleridge. Paradoxically, Keats makes Coleridge the exemplar of a poet who lacks Negative Capability because he comes so close.

My third chapter, “Beauty and Truth,” points out how such a redefinition of the term changes the way one reads Keats’s poetry. To excite a state of speculation in his

readers, he creates “fine isolated verisimilitudes” and asks but does not answer questions in his poems, thereby inspiring a “half-slumbering” threshold state in which the mind, like a *speculum*, reflects and responds without irritation and ventures forth without definitely knowing where the enterprise will end up. “A question,” Keats explains, “is the best beacon towards a little speculation.” Ironically, it is Keats’s very ability to remain “content with half-knowledge” and in “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts”—his very Negative Capability—which make him susceptible to a suspicion that will eventually hamper his creativity toward the end of his life and lead him into “wild surmises” and suspicions of his friends, thereby intimating the potential dangers and limitations of Negative Capability.

My final chapter, “The Penetralium of Mystery,” explores the negative capabilities of *Wuthering Heights* and the capable negations of Henry James’s late fiction. After Lockwood crosses the “grotesque... penetralium” of *Wuthering Heights*, he encounters uncertainties, Mysteries, and doubts as he attempts to reconcile sign with signifier and penetrates the inner sanctum of Catherine’s bedroom. My chapter examines the novel’s Keatsian origins in Gondal, details its daemonic threshold states and intensity, and questions whether Bronte can sustain Negative Capability into a second generation. In the second section, I examine how Keats’s Negative Capability influences the fiction of Henry James. This section reads James’s capable negations in “The Altar of the Dead” as an inversion of Keats’s “Ode to Psyche” and traces the architecture of mind in Keats and James. The chapter ends with an examination of the permutations of Negative Capability over time, from Shakespeare and Keats to Kafka and beyond.

It is understandable why so many critics have followed Bate's misreading of Negative Capability rather than Keats' definition of it: the very hermeneutics of criticism necessitate that one irritably reach after fact and reason to explain away a text's uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts. Yet redefining Negative Capability as an aesthetic threshold rather than the negation of the self not only allows one to rectify some critical oversights and misreadings, it also allows one to identify a major aesthetic stance in English literature. Examining Keats's Negative Capability letter using what he would call "speculation" rather than "consideration" enables one to make connections between texts that are often overlooked—such as Keats's influence on Bronte or James—and locate within them spaces of intentional liminal obscurity that leave us, as Keats would say, "in a Luxury of twilight."

## Shakespearean Hieroglyphics

A melodious passage in poetry is full of pleasures both sensual and spiritual. The spiritual is felt when the very letters and points of characted language show like the hieroglyphics of beauty;—the mysterious signs of an immortal freemasonry! “A thing to dream of, not to tell!” The sensual life of verse springs warm from the lips of Kean, and to one learned in Shakespearean hieroglyphics,—learned in the spiritual portion of those lines to which Kean adds a sensual grandeur, his tongue must seem to have robbed the Hybla bees and left them honeyless! There is an indescribable *gusto* in his voice, by which we feel that the utterer is thinking of the past and future while speaking of the instant.

—Keats, “On Edmund Kean”

### I

#### *Keats's Presider*

Curiously, the play which inspired Keats's Negative Capability letter was not *Macbeth*, with its witches “caught from the Penetralium of Mystery,” nor *Hamlet*, with its gnomic “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts.” Although Keats culled many a bouquet from *Midsummer Night's Dream* for his own verses and found personal application for the sorrows of *Troilus and Cressida*,<sup>13</sup> neither play seems to have been his abiding touchstone. This is not to say that Shakespeare's other plays did not for a time form “the

---

<sup>13</sup> He wrote to Fanny Brawne in February 1820, “My greatest torment since I have known you has been the fear of you being a little inclined to the Cressid” (*Letters II*: 250).

center of” his “intellectual world” (*Major Works* 383); indeed, as Caroline Spurgeon points out, Keats marked *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* the most in his Princeton copy of Shakespeare (*Keats’s Shakespeare* 5). Yet although Keats did not write in his Steevens edition of *King Lear*, it has been well-thumbed, and *Lear* is the second most marked play in his preferred Folio edition.<sup>14</sup> In addition, it is the play to which he most alluded in his letters after *Hamlet* and the only one to have been honored by Keats with two sonnets, “On the Sea” and “On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Again.” If Shakespeare was Keats’s “Presider,” his presiding play for Keats was *King Lear*, which haunted him in the Isle of Wight and later served as inspiration for his concept of Negative Capability.

*King Lear* begins and ends Keats’s life of poetry. Though reading *King Lear* in January 1818 seemed to enact “a sea change” in his work from Spenserian bowers to human agonies, the seeds of his own poetic negation had already been sown in his earliest efforts. Keats wrote of the story of Lear<sup>15</sup> in his first extant poem, “Imitation of Spenser,” alluded to its literary sea in poems ranging from “Endymion” to “The Fall of Hyperion,” and quoted from it on his deathbed when he renounced all that “smells of mortality.”<sup>16</sup> Many scholars have sought for a single source for his epitaph, citing Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Philaster*,<sup>17</sup> Donne, Catullus, Chapman, Bacon, Henry VIII,<sup>18</sup> or

<sup>14</sup> All quotations from *King Lear* will be from Keats’s 1806 Folio copy in the Keats House, Hampstead.

<sup>15</sup> One assumes he referred to Spenser’s account of Lear in *The Faerie Queene*.

<sup>16</sup> From Severn’s letter to Taylor, January 25, 1821; Keats was quoting from *King Lear* Act IV.vi.136, a scene which long haunted him.

<sup>17</sup> *Philaster*, Act V.iii.: “all your better deeds / Shall be in water writ” (Lowell II: 526); Donne: “Vows are so cheap with women, or the matter / Whereof they’re made, that they are writ in water” (*Keats Circle* II: 91n72); Catullus LXX: “*Sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti / Inento et rapida scribere oportet aqua;*” Chapman: “Of what frail temper is a woman’s weakness! / Words writ in water have more lasting essence / Than our determinations;” Bacon: “But limns on water or but writes on dust.”

classical poetry as the sole origin for the line; more likely, several influences—including *King Lear*—dovetailed in Keats’s mind to form his last bitter line of poetry: “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.” Perhaps as he listened to the ceaseless play of water from the Barcaccia fountain outside his window in Rome, he was once again haunted by the line from *King Lear*, “Hark, do you hear the sea?”

Although *King Lear* resonated throughout Keats’s letters and poems, his speculations on the play changed over time, ebbing and flowing with his dialectical mind. Keats, did, however, leave traces of his “mysterious semi-speculations” on *Lear* in the months preceding and following the composition of Negative Capability letter that are just “smokeable.” During this time, *King Lear* seems to have had an uncanny influence on Keats, haunting him in the Isle of Wight until he became “not over-capable in [his] upper Stories” and enacting a sea-change in his writing in the winter of 1817-1818 “into something rich and strange.” During his stay in the Isle of Wight, *King Lear* offered him a metapoetic model for composition itself; later that year, the play initiated Keats’s metamorphosis into “the agonies, the Strife / Of human hearts” that he had foreseen in *Endymion*. The play also inspired his ideas of intensity, beauty and truth and Shakespearean hieroglyphics in his December 1817 Negative Capability letter. Reading the play, Keats defined his own position among “the mighty dead,” hanging in a threshold position halfway up Cliff of Poesy like Edgar’s “Samphire gatherer” clinging to a virtual Dover cliff above an imaginary sea.

Images of this literary sea appeared early on in Keats’s verse, especially in “On the Sea” and *Endymion*, both of which he felt inspired to write in the Isle of Wight.

---

<sup>18</sup> In his journal entry for March 9, 1821—just before he found out that Keats had died—Haydon misquoted from *Henry VIII* to describe John Scott’s death (who had died in a duel with Lockhart over a review of Keats): “Men’s vices live in brass, while their virtues we write in water” (*Journals* II: 316).



It may seem at first a curious passage to have attracted Keats's attention; surely Cordelia's lamentations, Lear's curses, or Edmund's machinations contain more readily apparent intensity and "beauty and truth." And yet this scene from *King Lear* unsettled Keats in the Isle of Wight as few passages in literature had before or would thereafter, and under its influence he became, like Lear, as "mad as the vext Sea," and found in Edgar's "fine isolated verisimilitudes caught from the Penetralium of Mystery" the model for his own mature poetry.

Keats traveled to the Isle of Wight in the spring of 1817 with a slim volume of verses under his belt and grand ambitions; by the winter of 1817-1818, he had completed an epic and become a poet of Negative Capability. Something happened to him while he was alone in the Isle of Wight that acted as an "ethereal chemical" in him, enabling him to emulate the "great Poets" who all wrote "long poems" and bringing him "towards the Temple of Fame." The catalyst for that alchemical transformation seems to have had much to do with his reading and re-reading of *King Lear*, a play that had an uncanny influence on him in May 1817, again in the winter of 1817-1818, and once again in the midst of his *annus mirabilis*. Yet despite the lasting impact this experience of reading *King Lear* by the sea had on Keats, biographers have typically allotted only two or three pages to Keats's time on the Isle of Wight—an understandable omission, given the constrictions of the genre. Keats himself left only a few scattered remarks about it, apparently out of a superstitious dread of saying too much. This chapter will examine the haunting of John Keats by *King Lear* in the Isle of Wight in greater detail, explore the reasons for that haunting and its effect on his poetics, and demonstrate how the

“Shakespearean hieroglyphics” of *King Lear* dovetailed to form the “fine isolated verisimilitudes” of Negative Capability.

## II

### “Mad as the Vext Sea”

On the evening of April seventeenth, 1817, John Keats sat writing a letter beneath a portrait of Shakespeare. This was his first night in his new lodgings in Carisbrooke, and he was uneasy; he thought that writing to Reynolds might relieve him of the loneliness that had seized him in Southampton and persisted over the next two days (*Letters* I: 128). Keats had been reading *King Lear* since arriving in Southampton, and so intensely had it acted upon his imagination that it seemed as though Edgar’s visionary sea had risen up and flooded the darkness around him. While visiting Shanklin to write *Endymion*, Keats described how the actual cliffs yawning before him “of the depth of nearly 300 feet at least” (*Letters* I: 130) became the virtual Dover Beach in a literary transmogrification reminiscent of his axiom that “Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream: he awoke and found it truth.” “Shanklin is a most beautiful place,” he wrote to Reynolds, describing its

cleft between the Cliffs of the depth of nearly 300 feet at least. This cleft is filled with trees & bushes in the narrow part; and as it widens becomes bare, if it were not for primroses on one side, which spread to the very verge of the Sea, and some fishermen’s huts on the other, perched midway in the Ballustrades of beautiful green Hedges along their steps down to the sands.—But the sea, Jack,

the sea....From want of regular rest, I have been rather narvus—and the passage in *Lear*—‘Do you not hear the sea?’—has haunted me intensely. (*Letters* I: 130-131)

This passage from Keats’s letter suggests a number of things about his experience of reading and writing. That he was “haunted” by a line from *Lear* and yet misquoted it slightly<sup>19</sup> intimates that he did not, as Gittings would have it, compose poetry with Shakespeare’s plays open before him; rather, he echoed *Lear* after he had assimilated it. First Keats read “a certain Page full of Poesy or distilled Prose, and” then allowed himself ample time to “wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect upon it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it, until” it “serve[d] as a starting post towards all the ‘two-and-thirty Pallaces,’” from the Infant Chamber to the Chamber of Maiden Thought (*Letters* I: 231). Keats “chew[ed] the honied cud” of Shakespeare’s lines, “Till in his soul, dissolv’d, they [came] to be / Part of himself” (176). After repeated readings, *Lear* became for Keats what James calls “felt life:” it was “proved upon [his] pulses.” Not by indolence, nor by an “irritable reaching after fact & reason,” but by what Keats called a “diligent indolence” (“I am an otiosus-peroccupatus Man,” he said to Woodhouse in September 1819) does one arrive at a state conducive to composing—to a state of Negative Capability.

Keats had traveled to the Isle of Wight to compose *Endymion* and to “right Jack Health” (*Letters* I: 125), but neither had come readily to him. He was in that time of life, he would explain in his preface to *Endymion*, between the healthy imagination of childhood and the mature imagination of a man, a time “in which the soul is in a ferment,

---

<sup>19</sup> Although Capell’s 1768 edition has “Hark, Hark; do you not hear the sea?” in place of Steevens’s version of the line: “Hark, do you hear the sea?”

the character undecided, the way of life uncertain” (*Complete Poems* 63), and he had been having bad dreams. The poetic induction he had hoped for had become a species of dream incubation, for “any organic derangement,” he later noted, “always occasions a Phantasmagoria” (*Letters* II: 277). The Isle of Wight was a famed health spot, but for Keats, its reputedly healthful air had not dispelled the “dark vapours” of either body or soul, but rather seemed to increase them. They gathered about him now in the evening mist as he sought relief in writing to his friend. In the distance, he could hear a tempest rising on the sea (*Letters* I: 132).

The room grew cold as he wrote (*Letters* I: 128, 133). “The wind is in a sulky fit,” he continued, “and I feel that it would be no bad thing to be the favorite of some fairy, who would give one the power of seeing how our friends go on, at a distance.” He seemed to see the faces of Reynolds, his brothers, and Haydon rise up and fade before him as though he had become a specter watching over them from a great distance (*Letters* I: 129). “You must warn them,” he told his brothers, “not to be afraid should my Ghost visit them on Wednesday.” Years later, Keats would suggest to George Keats in America how they might experience “a direct communication of spirit” despite vast distance between them: “I shall read a passage of Shakspeare every Sunday at ten o Clock—you read one at the same time and we shall be as near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room” (*Letters* I: 5). Shakespeare seemed to have a similar effect on him in Carisbrooke, giving him “power of enormous ken.” “Ever since I wrote to my Brothers from Southampton,” he told Reynolds, “I have been in a taking” (*Letters* I: 130).<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* defines this as “a disturbed or agitated state of mind,” although the expression was also used to denote “a seizure or sudden attack of illness or pain” as well as an “enchantment” or possession.

Indeed, so vividly did Keats imagine the scene conjured up by Edgar that he became haunted by its figurative sea and entered into the scene himself. Like Milton's Satan who "informs" the serpent in the garden of Eden, Keats incarnated into the samphire-gatherer from *King Lear*, crawling up the side of "the Cliff of Poesy" with Shakespeare towering above him and Pope scurrying along the shore beneath him: "I am 'one that gathers Samphire dreadful trade'" (*Letters* I: 141-142). It is a curious metaphor to use—poetry as a "dreadful trade"—and bespeaks of the depth of poetic haunting Keats felt at the time. Act IV.vi of *King Lear* seems to have been one of those "passages of Shakespeare" that became palpably "real" to him, "such as existences of Sun, moon, and Stars" (*Letters* I: 243). "From want of regular rest," he told Reynolds, "I have been rather *nervus*—and the passage in *Lear*—'Do you not hear the sea?'—has haunted me intensely."

The line kept beating in his mind like a heartbeat.<sup>21</sup> It kept him awake at night. He longed to make room among the portraits of Milton, Mary Queen of Scots, and Shakespeare for one more picture. "I should like, of all Loves," he admitted to Reynolds, "a sketch of you and Tom and George in ink which Haydon will do if you tell him how I want them." He was alone, and turned to Shakespeare for comfort, and found Shakespeare staring back at him. He remembered the "sacred secret" Haydon had imparted to him a month earlier:

Often have I sat by my fire after a day's effort, as the dusk approached, and a gauzey veil seemed dimming all things—and mused on what I had done and with a burning glow on what I would do till filled with fury I have seen the faces of the

---

<sup>21</sup> Keats underlines in his Steevens and Johnson edition of *King Lear* he had bought for his trip, "the tempest in my mind / Doth from my fences take all feeling else / Saves what beats there" (297).

mighty dead crowd into my room, and have sunk down & prayed [to] the great Spirit that I might be worthy to accompany these immortal beings in their immortal glories, and then I have seen each smile as it passed over me, and each shake their hands in awful encouragement. (*Letters I*: 124)

Ever since he had found that uncanny portrait of Shakespeare in the passageway, Keats had sensed a “High Power” watching him. “I remember your saying you had notions of a good Genius presiding over you,” he later wrote to Haydon. “I have of late had the same thought, for things which {I} do have at Random are afterwards confirmed in my judgment in a dozen features of Propriety—Is it too daring to Fancy Shakspeare this Presider? When in the Isle of Wight I met with a Shakspeare in the Passage of the house at which I lodged” (*Letters I*: 141-142). That April 1817 night as Keats wrote to Reynolds, lines of poetry came to him without effort, “from strange influence” (*Complete Poems* 69-71), as though given to him by a shadowy Presider whose voice was also that of the murmuring surge.<sup>22</sup> He saw the way open before him; the way seemed inexorably vast (*Letters I*: 139). Sitting alone during a wild storm with the disembodied head of Shakespeare rising out of the shadows above him, Keats composed a sonnet for Reynolds that was half incantation and half exorcism:

On the Sea.

⊙ Sea It keeps eternal Whisperings around

<sup>22</sup> *Endymion*: “The surgy murmurs of the lonely sea” (*Complete Poems* 67). Woodhouse recorded later, [Keats] has said, that he has often not been aware of the beauty of some thought or expr<sup>n</sup> until after he has composed & written it down—It has then struck him with astonishm<sup>t</sup>—& seemed rather the prod<sup>n</sup> of another person than his own—He has wondered how he came to hit upon it.... It seems scarcely his own; & he feels that he c<sup>d</sup> never imitate or hit upon it again: & he cannot conceive how it came to him—Such Keats s<sup>d</sup> was his Sensation of astonishm<sup>t</sup> & pleasure when he had prod<sup>d</sup> the lines “His white melod<sup>s</sup> & c[”]—It seemed to come by chance or magic—to be as it were something given to him (*Keats Circle I*: 129). See also the preface to *Kubla Khan*: “Yet from the still surviving recollections of his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, *given to him*” (250; emphasis added).

Desolate shores, and with its mighty swell  
 Gluts twice ten thousand Caverns; till the spell  
 Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.  
 Often 'tis in such gentle temper found  
 That scarcely will the very smallest shell  
 Be moved for days from whence it sometime fell  
 When the last winds of Heaven were unbound.  
 O ye who have your eyeballs vext and tir'd  
 Feast them upon the wideness of the Sea  
 O ye whose Ears are din'd with uproar rude  
 Or fed too much with cloying melody—  
 Sit ye near some old Cavern's Mouth and brood  
 Until ye start as if the Sea Nymphs quired—

Edgar's query—"Do you hear the sea?"—resonates throughout Keats's sonnet, keeping "eternal whisperings round." Gloucester's visionary, visionless eyes suffer a sea change into the "eyeballs vex'd and tired" of "the wideness of the sea" in the sonnet and thence into Cynthia shining on Glaucus's eyes "seeming not to see" the ocean's "hollow vast." The image reappears throughout Keats's verse, as in his *Hyperion: A Dream*. Moneta's eyes "visionless entire seem'd / Of all external things—they saw me not / But in blank splendor beam'd like the mild moon." Like Glaucus, doomed to "live and wither" for "ten hundred years," Moneta is "deathwards progressing to no death." Gloucester, who falls into the visionary surge only to arise anew, perhaps served as a prototype for Keats's patterns of "[dying] into life," from the reanimated lovers in *Endymion* to Keats himself

who was “consumed in the fire” of *King Lear* only to rise again with “new Phoenix wings.” Keats’s “On the Sea” sonnet is an invocation of Shakespeare as well as an echo of *King Lear*, and like Act IV.vi of the play, the sonnet’s “real subject is the poetic process” itself, “the natural creativity of the unconscious mind,” (Sperry 75).

Murry argues that “the most striking fact that emerges from a comparison of” Shakespeare’s Dover Beach scene in Act IV.vi of *King Lear* “with Keats’ sonnet,” “On the Sea,” “is that the only visible connection between them is the strange use of the word ‘eye-balls’ in the sonnet” (*Keats and Shakespeare* 35), but Keats also took Edgar’s conceit from the scene as well. Keats might have written to Mary-Ann Jefferies that Hamlet “is perhaps more like Shakespeare in his common everyday Life than any other of his Characters” (*Letters* II: 116), but Keats himself identified with the samphire gatherer in Act IV of *King Lear*, hanging from the side of the “Cliff of Poesy” with Shakespeare towering above him and Pope crawling along the shore beneath him:

Truth is I have been in such a state of Mind as to read over my Lines and hate them. I am one that ‘gathers Samphire, dreadful trade’—the Cliff of Poesy towers above me—yet when Tom who meets with some of Pope’s Homer in *Plutarch’s Lives* reads some of those to me they seem like Mice to mine. (*Letters* I: 141)

Composing *Endymion* was an awful and awe-inspiring task, and Keats did not feel wholly up to it. It was not simply a lack of inspiration that hampered him, but a sense of the immensity of his task. “The high Idea I have of poetical fame makes me think I see it towering to[o] high above me,” he wrote to his brothers that spring, but added, “God forbid I should be without such a task!” To Hunt, he admitted feeling “down in the Mouth lately at this Work:”

I have asked myself so often why I should be a Poet more than other Men,—  
 seeing how great a thing it is,—how great things are to be gained by it—What a  
 thing to be in the Mouth of Fame—that at last the Idea has grown so monstrously  
 beyond my seeming Power of attainment that the other day I nearly consented  
 with myself to drop into a Phaeton...I see...nothing but uphill Journeying.

He felt as though he had become Edgar's samphire-gatherer, and the trade was dreadful  
 indeed. He had experienced something similar after viewing the Elgin Marbles, a sense  
 of being in "the shadow of a magnitude" that frightened him more than he cared to let on:

My spirit is weak—mortality  
 Weighs heavily upon me like unwilling sleep,  
 And each imagined pinnacle and steep  
 Of Godlike hardship tells me I must die  
 Like a sick eagle looking at the sky...

It was three years before Keats began to succumb to his final illness, but he  
 already felt a sense of time running out. "Does Shelley go on telling strange Stories of  
 the Death of kings?" he asked Hunt. "Tell him there are strange stories of the death of  
 Poets—some have died before they were conceived."<sup>23</sup> And fearing that his own epic  
 might turn out to be stillborn, Keats fled the Isle of Wight five or six days after finishing  
 his April 1817 letter to Reynolds:

I went to the Isle of Wight—thought so much about Poetry so long together that I  
 could not get to sleep at night—and moreover, I know not how it was, I could not

---

<sup>23</sup> Possibly a reference to Chatterton, a gibe at Shelley, or a piece of self-abnegation. Similar images of poetic birth and death occur in *After Dark Vapours* ("a Poet's death"), *Sleep and Poetry* ("a Poet born"), *Endymion* (lovers re-animated by the poetic swain), *'Tis the witching time of night* (lullaby for George's unborn child, whom Keats imagined would be the first American poet), *Lamia* (Lamia's rebirth, Lycius' death), and the two *Hyperion* fragments, and "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Again".

get wholesome food—By this means in a Week or so I became not over capable in my upper Stories, and set off pell mell for Margate, at least 150 Miles....I was too much in Solitude, and consequently was obliged to be in continual burning of thought as an only resource.

Like Lear, he had grown “as Mad as the vext Sea” in the Isle of Wight, unsettled in mind no less than body. “Instead of Poetry,” Keats wrote to his publisher from his new lodgings, “I have a swimming in my head—And feel all the effects of a Mental Debauch” (*Letters* I: 138). Apart from a few scattered remarks on “forebodings” and a “Brain so overwrought” from composition that he “had neither Rhyme nor reason in it,” Keats never afterwards explained what made him “set off pell mell for Margate” in such a hurry without giving his landlady notice or securing new lodgings elsewhere.

Perhaps a hint of what happened to him in the Isle of Wight might be found, however, in the request he made of Reynolds toward the end of his April 1817 letter. Keats asked him to write a letter on Shakespeare’s birthday that was also a portent, as though there was something occult in the date:

I’ll tell you what. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> was Shakespeare born—now If I should receive a Letter from you and another from my Brothers on that day ‘twould be a parlous good thing. (*Letters* I: 146)

As far as we know, Reynolds did not send him a letter on the twenty-third, though Keats apparently received a communication of a powerfully uncanny sort that day that drove him from Carisbrooke in a panic. Much of his early verse had been concerned with mapping out the future of his poetry and questioning the source of inspiration. “O Poesy!” he exclaimed in “Sleep and Poetry,” “for thee I grasp my pen / That am not yet a

glorious denizen / Of thy wide heaven” (*Complete Poems* 38-39), and to his friend Charles Cowden Clarke, he explained why he had ‘never penn’d a line’ to him: he “had never known” Apollo’s inspiration and feared the wine of his song “was of too poor a savour” (*CP* 31). In a sonnet to Haydon on the Elgin marbles, he apologized for not being able to “speak / Definitively on these mighty things,” for he knew “not where to seek” for the source of inspiration (*CP* 58). This is why he was so unsettled by the mockery he felt he had made of Apollo at Hunt’s, and wrote his “Ode to Apollo” and “God of the Golden Bow” (Woodhouse later explained) as poetic apologies to a God he hoped would some day guide him (*CP* 427). He had heard of trance-like moments of inspiration that transform the visible world into the visionary. “And should I ever see them,” he promised his brother George, “I will tell you.”

In the Isle of Wight, he did see them. “I was at home, and should have been most happy,” he would later tell Reynolds, “but I saw / Too far into the sea.” The “God of Song” bore him “along / Through sights [he] scarce [could] bear,” (*Letters* I: 221); “And is not this the cause / of Madness?” On the anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth and death, Keats “died into life” and “felt / What ‘tis to die and live again before” his “fated time.” This was the inspiration he had long sought; yet on that day he left the Isle of Wight “more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads, than one / Who sought the thing he loved” (Wordsworth 109). He had planned to stay a month or more (*Letters* I: 133). Despite his abrupt departure, Keats’s landlady was sufficiently impressed to let him keep the head of Shakespeare he had found in the passageway. “Do you not think,” he asked Haydon (*Letters* I: 142), “this is ominous of good?”

## III

## “One that Gathers Samphire, Dreadful Trade!”

The haunting of Keats by *King Lear* continued long after he returned from the Isle of Wight and Margate. Even into September 1817, Keats wrote of still hearing “the ocean’s music, . . . though ‘inland far I be,” and Severn in later years recalled Keats exclaiming while looking at grass rippling in the wind, “The tide! The tide” (Sharp 20)! In his 14 September 1817 *letter* to Jane and Mariane Reynolds, Keats asked strangely, “Which is best of Shakespeare’s Plays?—I mean in what mood and with what accompaniment [sic] do you like the Sea best?” (*Major Works* 385). Perhaps Keats was punning on the etymological connection between “sea” and “soul,” as Wordsworth did in his “Intimations” ode: “Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither” (190). It is as if the sea of *King Lear* and *The Tempest* became a synecdoche for Keats of Shakespeare’s “protean” genius, and Keats’s poetry at this time was particularly drenched in Shakespearean water imagery.

While on the Isle of Wight, Keats had described this gradual ripening of his powers of composition through reading and writing: “I am ‘one that gathers Samphire dreadful trade;’” and yet “I hope for the support of a High power while I clime [sic] this little eminence” (*Letters* I: 141). While composing, Keats, in a way reminiscent of Kean, “deliver[ed] himself up to the instant feeling, without any shadow of a thought about anything else,” possessed by and possessing Shakespeare. It is “the high Idea” Keats had “of poetical fame” that made him “see it towering to high above” (*Letters* I: 169); yet if he was in “the shadow of” Shakespeare’s “magnitude,” Keats also saw him as a

“Presider.” The first portion of Act IV of *Lear* seems at once a daunting achievement and a model for Keats’s early verse—much of which concerns the act of writing poetry.

Part of the reason the scene continued to haunt Keats was its depiction of the artist in the act of conjuring a world out of “airy nothing.” Shakespeare’s metapoetically intense description of an imagined Dover Beach is a description of composition itself and thereby held an abiding interest for Keats. Shakespeare stages the liminal scene at the edge of England and the limits of imagination, and it exemplifies his *creatio ex nihilo*, his Negative Capability that creates something out of nothing. Keats became fascinated with *King Lear* during this time in part because of its depiction of Edgar as a surrogate poet who is able to suggest an entire landscape out of a few “fine isolated verisimilitudes,” thereby reversing the laws of Newton and hoodwinking his father to “die into life.” R.S. White notes,

Just as the function of Edgar’s verbal trick is to restore Gloucester’s faith in living on, so its wider function is to compel faith in the power of poetry to create something which is not physically before the eyes of the audience—a primary aim of much dramatic poetry. (188)

Keats himself was “desirous of doing the world some good,” toyed with the idea of becoming a ship surgeon in 1819, and wondered in *The Fall of Hyperion*, “sure a poet is a sage, / A humanist, physician to all men.” Indeed, Moneta’s staging of the poet’s oneiric death only to have him “die into life” is a version of Edgar’s hoodwinking of his father into an imagined resurrection. Poetry can be—as Stevens phrases it—“a health,” and *King Lear* is both a text through which Keats must “burn” as well as “capable of

making all disagreeables evaporate, from [its] being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth.”

In the Dover Beach scene, Edgar makes cosmos out of chaos and shows how poetry can become passage and “ripeness is all;” his daedal language enacts a “sea-change” in Gloucester as well as in the reader. Reading of characters struggling “betwixt damnation and impassion’d clay” (*Major Works* 168) likewise gave Keats “new phoenix wings” to compose poetry of “dark passages” where he “see[s] not the balance of good and evil” (*Letters* I: 281). “The ripe hour came,” Keats wrote in *Hyperion*, and “touched / The whole enormous matter into life.” In his revised “Preface” to *Endymion*, Keats revealed how “The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination 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” (64). Keats himself was struggling through such a transformation into a negatively capable poetry, and writing *Endymion*—inspired in part by the sea-changes in *Lear*—helped to enact this change in him in the coming months: “In *Endymion*,” he described to Hessey in October 1818, “I leaped headlong into the Sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks” of composition “than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice” (*Letters* I: 374). After all, “a long Poem is a test of invention,” he told Bailey, “which I take to be the Polar Star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the rudder” (*Letters* I: 170). The “Scenery” of the bower” is fine—but human nature is finer” to a maturing Keats (*Letters* I: 242). He was aware that he must eventually leave his Bowers of Bliss for “the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts” such as *King Lear* depicts. As Keats

informed Hessey, “That which is creative must creative itself” (*Letters* I: 374) in a “gradual ripening of the intellectual powers” that owes much to *King Lear* and its gnomic conception that “ripeness is all.” It is a move from the “ripened fruitage” of *Endymion* through “the full-ripened grain” of “When I have fears” and on to the “ripeness to the core” of “Autumn.” Poetry for Keats “must / Be of ripe progress” (as in *Hyperion*) and be “ripening in itself.”

By the winter of 1817-1818, Keats had projected his own position amid “the mighty dead” and begun the transformation from his early poetic bowers into poetic intensity. In his Negative Capability letter, he used *Lear* as an exemplar of how intensity arising out of Beauty and Truth can make “all disagreeables evaporate”—for the intensity of language and situation redeem the bitterness of Lear’s curses, Edmund’s cruelty, the Fool’s caustic wit as well as Keats’s own sorrow at the death of his brother Tom (while nursing him, Keats underlined “Poore Tom!” and dated it). The beauty and truth of the play seem to reside in “fine phrases” upon which Keats looks “like a lover” as well as such figures as Cordelia who, in her beauty, truth, and speaking silence, generates much of the action of the play out of inaction and—like Edgar in his Dover Beach description—shows “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” These are the “fine isolated verisimilitudes caught from the Penetralium of Mystery” that Coleridge would “let go by”—suggestive appearances of truth that impart only a “knowledge,” leaving the reader in “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts,” and heightened speculation.

## IV

## Hieroglyphics of Beauty

*King Lear* not only influenced Keats's ideas of intensity arising out of beauty and truth that makes disagreeables evaporate (as discussed in the introductory chapter), his conception of his position among "the mighty dead," and the role of poetry; it also inspired his idea of speculative thresholds of half-knowledge that he discussed in his Negative Capability letter. In *Endymion*, Keats took "4000 Lines of one bare circumstance and fill[ed] them with Poetry" (*Letters* I: 170), and he chose an epigram from Shakespeare for this "Poetic Romance." "The stretched metre of an antique song." Through Shakespeare's "verisimilitudes" and "hieroglyphics of beauty" that abound in Edgar's virtual seascape, Keats learned how "an airy nothing acquires at once a local habitation and a name" ("On Kean in Richard" 237) and "one bare circumstance" can become an epic. In a review he wrote around the time he was composing his Negative Capability letter to his brothers, he spoke of how

A melodious passage in poetry is full of pleasures both sensual and spiritual. The spiritual is felt when the very letters and points of characted language show like the hieroglyphics of beauty.

Keats's markings in his Folio edition of *King Lear*<sup>24</sup> tracked such Shakespeare's hieroglyphic intensity of language, character, and situation. The markings include

---

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps Keats marked his Folio edition of *King Lear* over several readings but did not annotate his Quarto edition simply because the former was easier to carry, or perhaps he gravitated towards it because what it loses in "fine phrases," it makes up for in intensity. Steve Urkowitz argues that the Folio *King Lear* is a revision of the Quarto whose changes tend to "intensify the experience of the moment" and "enhance the tension" of the play (27). This heightened intensity arises out of a variety of editorial changes: the removal of superfluous characters on stage focuses the audience's attention on the principle characters, and the merging of speeches and excision of unnecessary passages augments the play's power.

underlined phrases and speeches, single and occasionally double lines down the margins, and in several places, both. As much as it is tempting to delineate Keats's reading habits and aesthetic interests from such marginal hieroglyphics, it is dangerous to profess to account for these markings in any systematic way. Shall we, for example, assume that Keats's request of Reynolds that he mark all passages in *Endymion* with double parallel lines that exhibited a "true voice of feeling" also applied to Keats's own markings in *King Lear*? Can we conclude that single marginal lines denote his appreciation of character and underscorings show his love of compound epithets? And what are we to make of passages that are marked with underlining as well as parallel lines down the margins? One assumes they either indicate Keats's overflowing enthusiasm or are evidence of two different readings—or perhaps both. The markings in the text presumably accumulated from his numerous readings of the play, two of which he dates in the text itself—as though, like young Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, he had begun to keep a diary in the margins of another text. He wrote the first date, "January 22, 1818," underneath "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Again" in the blank space between *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, and the second, "Sunday Evening Oct. 4, 1819," appears beside the phrase "Poore Tom."

To judge Keats's appreciation of the play solely by his markings in *King Lear*, one would assume his favorite "Shakespearean hieroglyphics" are from Act II.ii (underlined and marked down the margin with three parallel line just below a doodle), "O heavens! / If you do love old men, if your sweet sway / Allow obedience, if your selves are old, / Make it your cause: Send down, and take my part;" from Act IV.i, "As flies to wanton boys we are to the Gods/ They kill us for their sport" (underlined and set apart by

two exclamation marks); and two from Act IV.v., “dost thou / Squinny at me” (the last three words underlined three times) and “It smells of mortality” (underlined twice and marked by two parallel lines on either margin), a line Keats quoted on his deathbed. The first and second of these specially marked lines express metaphysical despair in language that Keats seems to have emulated in Saturn’s laments in “Hyperion;” perhaps the third phrase delighted Keats with its use of the onomatopoeic “squinny” like something out of Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* (or perhaps it simply reminded him of his “Granny good”); the last specially marked phrase has a gnomic suggestiveness as well as a rightness, “a wording of his own thoughts” (as Keats wrote in a letter detailing his poetic “axioms”) that, at the close of his life, came back to Keats as “almost a remembrance.”

Although it is difficult to say exactly what attracted Keats to multiple passages on multiple readings, generally speaking, R. S. White’s observations on the markings Keats made in his Folio *Tempest* could also apply to those in his *King Lear*:

it is convenient to distinguish between two categories of markings. One is the marking of a whole passage, paragraph or speech, and these may indicate various interests ranging from language to character and context....The second group includes words and short phrases which he marked, and it may be assumed that Keats’s interest here lay in the language itself, the ‘hieroglyphics’” (94).

Sometimes the markings are of what Keats called “bye-writing” such as the colloquy between Goneril and Regan after Cordelia’s banishment. Other times, he marked simple phrases such as Lear’s “No, no, no, no” in Act V.iii. that reveal the intensity of his despair and the breakdown of language at the limits of his mental and emotional

endurance.<sup>25</sup> Frequently, the markings indicate Keats's fondness for condensed intensity and gnomic suggestiveness, what he calls "fine isolated verisimilitudes" in his Negative Capability letter.

Keats seems to have developed this idea of the "hieroglyphics of beauty" and "fine isolated verisimilitudes" after reading Hazlitt's criticisms of West's "Death on the Pale Horse": "The only way in which the painter of genius can represent the force of moral truth, is by translating it into an artificial language of his own,—by substituting hieroglyphics for words, and presenting the closest and most striking affinities his fancy and observation can suggest between general idea and the visible illustration of it" ("On The Pale Horse" 138). In his letter to George and Georgiana Keats from the spring of 1819, Keats elaborates on this idea of hieroglyphic art when he writes that

A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory—and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life—a life like the Scriptures, figurative—which such people can no more make out than they can the Hebrew Bible. Lord Byron cuts a figure—but he is not figurative—Shakespeare led a life of Allegory; his works are the comments on it. (*Letters* II: 67)

A reader well-versed in Shakespearean hermeneutics such as Keats can divine Shakespeare's soul from reading his works as a Talmudic commentary on his life. The context for this passage on allegory is curious and often overlooked in commentaries on Keats's idea of "a life like the Scriptures, figurative." It follows a discussion of Bailey's disingenuousness with the Reynolds sisters, which shows how "the man who ridicules [sic] romance is the most romantic of Men—that he who abuses women and slights them—loves them the most" (*Ibid.*). Such a judgment could also apply to Keats himself,

---

<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the cloudy mountains he doodles in the margins date from his stay by the cliffs of the Isle of Wight.

who professed a desire to remain single, wedded only to the sublimities of inanimate nature at the very moment he was secretly engaged to Fanny Brawne. Allegory for Keats partakes of half-knowledge and partial truth, obscurity and subterfuge and suggestion. His sense of the term is not Coleridge's, but closer to the kind of allegory that Angus Fletcher describes when he writes:

most allegories of major importance have ultimately very obscure images, and these are a source of their greatness. (*Allegory* 73)

According to a passage Keats marked in Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, "We see the ebb and flow of feeling," in *King Lear*, "its pauses and feverish starts, its impatience of opposition, its accumulating force when it has time to recollect itself, the manner in which it avails itself of every passing word or gesture, its haste to repel insinuation, the alternate contradiction and dilation of the soul." Keats remarks that "This passage has to a great degree the hieroglyphic visgnomy," a gnomic containment of "half-knowledge" and half mystery. Keats's use of the term "visgnomy"—a dialect form of "physiognomy" that the Brontës also used— suggests both a "gnomic," which Angus Fletcher defines as "a mysterious, enigmatic, and pithy phrase or sentence" that "depends upon the secret aspect of knowledge" (*Colors of the Mind* 102), as well as a "gnomon" of a sundial, pointing to a truth without recourse to abstruse reasoning. Keats expands on his idea of "hieroglyphic visgnomy" when he writes of Shakespeare's "hieroglyphics of beauty" and seeming truths in his discussion of "fine isolated verisimilitudes" in his Negative Capability letter.

The term "hieroglyphic" was in the air at the time because of the rise of Egyptology in the eighteenth century that culminated in the discovery of the Rosetta

stone in 1798. “Egyptian subjects were very much in vogue,” Richard Holmes writes in his biography of Shelley, “for in the autumn of 1817 the British Museum had taken the receipt of fragments and sculptures from the empire of Ramses” (410). Around that time, Hunt, Keats, and Shelley wrote sonnets to the Nile in a poetry competition with one another, and Shelley wrote “Ozymandias” in a contest with Horace Smith in December 1817 or January 1818 (*Shelley’s Poetry and Prose* 109). Keats seems also attracted by the idea of Shakespeare’s writing as system of sacred rebuses, and “the prevailing understanding of hieroglyphics” in the Regency era “was that they were not a language as we would recognize it, but a direct visual expression of thought” (*Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age* 493). Hazlitt proposes such a view when he writes that Shakespeare’s “language is hieroglyphical. It translates thoughts into visible images” (*Works V*: 54-55). Like the sacred writing of lost empires, Shakespeare’s language for Keats often suggests pictographically but does not clearly delineate, leaving one in “half-knowledge.” Likewise, “A melodious passage in poetry is full of pleasures both sensual and spiritual. The spiritual is felt when the very letters and points of characted language show like the hieroglyphics of beauty;—the mysterious signs of an immortal freemasonry!” Keats felt he understood Shakespeare “to the depths” and believed when we are “learned in Shakespearean hieroglyphics,” we understand both the spiritual and sensual aspects of the verse without doing away with (in Lear’s words) “the mystery of things, / As if we were God’s spies.”

These Shakespearean hieroglyphics occur throughout *King Lear*, as when Regan and Goneril discuss Lear’s perversity at the end of the first act—an exchange that Keats underlines in his copy:

Gon.—You see how full of changes his age is, the obseruation we haue made of it hath been little. He alwaies lou'd our Sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off, appeares too grossely.

Reg.—'Tis the infirmity of his age; yet he hath euer but slenderly knowne himselfe.

Gon.—The best and soundest of his time hath bin but rash, then must we looke from his age, to receue not alone the imperfections of long ingrafted condition, but therewithall the vnruely way-wardnesse that infirm and cholericke yeares bring with them.

Reg.—Such vnconstant starts are we like to haue from him, as this of Kent's banishment.

Keats writes in the margin of his Folio edition under this conversation,

How finely is the brief of Lear's character sketched in this conference—from this point does Shakespeare spur him out to the mighty grapple—'the seeded pride that hath to this maturity blowne up' Shakespeare doth scatter abroad on the winds of Passion, where the germs take buoyant root in stormy Air, suck lightning sap, and become voiced dragons—self-will and pride and wrath are taken at a rebound by his giant hand and mounted to the Clouds—there to remain thunder evermore—

Goneril and Regan's colloquy suggests, but does not delineate, Lear's past even as it intimates his future—all while sounding plausibly like the conversation two daughters might have in their position. Both women would already know Lear's history and thus would not need to rehearse his earlier rashness, as they do not in this passage; and yet we

get a powerful sense of Lear's mind and passions from it nonetheless. Hazlitt writes in his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, "four things have struck us in reading *King Lear*....That the greatest strength of genius is shewn in describing the strongest passions: for the power of the imagination, in works of invention, must be in proportion to the force of the natural impressions, which are the subject of them" (Keats's emphasis; *Poetical Works* 286). Keats footnotes this passage by saying, "If we compare the Passions to different tons and hogsheads of wine in a vast cellar—thus it is—The Poet by one cup should know the scope of any particular wine without getting intoxicated—this is the highest exertion of the Power" (*Ibid.*) In other words, a poet should be able to savor emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them in a text and likewise allow the reader to sample just enough to relish their flavor "against his palate fine" without a cloying sufeit. Having control over one's art and creating poetry whose "might" is "half-slumbering on its right arm" is "the highest exertion of power."

The exchange between Lear's daughters also conveys a sense of overhearing a conversation in mid stream the way one might in reality: Goneril speaks of Lear's earlier rashness but we never find out what this entailed, and Shakespeare leaves it ambiguous whether or not Lear has gone mad with age or exhibits "ingrafted" faults. "Shakespeare is seldom guilty," Keats writes in his copy of *Troilus and Cressida*, of "a bare aptness," but more often "load[s] every rift with ore," as Keats advises Shelley to do. Phrases of Shakespeare are like "extracted veins of gold from a huge mine," as Keats says in an article on the "Shakespearean" actor, Edmund Kean. Such seemingly effortless by-writing as the end of Act I of *Lear* seems caught from the penetralia of mystery and thus "more marvellous than the whole ripped up contents of Pernambuco or any buca

whatever—on the earth or in the water under the earth” (*Poetical Works* 272). A mere off-handed exchange between characters in Shakespeare conjures up images of a paradisiacal port for Keats where, like his “stout Cortez,” one can have a “wild surmise.” He tells Bailey in 1819, “I look upon fine phrases” of Shakespeare and Milton “like a lover” (*Letters* II: 139).

Shakespeare’s plays are filled with such fine isolated verisimilitudes, as when Hamlet cries (a passage Keats underlined), “O my prophetic soul!” without detailing what he means, or the watchman says, “For this relief much thanks. / ‘Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart” without going into exactly why he is sick at heart: it is enough for Shakespeare to suggest that he is uneasy, thereby intimating realities beyond ready understanding while at the same time creating a plausible colloquy—“A thing beyond us, yet ourselves,” as Stevens writes. Likewise, when Brabantio exclaims to himself, “this is not unlike my dream,” Shakespeare does not subject his dream to any proto-Freudian analysis,<sup>26</sup> but leaves it up to his audience to fill in the details and make judgments about why Brabantio might dream of his daughter bedding down with Othello. Rather, this fearful fantasy is “a sight to dream of, not to tell!” (quoted in Keats’s review of Kean), for there are “mysteries which” Shakespeare “will not have [us] to know” (*Cor.* IV.2.35). Keats calls these seeming truths “hieroglyphics” because they are sacred symbolic writing that hints at mysteries unfathomable by us, giving us the merest tantalizing traces of existence.

---

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, post-Freudian literature is largely anti-capability literature, an idea I will develop in my chapter on Henry James.

Keats often writes about “fine isolated verisimilitudes” or hieroglyphic traces of presence in his own poetry. In his *Fall of Hyperion*, they appear as eerie traces of past existences that were themselves interpretations of the symbolic language of nature:

hieroglyphics old  
 Which sages and keen-eyed astrologers  
 Then living on the earth, with labouring thought  
 Won from the gaze of many centuries —  
 Now lost, save what we find on remnants huge  
 Of stone, or marble swart, their import gone,  
 Their wisdom long since fled.

Such “hieroglyphics of beauty” occur throughout Keats’s verse, such as Bertha’s magic book in “The Eve of St. Mark,” the “leaf-fring’d legend” of “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” or the “day-school hieroglyphics” and “legend-leaved book, mysterious to behold” that will spirit Bertha Pearl away on St. Mark’s Eve in Keats’s late poem, “The Cap and Bells; Or, The Jealousies.” These texts- within-texts suggest the pleasures and perils of reading Keats’s own poems: Bertha is a “poor, cheated soul” in both the “St. Mark” and “Jealousies” fragments, and the “Cold Pastoral!” of the Grecian Urn only temporarily teases the speaker “out of thought” with its apparent beauty and truth. Readers and listeners in Keats’s poetry and of Keats’s poems are hoodwinked, cheated, enchanted, and amazed in the labyrinths of hieroglyphic text, and attempts to unravel the thread of meaning with fact and reason only leads to further entanglements.

Endymion manages to unravel the “tangled thread” Glaucus gives him without effort, perhaps because he does not try; like the children in Frost’s “Directive” or the poet

in “Ode to a Nightingale,” he is lost enough to find himself. Before Endymion comes to release him, Glaucus is doomed to a restless searching after the meanings of things: he “scans all the depth of magic, and expounds / The meanings of all motions, shapes, and sounds” to their very “symbol-essences.” He is an Ancient Mariner Figure who felt “distempered longings” to see “too far into the sea” and became entrapped by a sorceress. In Glaucus’s “emblem’d” cloak, “the myriad sea” appears in all its shapes as though in a nightmare vision of the “vext sea” of *King Lear* and *The Tempest*: it is “O’erwrought with symbols by the deepest groan / Of ambitious magic: every ocean-form / Was woven in with black distinctness.” This protean figure, with his hoary beard and magic robes, seems also an emblem for Gloucester and Prospero as well as “myriad minded Shakespear” himself, whose description of Edgar hoodwinking his father by an imaginary sea continued to resonate with Keats throughout the composition of *Endymion* and inspired the “hieroglyphics of beauty” in his future verse.

To carry away such hieroglyphics from the *adytum*<sup>27</sup> successfully as Shakespeare does, one must be capable of being in a threshold state, of remaining content with half-knowledge and “finely...brief” intimations. Socrates calls this threshold state of knowing and not knowing *philosophia* in the *Symposium*; it is a state conducive to what Keats calls “wild surmise[s]” that excite “a momentous depth of speculation” in the heart and mind of the reader. “What creates the pleasure of not knowing?” Keats wonders in his margins of Milton, and decides it is because it gives one

---

<sup>27</sup> Bailey uses the plural of this word in his 22 February 1818 letter to Taylor in which he discusses Plato and Coleridge: “Plato had ‘the vision and faculty divine.’ He looked into ‘*adyta*,’ the ‘*penetralia*,’ the inmost recesses of Truth; and wanted the eye of Revelation to see *clearly* into the mysteries of Christianity, which he saw shadowed in the twilight” (*KC* II: 9). Keats incorrectly declined “*Penetralium*” as though it could be made singular in the manner of “*adytum*”—or perhaps the mistake was that of Jeffreys, Georgiana Keats’s second husband, who often misspelled words and omitted paragraphs from his transcriptions of Keats’s letters. The original version is no longer extant. The *OED* lists Keats’s Negative Capability letter as the first usage of the term “*Penetralium*;” Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (Chapter I) is the second.

A sense of independence, of power from the fancy creating a world of its own by the sense of probabilities. We have read the Arabian Nights and hear that there are thousands of these sort of Romances lost—we imagine after them—but not their realities. (*Poetical Works* 298)

Life to them would be death to the imagination. Likewise, Keats admires “The Triumph of Death” because of its very unpolished, incomplete quality: “I do not think I ever had a greater treat out of Shakspeare,” he writes; it is “even finer to me than more accomplish’d works—as there was left so much room for Imagination” (*Letters* II: 19). Such “half-knowledge” creates what Keats calls “speculation” that “overcomes every other consideration” but Beauty and Truth, “or rather obliterates all consideration.” According to Keats, Shakespeare’s histories suffer from being “ironed and manacled by a chain of facts, and cannot get free” (“On Kean in *Richard*” 237), a flaw not endemic to the bard’s other plays: “Shakespeare is generally free as is the wind—a perfect thing of elements, winged and sweetly coloured. Poetry must be free! It is of the air, not of the earth; and the higher it soars, the nearer it gets to its home.” (*Ibid.* 238). “The poetry of *Lear*,” however, “is the poetry of human passions and affections,—made almost ethereal [sic] by the power of the Poet” (238) and caught from “the Penetralium of mystery.” Art’s “intensity” arises out of the “depth of speculation excited” by its depiction of Beauty and Truth, and a “question,” he remarks elsewhere, “is the best beacon towards a little speculation.”

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare exhibits his ability to “fret not after knowledge” and irritably reach after fact and reason, but instead to “see” things “feelingly” and describe the soul’s “other-than-cognitive-forms” that are the opposite of what Keats calls

“speculation.”<sup>28</sup> He thereby is able “to paint from memory of self gone storms” (*Poetical Works* 286) that serve as models for Keats’s own verse. Shakespeare does just this in his descriptions of the stormy heath in *King Lear* that become Keats’s “elfin-storm[s] from faery land.” Keats’s comment in his margins of *Paradise Lost* could describe much of his own poetry: “It is a sort of delphic [sic] Abstraction—a beautiful thing made more beautiful by being put in a mist” (*Poetical Works* 295). Keats’s liminal poems are studies of mind-mists and Penetralia of Mystery, as when he muses in Scotland, “Mist is spread / Before the earth beneath me—even such, / Even so vague is Man’s sight of himself” (*Major Works* 215). Indeed, despite Keats’s plan to “learn Greek, and very likely Italian,” he goes on to say to Reynolds, “if you understood Greek, and would read me passages, now and then, explaining their meaning to me, ‘t would be, from its mistiness, perhaps a greater luxury than reading the thing one’s self” (I.274). For a negatively capable poet such as Keats, such half-knowledge and suspension inspires imaginative speculation rather than empirical consideration (“Byron describes what he sees,” he wrote to his brother and sister-in-law; “I describe what I imagine—mine is the hardest task”).

Like Claude’s “Enchanted Castle” to which he alludes in his Epistle to J. H. Reynolds” or the fragments of the Elgin marbles in the British Museum, half-understood phrases of Greek appeal to Keats because they leave him in a threshold of *philosophia* in the Platonic, not Humean, sense. He will strive to emulate such half-knowledge in such poems as his “Ode on a Grecian Urn” which speculates on—but ultimately never definitively explains—the meaning of the storied urn’s “leaf-fring’d legends.”

---

<sup>28</sup> Although he later came to think that “An extensive knowledge...helps, by widening speculation, to ease the burden of the mystery.” Severn reported Keats’s dying belief that the “vast stretch of the imagination” had hastened his death.

## V

## “A Momentous Depth of Speculation”

To excite “a momentous depth of speculation” in the minds of his readers, Shakespeare raises questions in plays such as *King Lear* but does not answer them.

Cavell summarizes these questions:

How are we to understand Lear’s motivation in his opening scene? How Cordelia’s? Is Gloucester’s blinding dramatically justified? What is the relation between the Lear plot and the Gloucester subplot? What happens to the Fool? Why does Edgar delay before revealing himself to his father? Why does Gloucester set out for Dover? Why does France not return with Cordelia? Why must Cordelia die? (*Disowning Knowledge* 43).

To these one might add: What drives Edmund’s malignancy? Why does he try to save Lear and Cordelia? Why does the Fool never appear on stage at the same time as Cordelia? What happened to Queen Lear? Are Gloucester’s wife and mistress dead? Such “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts” in *Lear* stimulate imagination and speculation in the minds of the reader and seem related to his negative capability, a capacity for making art *ex nihilo*: out of nothing and about nothingness. *King Lear* in particular revolves around an essential absence and strives to comprehend the incomprehensible, “the feel of not to feel it.” It is a play of unheard melodies and spirit ditties of no tone.

Keats also leaves gnomic gaps in his poetry in a way reminiscent of Shakespeare’s telling silences. The knight-at-arms’s reply to the querent raises more questions than it answers, and one ultimately does not know whether La Belle Dame’s

“fine isolated verisimilitudes caught from the Penetralium of Mystery” have merely the appearance of truth or are truthful appearances. The term “verisimilitude” occurs only once in all of Keats’s writings, suggesting that it had a particular, “fine” meaning for him. It is useful for Keats’s conception of Shakespearean hieroglyphics because of its possible range of meanings: an appearance of truth, an apparent truth, a likeness to truth, a truthful quality, or the mere appearance or show of truth. Keats’s verse explores all of these possibilities, often simultaneously. Stillinger has pointed out the seeming truths of “The Eve of St. Agnes” in which Madeline looks “like a saint” but may be more complaisant in her ravishment than she seems, just as Porphyro may not be the romantic hero he appears to be. Keats seems to want to suggest multiple readings of the poem without narrowing down various possibilities by insisting on one particular reading over others.

A negatively capable poet stimulates “a depth of speculation” in the reader, and “A question is the best beacon towards a little speculation.” For this reason, the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” like *King Lear*, poses a series of questions that it gnomically refuses to answer:

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape  
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?  
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loath?  
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?  
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

And later:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, oh mysterious priest,  
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
 And all her silken flanks with garlands dressed?  
 What little town by river or seashore,  
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

With these unanswered questions in his texts, Keats leaves the reader in “half knowledge” such as he describes in his Negative Capability letter. Having control over one’s art and composing poetry whose “might” is “half-slumbering on its right arm” is “the highest exertion of power” for Keats, and so he intentionally leaves questions in his poems to excite the imagination of his readers without giving too much away. In *The Questioning Presence*, Susan J. Wolfson summarizes how Keats maintains the “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts” of his odes “by the interrogative processes of the poetry itself:”

*Ode to Psyche* concludes in the indefinite foreshadowings of its future tenses; *Ode to a Nightingale* ends in uncertain definition and restless questioning; *Ode on a Grecian Urn* culminates in an answer that can only provoke further questions; the deepest plot of *Ode on Indolence* is the way the presence of the poem itself contradicts its avowed occasion; and *Ode on Melancholy* prescribes an answer that succeeds at the answerer’s expense. (332)

Shakespeare was Keats’s model for “exciting” a “momentous depth of speculation” in his reader through the creation of mysteries and unanswerable questions. Rather than giving his audience all the motivations for his characters’ actions,

Shakespeare often removes these and thereby creates plays filled with gnomic half knowledge. Similarly, when Keats attempted to write a drama with Brown, he refused to hear the whole of the plot and instead used fragments of information as “starting posts” for the imagination. In this he seems to have been trying to emulate Shakespeare’s way of working with the plots of other authors. For example, several of the possible sources for *Lear* provide motivations for Lear’s abdication of the throne that Shakespeare omits. Advanced age and incipient demise compel Lear to divide up his kingdom in *The Faery Queene* and *King Leir* versions of the tale: “when feeble age / Nigh to his utmost date he saw proceed / He cald his daughters,” the former explains (*Variorum* 391); the latter says he abdicates because “pale grym death doth wayt upon his steps” and because he is so overcome with grief for his “deceast and dearest Queen” that “he would fayne resigne” (*Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* 337). He also states he “would fain resign these earthly cares” in order to “thinke upon the welfare of my soule” (*Variorum* 393). By making Goneril and Regan already married to Albany and Cornwall at the beginning of his play, Shakespeare removes the urgency to divide up his land that exists in *A Mirour for Magistrates* in which the king desires “to wed” all three of his daughters “vnto Princely peeres, / And vnto them and theirs diuide and part the land” (*Variorum* 389) now that they have come of age. And unlike Holinshed, who explains Lear’s behavior in *The Second Booke of the Historie of England* by saying he has grown “vnwiely through age” and is therefore unfit to rule (*Variorum* 384), Shakespeare leaves this point ambiguous: “’Tis the infirmity of his age,” Regan says, but then admits that “yet he hath ever but slenderly known himselfe.” Goneril concedes: “The best and soundeth of his time hath bin but rash.” Thus, Shakespeare purposely obscures the

possible reasons for Lear's resignation, instead hinting at several causes but adhering wholly to none. Shakespeare takes out Lear's motivation and thereby creates, if not a "motiveless malignity," then a motiveless perversity.

Likewise, Shakespeare obfuscates the impulse behind the test to which Lear subjects his daughters. Geoffrey Bullough points out that in the precursors to *King Lear*, 'The father makes the test for varying reasons: to find an easy way' of abdicating "his kingdom; to get ready for death; to make sure that the daughter who loves him best will get all of the land; because the wicked daughters make him suspect that the good one does not love him (330). In Shakespeare's *Lear*, in contrast, it remains unstated and seemingly perverse. The first exchange of the play establishes that "in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most; for qualities are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety" (3-5), and Lear himself tells his daughters that "we have divided / In three our kingdom." Yet Lear then declares his "darker purpose:" he will" extend" his "largest bounty ... / Where nature doth with merit challenge" (8). We know from the play's initial exchange that Cordelia cannot "draw / A third more opulent than [her] sisters," for they are equal shares. Lear's perverse test seems like a gnomic riddle or a maxim of Heraclitus in which equality is inequality and nothing counts more than something. Johnson (at whose comments on Shakespeare Keats rails in his Johnson and Steevens edition) opines that this contradiction in Shakespeare's text is an error and then attempts to rationalize it:

There is something of obscurity or inaccuracy in [the] preparatory scene. The king has already divided his kingdom, and yet when he enters he examines his daughters, to discover in what proportion he should divide it. Perhaps Kent and

Gloster only were privy to his design, which he still kept in his own hands, to be changed or performed as subsequent reasons should determine him. (*Lear* 4, n. on line 4)

Yet the apparent contradiction in Lear's actions at the beginning of the play is in keeping with his creation of a "Penetralium of mystery." One might say that "his trade's mystery and mystery's his trade." Again, in none of Shakespeare's apparent sources is there such a murkiness of motive for Lear's test. He has "equally divided" his "realme" in *The Faery Queene* before testing his daughters' love (*Variorum* 391); in Holinshed, "he thought to vnderstand the affections of his daughters towards him, and preferre hir whome he best loued, to the succession ouer the kingdome" (*Ibid.* 384); *A Mirour for Magistrates* says simply, "vnto them and theirs" he will "diuide the land" (*Variorum* 389). Rather like Hamlet's cruel treatment of Ophelia that Shakespeare never effectively explains in the text, Lear's exile of Cordelia has troubled many critics and remains an intentionally insoluble problem, created to excite speculation in the mind and intensities in the heart.

A glance at his other plays reveals that Shakespeare also removed motivations from the sources of his other tragedies. By excising Iago's thwarted seduction of Desdemona from the *Gli Hecarommithi* source, for example, he creates Iago's fascinating and troubling "motiveless malignity." Similarly, Shakespeare transforms a oft-heard tale of a man's Will-to-Power by locating Macbeth's murderous ambitions within the minds of the witches; he also dislocates Hamlet's will to revenge by removing Claudius's initial murder attempt of his nephew from the Danish *Ahmlet* story. This creates the subjunctive tone of the play and Hamlet's uncanny dilemma: unlike Fortinbras or Laertes, Hamlet

needs ocular proof of his enemy's guilt, and yet is called upon to act upon the urging of a spirit which might be what Keats calls a mere "mood of one's mind." Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, Prospero, Lear, and Gloucester all feel a restless search for reasons and facts to be "proved upon the pulses" and in that respect are in a position analogous to the audience who desires explanations and certainty not found in the text. We thrust *in medias res* into an ongoing narrative in *King Lear* whose inception remains obscure, entering the penetralium of mystery of Shakespeare's imaginative universe. Like our own, it does not contain ready explanations for events or an explanatory prologue at the beginning. Instead, we must grope our way along with Gloucester through what Keats called "dark passages" in which "see not the balance of good and evil," trying to make sense of events as they unfold and not wholly sure what is up ahead in the mist.

The first scene of *King Lear* also sets up a perverse paradox for the play's second plotline: Gloucester says that Edgar "is no dearer in [his] account" than Edmund and yet calls the latter "whoreson" and states that he has been away nine years for an unnamed reason "and away he shall again." By such fine isolated verisimilitudes in the first scene, Shakespeare hints at possible motives for Edmund's later villainy but does not declare them outright, instead leaving it up to the audience to supply possible reasons for what seems irrational. In the *Historia Anglicana*, for example, Shakespeare's sources also provide answers for another one of Cavell's questions to Shakespeare's *King Lear*: "Why must Cordelia die?" She hangs "her selfe" in the *Fairie Queene*, *The Second Booke of the Historie of England*, and *The Historia Anglicana*, but not in Shakespeare's text, thus leaving the audience in "Uncertainties, mysteries, doubts."

The effect of Shakespeare's negating artistry is to map what Auchincloss describes as human contingency, the sense of overhearing "fine things said unintentionally." We are come into these "dark passages" that Keats admires in his sonnet "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Again:"

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.

Keats wanders in Shakespeare's labyrinth of meaning, a-mazed and bewildered as though in a wilderness of mind that he later articulates in his "Ode to Psyche." He wills himself to burn through the "disagreeables" of the text that are redeemed by its "intensity."

Significantly, Keats uses two oxymorons in his sonnet on *King Lear* and thereby intimates that the "excellence of" Shakespeare's "Art" is a paradoxical one, a bitter-sweet Negative Capability that limns "the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay." Like Montaigne, Shakespeare portrays "passing," and his *Lear* informs Keats's poetics of passage from Spenserian bowers to an "Autumn" in which "ripeness is all." Shakespeare exemplifies a poetry Keats describes as a powerful state of knowing and not knowing, or "might half-slumbering on its arm" that—in Tennyson's words—"half reveals and half conceals the soul within." Like the sea of Keats's Isle of Wight sonnet, Shakespeare's text "keeps eternal whisperings around."

For Keats, Shakespeare was the exemplar of the threshold poet. While Keats sat writing on the edge of the sea on the Isle of Wight, he felt palpably haunted by Edgar's imaginary cliffs at the edge of England and at the limits of the imagination. Keats

learned from this surrogate poet figure how to scale the sides of the *mysterium* and gather “all the gardener Fancy e’er could feign” halfway down the cliff of poesy. The herb Edgar’s imagined harvester garners is samphire, St. Peter’s Herb, the briny plant that grows on rocks half in and half out of the sea, a plant of gateways and thresholds. Keats, too, learned to scale the heights at the edge of chaos and the unknowable—a “dreadful trade” indeed. This scene in *King Lear* seemed to him to be a staging of Shakespeare’s poetics in general, employing half knowledge to entice the mind into speculation without giving too much away or holding too much back. It was a *mise en scène* of his Negative Capability, depicting in “verisimiliture”<sup>29</sup> poetry of everything and nothing. The unanswered questions Shakespeare wrote into his text, the telling silences and motiveless malignities and intentional gaps and suggestive hieroglyphics, provided Keats with a liminal model for his own verse.

*King Lear* also inspired, tormented, and consoled him by turns. He read himself so much into the text that he saw it commenting on his brother’s death, his own position amid “the mighty dead,” and even his perpetual lack of funds: “if my name had been Edmund,” he told his brother and sister-in-law ironically, “I should have been more fortunate” (*Letters* II: 242). The play influenced his first verses and his last words and became the measure for evaluating other works—from West’s paintings to Coleridge’s poetry. Its “hieroglyphics of beauty” became for Keats an allegory for reading life and living texts. Though Keats’s assessment of Shakespeare transformed over time, his veneration of *King Lear* remained constant and its poetic intensity, beauty, and truth

---

<sup>29</sup> As noted in the introduction, Jeffrey has this in place of “verisimilitude” in his version of the Negative Capability letter. While Jeffrey’s transcriptions were sloppy and highly inaccurate—not to mention truncated—“verisimiliture” is not implausible as Keats’s portmanteaux coinage for something like “an appearance of truth in miniature.”

resonated throughout his verse like the echoes of its virtual sea until he lay dying by the murmur of the Barcaccia fountain in Rome. To Keats, Edgar's visionary sea was the sound of a mind lingering at the edge of thought and at the Penetralium of mystery—the sound of Negative Capability.

## Negative Capability and Positive Negation

“A fear—a future state;—’tis positive Negation!”

—Coleridge, “Limbo”

### I

#### *Horror Vacui*

Around the time Keats was composing his letter on Negative Capability, Coleridge wrote a poem describing an inverse state he called “positive Negation.”<sup>30</sup> In “Limbo,” Coleridge imagined a nightmare realm bounded by “the mere horror of blank Naught-at-all,” the horror of complete negation. He used “mere” in this description in the Elizabethan sense of “essential,”<sup>31</sup> perhaps expressing his essential dread of the formless. For a poet whose grand failure in life seemed to be his inability to find the right organizational paradigm for his illimitable metaphysical epics and *Opus Maximum*, this fear of shapelessness was a very real one:

‘Tis a strange place, this Limbo!—not a Place,

Yet name it so;—where Time and weary Space

Fettered from flight, with night-mare sense of fleeing,

Strive for their crepuscular half-being;— (*Complete Poems of Coleridge* 357)

Coleridge often had nightmares of formless specters, such as his “most frightful Dream of a Woman” named Ebon Thalud “whose features were blended with darkness catching hold of [his] right eye & attempting to pull it out” (*Notebooks* I: 848:4.123), or of the

<sup>30</sup> EHC’s conjecture. For problems of dating the poem from the *Notebook*, see *Notes to The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 3, 4073–4075.

<sup>31</sup> As in *Hamlet*’s “possess it merely” or in Yeats’s “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

“figure of a woman of a gigantic Height, dim & indefinite & smokelike” (*Notebooks I*: 1249:21.213). Both Keats and Coleridge understood what Burke had argued in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*: “To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary” (99). But whereas Keats reveled in the twilight half-knowledge of the mysterium, Coleridge was both fascinated and tormented by a sense of “crepuscular half-being,” and had, perhaps, a more intimate understanding of the infinitely horrible and horribly infinite.

Coleridge’s horror of nothingness goes beyond even Death itself, to “positive Negation” whose “lank Half-nothings” are “the sole true *Something* in this Limbo Den / It frightens Ghosts as Ghosts here frighten men” (*Poems* 357).<sup>32</sup> In Coleridge’s conception, Death is merely the shadow cast by this “Sole Positive of Night,” the “Ne Plus Ultra” from whose bourne no soul ever returns. Unlike “Negative Capability,” with its emphasis on the creative power of mystery and half-knowing, “Positive Negation” is a state of utter annihilation, a Penetralium of Nothingness in which souls become naught. They are positively negated, not negatively positive, as in Keats’s conception. Angus Fletcher characterizes Coleridge as having “liminal anxiety—existential vertigo” because he recognizes “that the betweenness of time-as moment, pure thresholdness, barren liminality, at least in what Einstein would call a ‘space-like’ way, must be a nothingness” (*Colors of the Mind* 172). He was terrified of the idea of “Lank Space, and scytheless Time with branny hands / Barren and soundless as the measuring sands” (*Poems* 357) like a nightmare version of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Time and space and being and knowledge will not hold in the penetralia of mystery, but dissolve into utter negation.

---

<sup>32</sup> Beer, Coburn, Keach, Bloom, and Fletcher are among those who read “On John Donne’s First Poem,” “Limbo,” “Moles,” and “Ne Plus Ultra” as interrelated texts, and perhaps fragments of one text.

If Coleridge tended to let the hieroglyphics of beauty and truth he found there slip through his fingers, perhaps it was because he saw in them “Condensed blackness and abysmal storm / Compacted”—the horror of positive negation.

The difference between Negative Capability and Positive Negation becomes clearer when one compares the varying reactions of Keats and Coleridge to *King Lear* as well as the degree to which they are at home in liminal speculation in their own poetry and prose. Like Keats, Coleridge recognizes the fine suggestiveness of Shakespeare’s isolated verisimilitudes and the gnomic gaps in his texts, but whereas Keats is content to remain in the port of Pernambuco gazing out at the wideness of the sea, Coleridge charts undiscovered countries. The one resides comfortably in speculative thresholds, rising with the scattered seeds of Shakespeare’s bye-writing to imaginative storms in “faery lands forlorn;” the other would “take upon” himself “the mystery of things / As if [he] were God’s [spy].” Rather in the manner of Milton filling in the gnomic gaps of Genesis, or of his gloss explaining the incongruities of his own *Ancient Mariner*, Coleridge seeks definite causes for what Shakespeare leaves open and a Rosetta stone for the “Shakespearean hieroglyphics” he encounters in his reading. In the margins of his copy of *King Lear*, Coleridge writes that although “it was not without forethought, or is it without due significance, that the division of Lear’s kingdom is in the first six lines of the play stated as a thing previously determined in all its particulars” (*Coleridge’s Literary Criticism* 240), he nonetheless saw the initial scene as not crucial to the play as a whole:

Let the first scene of *Lear* have been lost, and let it be only understood that a fond father had been duped by hypocritical professions of love and duty on the part of two daughters to disinherit a third, previously, and deservedly, more dear to him,

and all the rest of the tragedy would retain its interest undiminished, and be perfectly intelligible. (*Ibid.* 241)

We do have this work: It is the superseded *The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir*, now read only for its possible inspiration on Shakespeare's tragedy. In *Motiveless Malignity*, Louis Auchincloss pointed out how a lack of motivations for characters throughout the plays provides a sense of human contingency essential to Shakespeare's genius. Coleridge himself famously noted this quality in *Othello* and also found it in *Lear*; yet instead of stressing how the play gained differed favorably from its sources in its lack of motivation, he referred to these sources to show that however improbable and strange Lear's actions were, it was nonetheless "an old story rooted in the popular faith" (241). Without its initial scene, *King Lear* might "retain interest," but it would lose some of its capacious nothingness, its quality of strangeness and undecidability that sets Shakespeare apart from his contemporaries who recounted the same "old story." To provide Lear and Edmund with clear motives for their actions would be to remove their essentially Shakespearean quality; his negative capability lies in what he leaves out as well as what he includes. By leaving gnomic gaps in his plays, Shakespeare invites speculation and wild surmises. Coleridge, however, would "pluck the heart out of" Shakespeare's "Penetralium of mystery." Rather than mine the ore of "Shakespearean Hieroglyphics" of beauty and truth, Coleridge wanted to become hierophant to their mysteries.

Hazlitt accused Coleridge of always "prefer[ring] the *unknown* to the *known*" (cited in "Keats Vs. Coleridge on Negative Capability" 135).<sup>33</sup> This was a popular view

---

<sup>33</sup> Coleridge wryly comments, "Your Poem must eternal be, / Dear Sir!—It cannot fail: / For tis incomprehensible / And without head or tail."

of Coleridge at the time, and one finds resonances of it in contemporary criticism that irritably reaches for facts and reasons for the disjunctions and silences in his work. But had Coleridge always remained in the realm of the unknown, he would have been in a constant state of negative capability. John Wilson's assessment of Coleridge is, oddly, closer to Keats's critique of the poet in his Negative Capability letter. Wilson described Coleridge as one "who presumptuously came forward to officiate as High-Priest at mysteries beyond his ken—and who carried himself as if he had been familiarly admitted into the *Penetralia* of Nature, when in truth he kept perpetually stumbling at the very Threshold" (cited in *Coleridge the Visionary* 305-6).<sup>34</sup> Keats's friend Bailey attempted to make a similar point a couple of months later in a letter to Taylor (in which he also mentions a letter he had just received from Coleridge):

I am asked to prove what I can but see, not reach. As the stars of Heaven I could die upon it, but I can see many most glorious truths: but can no more demonstrate (a logical pick-ax, that word) how, than I can trace "the path of an eagle through the air" and the other mysteries which Solomon proposes....Plato had 'the vision and faculty divine.' He looked into 'adyta,' the 'penetralia,'<sup>35</sup> the inmost recesses of Truth; and wanted the eye of Revelation to see clearly into the mysteries of Christianity, which he saw shadowed in the twilight. (*Keats Circle* I: 9)

One suspects Bailey was a bit too complacent of his vision and saw the *mysterium* too clearly to have seen it truly. Coleridge did, in Keats's view, "ascend to the very bourne

---

<sup>34</sup> Coleridge records in his *Notebooks* his son's amusingly similar pronouncement: "When I'm a man, I'll get a Ladder, and get up to the sky, and pick out the stars, and give them to Anny Sealy—I'll pick 'ern out with a knife" (*Notebooks* I: 617,4.33)

<sup>35</sup> Apparently, Bailey or Wilson inspired Keats's idea of the "Penetralium of Mystery" that Colvin calls "an admirable phrase!—if only *penetralium* were Latin" (*Keats Circle* II: 211). Keats makes *penetralia* singular in the manner of "*mysterium*."

of Heaven,” but did not remain content “to put down his half-seeing” and leave what he saw “shadowed in twilight.” Yet he would have lauded the seeking itself and did not object to the idea of gazing into the “*adyta*, the *penetralia*, the inmost recesses of Truth”; he believed that “every many whose soul is not a clod / Hath visions, and would speak, if he had loved / And been well nurtured in his mother tongue” and is able to remain content with half knowledge. He did feel that one should leave the seeming truths one found there, however, “in a Luxury of twilight.”

By the time he wrote his Negative Capability letter, Keats had read a number of Coleridge’s poems and essays. A month earlier, he had asked for a copy of the newly published *Sibylline Leaves* and this volume was in the forefront of his mind as he critiqued Coleridge’s discomfort with “half-knowledge.” He was also presumably familiar with the recently published *Biographia Literaria* that Bailey had been reading. Chapter Twelve contains phrasing similar to Bailey’s letter to Taylor and Keats’s idea of Negative Capability: after discussing Plato’s “half-meanings” and quoting Wordsworth’s “vision and faculty divine,” Coleridge cites the *Ennead* on “highest and intuitive knowledge:”

It is not lawful to enquire from whence it sprang, as if it were a thing subject to place and motion, for it neither approaches hither, nor again departs from hence to some other place; but it either appears to us or it does not appear. So that we ought not to pursue it with a view to detecting its secret source, but to watch in quiet till it suddenly shines upon us; preparing ourselves for the blessed spectacle as the eye waits patiently for the rising sun. (140)

Keats also teased Bailey about his voracious reading of “Coleridge’s Lays” in October 1817 and apparently read some of both *A Lay Sermon* as well as *The Statesman’s Manual* that arguably manifest “an irritable reaching after fact & reason”—and may also have seen Coleridge’s letter to Bailey. Coleridge was much discussed in the Keats circle at this time. Yet as Beth Lau points out, “No doubt Keats had seen these volumes at Bailey’s in September 1817, but there is little evidence that he read in them extensively” (71-72), whereas there is a great deal of echoing of Coleridge’s poems from Keats’s work at the time, including a quotation from “Christabel” in his review of Kean that December. He read at least one edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (Ibid., 69), the 1816 *Christabel; Kubla Khan, A Vision; The Pains of Sleep*, and owned a copy of the 1797 edition of *Coleridge Lamb Lloyd*.

Critics have cited several of Coleridge’s lyrics and prose works as possible sources for Keats’s Negative Capability letter. Thayer argues that Coleridge’s “Love” and its obstrusive framing story was the impetus behind Keats’s criticisms and the inspiration for “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (271-272). John Barnard sees Coleridge’s additions to “The Eolian Harp” in *Sibylline Leaves* as occasioning Keats’s Negative Capability Letter, although surely Keats would have appreciated the idea of “Music slumbering on her instrument” (87) that sounds like an echo of his own negatively capable idea of “Might half-slumbering on its right arm.” Barbara Hardy feels that Coleridge anticipated Keats’s critique of him in the 1802 “Dejection” when he lamented his now habitual impulse to engage in “abstruse research” (299). Robert M. Ryan sees *The Statesman’s Manual* as the source for the concept (81), while Stillinger, Gittings,

Watson, and Beer see *Biographia Literaria* and its critiques in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* as the origin of Keats's negative assessment of Coleridge.

There is certainly ample reason for this view. In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge professed his intention "to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (*Biographia Literaria* 179), and hoped that, through poetry "*laxis effertur habenis*," carried on with slackening reins, "The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the journey itself" (185). Later on in chapter twenty-two, Coleridge discusses "That illusion, contradistinguished from delusion, that negative faith, which simply permits the images presented to work by their own force, without either denial or affirmation of their real existence by the judgement" that is "rendered impossible by the immediate neighborhood to words and facts of known and absolute truth" (271). In this chapter, Coleridge also uses the words "verisimilitude," "intensity," "dove-tail," and "disquisition" (a favorite Coleridge term), all of which appear in Keats's letter to his brothers; Coleridge's phrase "Men of Genius" also appears in Keats's letter to Bailey in November 1817.

Keats's criticisms of Coleridge in his December 1817 letter to his brothers would seem to apply to the bulk of Coleridge's "consequitive" prose work and "Conversation Poems," with their "abstruser musings";<sup>36</sup> they do not immediately seem to apply to his "magic poems," those occult aberrations to the main of his work. Robert E. Morsberger

---

<sup>36</sup> Though Morris Dickstein points out that these poems often relegate "most of the descriptive and circumstantial detail" to the frame and "move inward toward a visionary center" (370).

maintains that in his magic poems at least, “Coleridge certainly did have the Negative Capability that is satisfied with mystery and half-knowledge” (“Keats Vs. Coleridge on Negative Capability” 136). If Keats later qualified his opinion of Coleridge, however, he left no record of it. What we do have, however, is his account of meeting Coleridge for the first and only time on April 11, 1819. This incident took place, as Stillinger points out, when “Keats, then twenty-three years old, was a third of the way through his ‘living year’ ...and Coleridge, at forty-six, was decidedly over the hill as poet, critic, and philosopher but was becoming increasingly famous as a talker” (“Keats and Coleridge” 8). The tone of Keats’s account is somewhat bemused, although he does recall many details from the stream of Coleridge’s voluminous conversation and was obviously paying close attention:

Last Sunday I took a walk towards Highgate and, in the lane that winds by the side of Lord Mansfield's park, I met Mr Green, our demonstrator at Guy's, in conversation with Coleridge. I joined them, after enquiring by a look whether it would be agreeable. I walked with him at his alderman-after-dinner pace for near two miles, I suppose. In those two miles he broached a thousand things; let me see if I can give you a list. Nightingales, poetry -- on poetical sensation -- metaphysics -- different genera and species of dreams -- nightmare -- a dream accompanied by a sense of touch -- single and double touch -- a dream related -- first and second consciousness -- the difference explained between will and volition -- so many metaphysicians from a want of smoking -- the second consciousness -- monsters -- the kraken -- mermaids -- Southey believes in them -- Southey's belief too much diluted -- a ghost story -- Good morning -- I heard his

voice as he came towards me -- I heard it as he moved away -- I had heard it all the interval (if it may be called so). He was civil enough to ask me to call on him at Highgate goodnight! (*Letters II: 88-89*)

Predictably, Coleridge's account of the meeting (given in two places) was very different, though both accounts featured the elder poet in a starring role. When Coleridge reported the meeting to Frere in 1830 and again in 1832, he was recalling an incident from over a decade earlier and was obviously not able to provide the wealth of details found in Keats's letter.

A loose, not well-dressed youth, met Mr Green and me in Mansfield Lane. Green knew him and spoke. It was Keats. He was introduced to me, and stayed a minute or so. After he had gone a little, he came back and said, 'Let me carry away the memory, Coleridge, of having pressed your hand.' There is death in his hand, said I to Green when he was gone. Yet this was before the consumption showed itself. (*Specimens of Table Talk 195*)

Stillinger compares the two accounts and holds that one of them "is clearly more consistent with Negative Capability than the other" ("Keats and Coleridge" 10). Lau, on the other hand, argues that the "encounter may have helped to dispel Keats's previous impression of Coleridge" and points out that "The man who drifted in his conversation from nightingales to poetry to dreams to mermaids surely did not strike Keats as a 'consequitive reason[er]'" (85). It depends on how one reads Negative Capability—as either an egotistical sublime (Stillinger's view) or a poetic stance opposed to striving for facts and reasons (Lau's view here).

In his Negative Capability letter at any rate, Keats does not accuse Coleridge of abiding in the mundane world of muddy reality, reveling in an egotistical sublime, or getting lost in the maze of prose sentences, but for failing to make the most of his quests to the Penetralium of mystery. In other words, the very poems that seem to have a magical quality about them are the ones that enticed and disappointed Keats by turns. In his moral essays, Coleridge apparently accepted that “*Omnia exeunt in mysterium...i.e., There is nothing, the absolute ground of which is not a Mystery*” (*Aids to Reflection*, 121); in his amoral poems of “pure imagination,” however, he had difficulty in refraining in the *mysterium* for long and applied “moral sentiment” or reason to the seeming truths he found there. Perhaps it is a measure of his discomfort with the idea of the *Ne Plus Ultra* of the imagination that he only wrote a few occult poems exploring this shadow realm, though his *Collected Works* number sixteen volumes in the Bollingen edition.

Keats’s views on Coleridge’s magic poems were at variance with Hazlitt’s, but perhaps in keeping with those of the Hunt set at this time. Beth Lau, for example, remarks on the similarity between Keats’s 1817 views on Coleridge and Hunt’s later 1821 “Sketches of the Living Poets.” Coleridge, Hunt complained, introduces *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

With a critico-philosophical extract from Burnet’s *Archaeologica*.... In the same spirit he interrupts his “Christabel” with an explanation of the wish sometimes felt to give pain to the innocent; and instead of being content to have written finely under the influence of laudanum, recommends “Kubla Khan” to his readers, not as a poem, but as a “psychological curiosity” (cited in Lau 81).

Like Keats, Hunt was both stimulated and irked by Coleridge's magic poems and his irritable tinkering with them (which bespeaks more of his poetic insecurity than an egotistical confidence)—perhaps inspired by his diffidence in the face of Wordsworth's somewhat self-serving criticisms. In these poems, Coleridge entered the adytum, recorded the “hieroglyphics of beauty” he caught there, but ultimately provided a *Guide for the Perplexed* for his sibylline leaves, including prefaces, footnotes, epigrams, glosses, summations, and apologies to ground his seeming truths in the realm of fact and reason and make sense of their terrible and wonderful obscurity. As with the “Conversation” poems, a prose frame surrounds a visionary center (Dickstein 370). It is as though he felt mightily uncertain about the worth of his own poetry for poetry's sake—or perhaps feared that allowing them a shadowy half-life would render Coleridge's own existence into “crepuscular half-being:” “Ghost of a mountain,” he recorded in his *Notebooks*, “the forms seizing my Body as I passed and became realities—I, a Ghost, till I had reconquered my Substance” (523:5.31).

In his magic poems, Coleridge may not exhibit Negative Capability, but he does begin to explore the Ne Plus Ultra of positive negation. In his December 1817 letter to his brothers, Keats responded to the moments of sublime indeterminacy and enchantment in Coleridge's magic poems but yearned, like Goethe's Faust, to let them linger. He singled out Coleridge for criticism not because Coleridge was utterly incapable of approaching the adytum, but because he “let go” of the “fine isolated verisimilitudes” he found there. Indeed, Keats took much from Coleridge's poems, and critics have heard many Coleridgean echoes in his work—especially *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and “Kubla Khan” in *Endymion* and “Christabel” in “The Eve of St. Agnes.” Other

possibilities not yet elucidated, but beyond the scope of this present study, include “Fears in Solitude” and the “Ode to a Nightingale;”<sup>37</sup> “France: An Ode” or “Eolian Harp” and “On the Sea;”<sup>38</sup> “France: An Ode” and “Ode to Psyche;”<sup>39</sup> “Lewti” or “The Pains of Sleep” and “La Belle Dame Sans Merci;”<sup>40</sup> “Eolian Harp” or *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and “The Eve of St. Mark;” and so forth, indicating Keats’s admiration for Coleridge as a sensuous poet and seeker, however qualified this admiration might have been by his comments in his Negative Capability letter.

If Coleridge was not comfortable with his half-seeing at the edge of the *adytum*, he nonetheless arrived “at the very bourne of heaven.” Coleridge divined all too well the horror of nothing coming from nothing in Shakespeare and was troubled by the capable negation Keats found stimulating; and yet Coleridge comprehended the “myriad-minded” Shakespeare more than any of Keats’s contemporaries with the possible exception of Hazlitt, and his commentaries on Shakespeare’s protean qualities apparently inspired Keats’s “camelion poet” letter a year later. “The relationship of the contemporary comments” of Keats and Coleridge, Barbara Hardy writes, “shows these two poets answering each other’s unknown thoughts almost as if they had been writing to and for each other” (301). Coleridge was both a model and a warning for Keats, stimulating him to define his own sense of poetics and tantalizing him with poems that began to explore

---

<sup>37</sup> For example, “Now farewell, / Farewell, awhile, of soft and silent spot! / On the green sheep-track, up the healthy hill, / Homeward I wind my way” and “Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades / Past the near meadows, over the still stream, / Up the hill-side...”

<sup>38</sup> “The stilly murmur of the distant sea” and the murmuring of the sonnet.

<sup>39</sup> “And then I felt thee on that sea-cliff’s verge, / Whose pines, scarce travell’d by the breeze above, / Had made one murmur with the distant surge!” and “Psyche”’s “Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind.”

<sup>40</sup> Perhaps Keats inverts the wish in “Lewti,” “Oh! that she saw me in a dream / And dreamt that I had died for care; / All pale and wasted I would seem” (*Poems* 238) into the “wasted” knight’s dream of “pale kings and Princes too” who have presumably “died for care.” There is also some resemblance between the tortured dream confusion of “Pains of Sleep” and the indeterminacy of events in “La Belle Dame”—“Up-starting from the fiendish crowd” and “Deeds to be hid which were not hid / Which all confused I could not know, / Whether I suffered, or I did” (*Poems* 329).

Positive Negation and the limbo of the imagination. Perhaps the reason Keats makes Coleridge the exemplar of a poet who lacks Negative Capability is because Coleridge comes so close.

## II

### *Rime's Reason*

Contemporary reviewers of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* varied in their responses to the poem, but all seemed bewildered by it. “Many of the stanzas are laboriously beautiful,” Robert Southey wrote in the *Critical Review*, “but in connection they are absurd or unintelligible” and readers must strain “their ingenuity in attempting to unriddle it” (197-204). Likewise, an anonymous writer from the *New London Review* saw the ballad as “a dark enigma” (356); Charles Burney described it as “a rhapsody of unintelligible wildness and coherence” (359); and *The British Critic* complained of its “confusion of images, which loses all effect from not being quite intelligible” (362)—though *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is certainly more intelligible than many traditional ballads or their imitations. This view of the poem as a “dark enigma” needing to be unriddled has continued into our own era. Surveying reactions to Coleridge’s ballad from the Regency to the postmodern era, Francis Ferguson concludes, “The criticism of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ reflects a craving for causes” (113). From Wordsworth’s complaint that events in the poem have “no necessary connection” and “do not produce each other” to the current century, readers have been troubled by the perceived lack of moral coherence to the poem, finding the death of the sailors

inordinately harsh and the Mariner's penance out of proportion to his "inhospitable" crime.

Coleridge's own feeling about the poem, however, was precisely the opposite. In this, he was perhaps close to Keats's December 1817 critique of him. Coleridge famously commented on his ballad in *Table Talk*,

Mrs. Barbauld once told me that she admired the Ancient Mariner very much, but that there were two faults in it,—it was improbable, and had no moral. As for the probability, I owned that that might admit some question; but as to the want of a moral, I told her that in my own judgment it had too much; and that the only, or chief fault, if I might say so, was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of pure imagination. It ought to have had no more moral than the *Arabian Nights'* tale of the merchant's sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well and throwing the shells aside, and lo! a genie starts up and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant *because* one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie's son.

Coleridge's self-criticism is in keeping with near-contemporary censures of *Vathek*, which also attempted to be a tale in the manner of the *Thousand and One Nights*: the *European Magazine* said it failed to give the impression of an "Arabian Tale" because "it inculcates a moral of the greatest importance" (*European Magazine* 102), while *The English Review* argued that "The chief defect of the work arises from the moral, which is the foundation of the tale, and tinctures the whole (182). Coleridge had similar criticisms

of Mad Monk Lewis's diabolical creation, arguing that "a romance is incapable of exemplifying a moral truth" and must keep within the genre of "a work of pure imagination:"

The romance-writer possesses an unlimited power over situations; but he must scrupulously make his characters act in congruity with them. Let him work physical wonders only, and we will be content to dream with him for a while; but the first moral miracle which he attempts, he disgusts and awakens us. (*Critical Review* 19: 194-195)

If the author makes his creation adhere to no law apart from the dictates of whim and convenience, he gives his reader "no pleasure" (a grievous fault in a genre whose highest praise "is simply that of having given pleasure during its perusal"), though he "may make us wonder." In Coleridge's view, the intrusion of a "moral miracle" only "disgusts and awakens us" out of our reverie, leaving us with a disagreeable sense of the writer's defects. Coleridge held that morality "belongs to the moral philosopher, and would be pursued, not only more appropriately, but in my opinion with far greater probability of success, in sermons or moral essays, than in an elevated poem" (*Biographia Literaria* II: 130). When writing visionary works of the *mysterium*, one must adhere to the dictates of that shadow realm. "A man's inventions may be stupid or clever," George MacDonald writes in a similar vein, "but if he do not hold by the laws of them, or if he makes one law jar with another, he contradicts himself as an inventor, he is no artist," for "Law is the soil in which beauty will grow; beauty is the only stuff in which Truth can be clothed" ("The Fantastic Imagination" 6).

Empson defined this obtrusive moral in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as “don’t pull pussy’s tail” and said of the Mariner’s unwitting blessing of the water snakes after futile attempts to pray, “I don’t think there is any traditional Christian parallel to this” (35). Perhaps the closest analog would be St. Francis’s blessing of “Both man and bird and beast” and St. Augustine’s belief that the desire to have faith without the conviction of belief is itself a form of faith. The punishment of the two hundred sailors so many critics have felt was unwarranted is not unlike Dante’s description of the souls in the outer vestibule of Hell (a work translated by Coleridge’s friend Cary and apparently the inspiration for lines 446-451, “Like one that on a lonesome road / Doth walk in fear and dread...”). This is “the abode of the weather-cock mind,” Sayers explains, “the vague tolerance which will neither approve nor condemn, the cautious cowardice for which no decision is ever final” (*Hell* 89). So despised are these souls that they are not admitted into Hell proper: “deep Hell rejects so base a herd, / Lest sin itself should boast because of them” (86). The shipmates’ punishment may seem hyperbolic—they all seem to die simply because they vacillate in their opinion—but in Dante’s underworld, they would have been confined to the most despised region of Hell, the vestibule of “The Futile.” In Coleridge’s terms, “’Tis a strange place, this Limbo!—not a Place, / Yet name it so,” where souls dread Positive Negation. In the poem, however, we do not know if the crew ends up in Inferno, Purgatorio, or Paradiso: “The souls did from their bodies fly, / They fled to bliss or woe!”

Most critics have seized on the moral tag at the end of the poem or the gloss as the locus of Coleridge’s self-criticisms. As Charles Lamb told Southey, “a moral should be wrought into the body and soul, the matter and tendency, of a poem, not tagged to the

end, like a ‘God send the good ship into harbour,’ at the conclusion of our bills of landing” (*Works* VI: 144). Similarly, Coleridge maintained in his distinction between allegory and symbol that “The form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material”—as with intrusions of moral sentiments that do not arise out of “pure imagination”—while the “organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within” (*Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare* 46). Perhaps Coleridge was partially thinking of the final lines of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* when he wrote his *Table Talk* comments, but he particularly focused on “the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader *as a principle or cause of action* in a work of pure imagination” (emphasis added) rather than the final moral summation. In all versions of the text, Coleridge has two spirits discuss the Mariner’s suffering:

“Is it he?” quoth one, “Is this the man?

By him who died on cross,

With his cruel blow he laid full low

The harmless Albatross.

The spirit who bideth by himself

In the land of mist and snow,

He loved the bird that loved the man

Who shot him with his bow.”

The other was a softer voice,

As soft as honey-dew:  
 Quoth he, "The man hath penance done,  
 And penance more will do."

In the latter portions of the ballad, which many critics have felt could have used an editor, these spirits also explain how the boat moves by itself: "What is the ocean doing?" asks one, and the other explains the mechanisms behind Coleridge's supernatural production: "The air is cut away before / And closes from behind." Even before Coleridge added his gloss to the poem, he had already begun his moral editorializing in the text proper. Far more uncanny are the simple lines that follow, "'Twas night, calm night, the Moon was high; / The dead men stood together," or the ending of the first section of the poem, "I shot the Albatross," with no further description or explanation. Coleridge later accused Wordsworth of a tendency to "matter-of-factness" and the creation of improbable situations in order to reveal the histories of his characters; the gossip of his own spirits in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, however, seems scarcely less improbable as a contrivance to explain the action of the ship and the Mariner's situation.

Wordsworth complained that events in the poem happen willy-nilly and that "the Mariner does not act, he is acted upon."<sup>41</sup> Coleridge's response was to add an explanatory argument in 1800, and later a marginal gloss and a quotation from Burnet in the 1817 edition. This pseudo-seventeenth century gloss seems mildly ironic at points as

---

<sup>41</sup> If Coleridge's Mariner seems passive to Wordsworth, perhaps it is because actions occur as in a nightmare as they do in German ballads that use the passive voice to denote supernatural agency; Lamb called the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* an attempt at "German sublimity" (*Complete Poems and Letters* 637). Like Keats' portals magically opening onto the liminal faery lands at the end of the *Eve of St. Agnes*, the ship moves "Unhelled by any wind," in keeping with Calmet's writings on the undead that Coleridge had consulted: "the things which once belonged to them are seen to move themselves and change their place without being touched by any one" (32). Other poets attempting to do this in English include Tennyson in "The Lady of Shalott" in which the lady's room seems to self-destruct without any catalyst: "Out flew the web and floated wide, / The mirror cracked from side to side." Likewise, Eliot in *Burrut Norton* and Stevens *Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion* use magical, agentless language to eerie effect.

though in reaction to the task of explaining his poems to his contemporaries, and perhaps was somewhat tedious for Coleridge to write. Nonetheless, glosses were common in the accounts of sea travel that Coleridge read, and if it robs the poem of some of its mystery, it also lends an air of textual verisimilitude. He was concerned about adding a “semblance of truth” to his “shadows of imagination,” and admitted in *Table Talk* that “as for the probability” of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, “I owned that that might admit some question”—perhaps an ironic admission, or perhaps an agreeing with Aristotle that the probable impossible is preferable to the improbable possible. But once the irrational has an air of likelihood imparted to it, Aristotle noted in his *Poetics*, the audience accepts it despite the absurdity (60-61). Coleridge’s extensive studies in maritime travel attest to his attempt to ground his creations in “fact and reason.” Likewise, Dorothy L. Sayers wrote of Dante, “if you want the reader not only to follow but to accept and believe a tale of marvels, you can do it best by the accumulation of precise and even prosaic detail” (*Wilkie Collins* 11). Coleridge’s gloss helped to establish a tradition of appealing to scholarly (or mock scholarly) authorities in supernatural tales, such as the footnoted “Giaour,” Polidori’s “Vampyre,” Le Fanu’s Doctor Hesselius and Baron Vordenburg as well as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. All these supernatural works strive to attain a sense of verity, “the semblance of truth” Coleridge argued in his *Biographia Literaria* that will inspire a “willing suspension of disbelief” in the reader and poetic good faith (179).

In adding a moral-causal gloss to his poem, however, perhaps Coleridge went too far in the other direction and later seemed to regret giving in to Wordsworth’s complaints about the lack of causal relationships in the poem (Wordsworth, for his part, also disliked

the gloss). “Instead of procuring a momentary suspension of disbelief,” Lowes maintains, “he ran the risk of implanting firmly a belief” (276). Keats read the 1817 version of the poem in *Sibylline Leaves* with the newly inserted marginal gloss that “often brings a moral interpretation to bear on the Mariner’s story” and offers “the ‘necessary connection[s]’ whose absence Wordsworth, among others, regretted” (*The Language of Interpretation* 206). Keats had also read the original version of the poem and perhaps regretted that Coleridge had, with his revisions and marginal additions to the poem, “let go by” many of its “fine isolated verisimilitudes caught from the Penetralium of Mystery,” various moments in the text of eerily suggestive seeming truths like glimpses of shadows from the Penetralium. As Lipking notes, “in the world of the gloss, actions have causes and consequences, parts fit into wholes, and human motives are not arbitrary” (78). Likewise, Ferguson notes that the gloss comment on the killing of the Albatross “bespeak[s] conclusions that do not echo the main text because the main text never reaches such value judgments” (118). For Keats, queries and uncertainties excite speculation, but consideration and explanation stultify this imaginative activity of the mind.

Looking at the compositional habits of the two poets, Stillinger generalizes, “Coleridge is an epitomizing example of the poet who revises; Keats is an epitomizing example of the poet who, for both theoretical and practical reasons, does not revise” (*Coleridge and Textual Instability* 101). When he does revise his texts, it is often to find a more felicitous phrase rather than explain away the “wild surmises” of his poems. One cannot, for example, imagine Keats—even in a half-ironic response to a protesting Dilke,

a critical Taylor, or uncomprehending critics such as those baffled by *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner*—providing a marginal gloss for his own ballad in this manner:

1

Oh what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?

The sedge has withered from the lake,  
And no birds sing...

4

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

11

I saw their starved lips in the gloam  
With horrid warning gaped wide,  
And I awoke and found me here  
On the cold hill's side.

10

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!'

A wayfarer meeteth a wretched wight  
and inquireth of his fortunes.

The knight-at arms is spellbound by the  
eye of the fair enchantress, who singeth  
spells and feedeth the knight magic  
herbs to lulleth him into a sleep of bad  
omen

And lo! Spirits of the witch's victims  
appear to him in a vision; they are the  
pale inhabitants of Limbo, departed  
souls who cannot passeth into heaven;  
concerning whom the learned Italian,  
Dante, and the English Doctor, Burton,  
may be consulted. They are very  
numerous, and haunt wastelands and  
silent pools.

Keats's impulse was to generate queries in his texts, not answer them, and the querent at the beginning of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" comes away from the encounter with more questions than he originally had before the knight's indeterminate explanation of them. Coleridge's gloss tends to move in the opposite direction, though it can be read as a prose poem in itself. Lipking argues that unlike the earlier versions of the poem, the 1817 version's added gloss usurps the role of the reader's imagination: "The activity of the reader's eye, skipping back and forth between the margin and the text, now performs the work of the imagination" (77). With his gloss, Coleridge filled in the figurative and literal blank spaces in his text. His map for the poem, like those of Carroll's looking-glass world, is nearly as large as the poem itself.

Keats seems to have liked gaps in texts as well as suggestive fragments, half-filled in outlines, recitations of passages in unknown tongues, and partial knowledge. He confessed a preference for Carlo Lasinio's sketchy engraving of "The Triumph of Death" to Benjamin West's "Death on a Pale Horse" because the former leaves "so much room for Imagination" (*Keats and His World* 96) with its indistinctness, while the latter is too prosaically distinct. Keats favored liminal "mistiness," feeling it gave one "a greater luxury than" that which was clearly defined (*Letters I*: 274). *The British Critic*, in contrast, complained that the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* had a "confusion of images which loses all effect from not being quite intelligible" (362). Shelley had taxed *Endymion* for having a similar "indistinct profusion" of images (inspiring Keats to tell Shelley to "'load every rift' of your subject with ore"), and perhaps some of this can be traced to Keats's reading of the 1798 version of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* at the time he was writing his own sea-haunted visions: Stillinger, Bush, Finney, Gittings, de

Selincourt, Allot, Pearce, and others have found echoes of it in *Endymion* (see Lau 90-91). The 1817 version with the gloss that Keats read later that autumn was perhaps an irksome change.

For Keats, “the pleasure of not knowing” comes from “a sense of independence, of power from the fancy creating a world of its own by the sense of probabilities. We have read the Arabian Nights and hear that there are thousands of these sort of Romances lost—we imagine after them—but not their realities” (*Poetical Works* 298). Coleridge had wanted his poem to be like one of these lost Arabian Nights tales. In the tale to which he alludes in his *Table Talk* comments of “The Merchant and the Genie,” the merchant inadvertently kills the genie’s son with one of the date pits he tosses aside and so must die—but his life is spared through the intervention of three aged men, who each tell marvelous tales in exchange for the merchant’s life. Likewise, the Ancient Mariner periodically assuages his burning guilt and Life-in-Death by recounting his tale.

In the realm of the *Arabian Nights* or classical literature, culpability lies in one’s actions, not in one’s intentions. This is not quite the “no moral” view that Ferguson deplors, but a grimmer idea of causality that Bostetter notes lies behind the game of dice between Death and Life-in-Death (68). If you casually throw aside a date pit, you could lose your life; if you unwittingly step on Oedipus’ grave at Colonus, you will be cursed for your innocent action; and if you accidentally chop down a tree with a hamadryad in it, or pluck a flower with roots in the Underworld, you could become the eternal prisoner of a tree or the child bride of Hades. Likewise, whatever the Mariner’s intention or lack of intention, he suffers for what he has done rather than what he has intended, and the

daemonic universe in which he moves punishes him accordingly, even if this punishment seems in human terms to be grossly disproportionate to his crime.

Just as Shakespeare took out motivations for Lear's test of his daughters, Cordelia's death, and the impetus behind some of Edmund's actions from his sources, so Coleridge takes the detail of killing the albatross from Wordsworth's reading of Shelvocke but initially removes its motivation, inspiring Ferguson to call it (using Coleridge's own term) a "motiveless malignity" (122) and Eilenberg, "a motiveless crime" (310). Coleridge's balladic vision of the universe is not so grim as that of *King Lear*—"As flies to wanton boys we are to the Gods / They kill us for their sport"—but the Mariner proceeds from never-defined motivations. Like Shakespeare with the sources for *King Lear*, Coleridge uses the sources for his ballad as starting points for the imagination rather than undeviating dictates. In his *Road to Xanadu*, Lowes has pointed out the extensive sources Coleridge apparently used for his poem, including occult reference books by Augustine Calmet, Eden's *History of Travayle* and Hakluyt's *Voyages*, upon which Shakespeare drew for his plots. Keats also turned to Shakespeare's sources when he wanted to write his own tragedies and asked that Brown give him only a few details of the plot at a time so that he would not be shackled to fact and reason. The text Wordsworth recounted to Coleridge was this:

We had continual squalls of sleet, snow, and rain, and the heavens were perpetually hid from us by gloomy dismal clouds. In short, one would think it impossible that any thing living should subsist in so frigid a climate; and indeed, we...had not had that sight of one fish of any kind...nor one sea bird, except a disconsolate black Albitross [sic], who accompanied us for several days, hovering

about us as if he had lost himself, till Hatley (my second Captain)...imagin'd,  
 from his colour,. That it might be some ill omen. That which, I suppose, induced  
 him the more to encourage his superstition, was the continued series of contrary  
 tempestuous winds, which had oppress'd us ever since we had got into this sea.  
 But be that as it would, he, after some fruitless attempts, at length, shot the  
 Albitross, not doubting (perhaps) that we should have a fair wind after it. (cited in  
*Xanadu* 206)

Coleridge removes this rationalization from the shooter and assigns it to his shipmates  
*after* he kills the albatross in his version, rather in the manner of Shakespeare removing  
 the simple motivation for Macbeth's actions from his source material and only making  
 Macbeth feel ambition after the witches tell him his fate.

Although the explanatory gloss seems to spell out the action of the poem, it often  
 contradicts or complicates the action of the text as much as it clarifies it, as recent  
 criticism has pointed out, and Coleridge leaves several questions unanswered in all  
 versions of his text. Many lines in the poem remain unparalleled for their uncanny  
 suggestiveness, such as the descriptions of the dead men or the Mariner's own sublimely  
 terrifying visage: "God save thee, ancient mariner, / From the fiends that plague thee  
 thus!" the Wedding Guest cries; "Why look'st thou so?" Coleridge's only explanation  
 here is the Mariner's strange confession, "With my crossbow / I shot the albatross." We  
 do not see the uncanny visage directly here, only the Wedding Guest's reaction to it.  
 Ultimately, we never know why the Mariner kills the albatross, why the curse is abated  
 by an involuntary prayer, or even why he singles out the "Hermit good" and the Wedding  
 Guest to hear his tale: "That moment that his face I see, / I know the man that must hear

me.” We are even uncertain of the Mariner’s status as a natural or preternatural being, deluded into believing he has been cursed or doomed to be “deathwards progressing to no death.” “It is an Ancient Mariner,” says the narrator, as though the human status of “it” were in doubt, and later the Hermit asks of the uncanny guest aboard his boat, “What manner of man art thou?” Huston Smith in his *Religions of Man* points out that only two figures in history were constantly asked not “*Who* are you,” but “*What* are you”: Jesus and Buddha (121). The Ancient Mariner provokes such questions, but we never quite know the answer.

After the first revisions of the poem, Charles Lamb lamented, “I am sorry Coleridge has christened his *Ancient Marinere*, a *Poet’s Reverie*; it is as bad as Bottom the Weaver’s declaration that he is not a lion, but only the scenical representation of a lion” (*Complete Poems and Letters* 689). With each recapitulation of the text, Coleridge capitulated to the criticisms of Wordsworth and his contemporaries to make the poem more intelligible and coherent. But despite its increasing reaching toward fact, reason, and certainty, the poem continued to hold mysteries for Keats in the coming months and contains some of Coleridge’s most beautiful prose poetry. If Keats saw in it Coleridge’s discomfort with the occult and with occultation, he nonetheless also recognized in the poem traces of the Penetralium of Mystery.

## III

*Holy Dread*

*Mr. Flosky:* That is strange: nothing is so becoming to a man as an air of mystery. Mystery is the very key-stone of all that is beautiful in poetry, and all that is sacred in faith, and all that is recondite in transcendental psychology. I am writing a ballad which is all mystery; it is 'such stuff as dreams are made of,' and is, indeed, made of a dream; for, last night I fell asleep as usual over my book, and had a vision of pure reason. I composed five hundred lines in my sleep; so that, having had a dream of a ballad, I am now officiating as my own Peter Quince, and making a ballad of my own dream, and it shall be called Bottom's Dream, because it has no bottom.

—Thomas Love Peacock, *Nightmare Abbey*

In Thomas Love Peacock's *Nightmare Abbey*, Coleridge appears as Mr. Flosky, or "a lover of shadows." Coleridge's nightmares of shadowy specters make one wonder how apt this description actually was, but this perception of him was a common one at the time, and his "Kubla Khan" seems to exemplify Eilenberg's idea that an "ordinary tale of the supernatural...depends upon a false bottom, and illusion of sourcelessness" (282). Perhaps Keats responded to its magical lushness and strange power: Albert Gerard calls it the "most Keatsian of Coleridge's poems," and Finney, Bush, Barnard, Stillinger, Bloom, Gerber, and Allot are among those critics who have heard echoes in of "Kubla Khan" in Keats's poems, especially in *Endymion*, which draws on water imagery from both this poem and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. But apart from a couple of

proposed echoes in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and *Lamia*, the fascination of the poem seems to have abated for Keats by the close of 1817. Perhaps this was under the influence of Hunt, who later complained that in this “Preface,” Coleridge is not “content to have written finely under the influence of laudanum” and “recommends ‘Kubla Khan’ to his readers, not as a poem, but as a “psychological curiosity” (cited in Lau 81). In the “Preface” to “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge attempts to provide a ground for the bottomless dream of his poem and inoculate himself from future criticism, providing frames within frames for his text in a way reminiscent of *The Arabian Nights*. But for Hunt and his circle, Coleridge’s attempt to illuminate the origin of his “fragments dim of lovely forms” perhaps shed too much light on its shadows.

Keats evidently identified with this diffident impulse to excuse one’s own poetic creations before giving it to a cruel and indifferent public—his own “Preface” to *Endymion* also attempts to forestall criticism. Charles Lamb had said to Wordsworth of the publication of “Kubla Khan,” although “it irradiates and brings heaven and elysian bowers into my parlour while he sings or says it,” nonetheless, “there is an observation, ‘Never tell thy dreams,’ and I am almost afraid that ‘Kubla Khan’ is an owl that won’t bear daylight” (*Complete Poems and Letters* 807). Coleridge seems to manifest similar concerns in his “Preface.” Geoffrey Yarlott holds that “he wrote his *Preface* partly in self-defense, anticipating the charge of obscurity which the poem’s acknowledged imperfection of organization would produce” (128). Although this preface irritably explains away some of the poem’s mystery by framing how we are supposed to read it, Keats alluded to it sympathetically in a conversation with Woodhouse about his experience with writing and the *mysterium*:

[Keats] has said, that he has often not been aware of the beauty of some thought or expr<sup>n</sup> until after he has composed & written it down—It has then struck him with astonishm<sup>t</sup>—& seemed rather the prod<sup>n</sup> of another person than his own—He has wondered how he came to hit upon it.... It seems scarcely his own; & he feels that he c<sup>d</sup> never imitate or hit upon it again: & he cannot conceive how it came to him—Such Keats s<sup>d</sup> was his Sensation of astonishm<sup>t</sup> & pleasure when he had prod<sup>d</sup> the lines “His white melod<sup>s</sup> &c[”]—It seemed to come by chance or magic—to be as it were something given to him. (*Keats Circle* I.129)

Keats’s account of how he composed echoes *Kubla Khan*’s preface: “Yet from the still surviving recollections of his mind, the Author has frequently purposed to finish for himself what had been originally, as it were, *given to him*” (250; emphasis added). These are the “fine isolated verisimilitudes caught from the Penetralium of Mystery” that characterize Negative Capability. Keats admired how Coleridge used these apparent truths to generate strangeness and speculation. Coleridge, however, often stirred the waters of “the Vast” to which he wrote his “mind had been habituated” (*Letters* 210) until “all the charm / Is broken — all that phantom-world so fair / Vanishes, and a thousand circlets spread, / And each misshapes the other” —a quotation from “The Picture” Coleridge cites to explain why he could not finish “Kubla Khan.”

Keats envisioned a literary diligent indolence in which one would “on a certain day read a certain Page of Poesy or distilled Prose and...wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect from it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it” (*Letters* I: 231). Coleridge did just that with his source for “Kubla Khan,” taking as a starting point for his oneiric imagination a page from *Purchas his Pilgrimage*. This was a

continuation of *Hakluyt's Pilgrimages*, one of Shakespeare's sources for his plays. In his dream-reverie, Coleridge leaves out much of the fact and reason of his source, letting the sibylline leaves he gleaned from the dreaming *mysterium* "[float] midway on the waves" of his imagination until the "Person from Porlock" broke the fabric of his vision.

Whatever the validity of Coleridge's claim that he dreamt the poem as a rebus composition ("if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as things, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort"), it does contain all the characteristics of dream fugues: it begins *in medias res* and is irrational, miraculous, temporally and spatially unstable, erotic, wish-fulfilling, violent, vivid, prophetic, and fragmentary. In this way, it escapes some of his need to establish certainty and full disclosure that often characterized his other poems.

Many critics have seen "Kubla Khan" as an expression of Coleridge's idea of secondary imagination, citing the famous description in *Biographia Literaria*:

The imagination then I consider either as primary or secondary. The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary imagination I consider as an echo of the former, coexisting with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or, where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is

essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

(175)

Yet in “Kubla Khan,” the secondary imagination of the poem strives for the power of the primary imagination, “the infinite I AM” in which word becomes deed. If one plots the moods of verbs on a graph of their distance from reality, the subjunctive mood (famously prevalent in *Hamlet*) is the furthest, making the connection between thought and deed a ghostly one at best; the conditional mood brings language nearer to the actuality, mapping a contingency; the declarative mood is closer still, describing “things as they are” and not as we would like them to be; the imperative makes word nearly synonymous with world, though commands may be disobeyed and blessings ignored by the gods; but in incantation, the word becomes incarnate. It is the distance from a prisoner’s feeble cry, “Would it were light!” to that of Yahweh, “Let there be light.”

“Kubla Khan” moves through this graph of verb tenses, from wishes (“Could I revive within me”), declarations (“But oh that deep romantic chasm”), and commands (“A stately pleasure-dome decree”) to the closing spell that becomes enacted in the reader’s recitation of the poem, making word become reality for the space of a poem:

‘Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread —  
For he on honey-dew hath fed  
And drank the milk of paradise.’

Though the final section of the poem that Coleridge composed after the dream-reverie had fled exhibits his attempt to explain and reconcile the disparate images of the first sections, the poem does not end on a note of fact and reason, but approaches the language

of the Godhead incarnating the word that Coleridge calls “The infinite I AM.” This incantatory power of “Kubla Khan” apparently attracted Keats while he was composing *Endymion*, and many critics have found echoes of its water imagery, wailing demon woman, Abyssinian maid, and “honey-dew” in his work at the time. The poem might also have inspired aspects of his verse that have not been explored, such as his early incantatory verse that includes “God of the Golden Bow,” the “Hymn to Pan” in *Endymion*, “Lines on Seeing a Lock of Milton’s Hair,” “God of the Meridian,” “Not Aladdian Magian,” “The Witching Time of Night,” “Spirit Here that Reignest,” and the later “Song of the Four Fairies.” Keats also frequently employed the language of conjuring and banishing in his odes, such as “Vanish, ye phantoms” in “Ode on Indolence” and “I will fly to thee.../ Already with thee” to the final “Adieu!” in “Ode to a Nightingale.” Keats’s poems early and late often describe visionary flights followed by a moment in which “all the charm vanishes” in a return to muddy reality, the mundane world of the man from Porlock.

Lamb complained in an essay on “Witches, and Other Night Fears,” “The poverty of my dreams mortifies me. There is Coleridge, at his will can conjure up icy domes and pleasure-houses for Kubla Khan, and Abyssinian maids, and songs of Abara, and caverns ‘Where Alph, the sacred river, runs’, to solace his night solitudes, when I cannot muster a fiddle” (*Complete Poems and Letters* 60). Yet Coleridge would have gladly exchanged his dreams with him at times and escaped the “The Pains of Sleep” that tormented him, which perhaps accounts for some of his reluctance or inability to remain in the incantatory dream mode for long. At the time he published “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge composed the strange “Limbo” that also contains the language of incantation and spell

casting and ends with an inversion of the sense of poetic puissance that closes “Kubla Khan.” This lyric expresses the frightening void at the other side of vision, beyond the “ancestral voices prophesying war” to the omega of “Alph, the sacred river” that lies in the depths of “a sunless sea.” “Limbo” revisits the daemonic mode of Coleridge’s early magic poems, but the daemons are no longer eudaemons, but terrifying specters of negation from the shadow realm of the *mysterium*. Angus Fletcher observes that in “Limbo,” Coleridge “attempts to define an indefinable, ultimate limit,” but “in doing so he personifies a bulk of nothingness” (*Ibid.* 184). In conjuring up his magic poems such as “Kubla Khan,” perhaps Coleridge conjured up something else as well that he had not expected, making him wary of the “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts” Keats celebrated. Perhaps Coleridge had looked too long into nothingness and saw “Positive Negation” staring back at him.

#### IV

##### *A Sight to Dream of*

“Wilkie Collins,” wrote Harriet, “was always handicapped in his treatment of the supernatural by the fatal itch” (could one be handicapped by an itch? Yes, why not? Let it go, anyway, for the moment)—“the fatal itch to explain everything. His legal training—” Bother! Too long. “...was handicapped by the lawyer’s fatal habit of explaining everything. His ghaisties and ghoulies”—no; worn-out humor—“His dream-phantasies and apparitions are too careful to tuck their shrouds neatly about them and leave no loose ends to

trouble us. It is in *Le Fanu* that we find the natural maker of—natural master of—the master of the uncanny whose mastery comes by nature.”

—Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*

Sir Leoline, the Baron rich,  
 Hath a toothless mastiff bitch;  
 From her kennel beneath the rock  
 She makes answer to the clock —  
 Four for the quarters and twelve for the hour,  
 Ever and aye, moonshine or shower,  
 Sixteen short howls not over loud;  
 Some say she sees my lady's shroud.

—Coleridge, *Christabel*

The baroness's ghost in *Christabel* does not tuck up her shrouds so neatly that we lose all sense of her uncanniness, but her maker does have a tendency to measure out the bolts of the fabric. In this precursor text to *Le Fanu's Carmilla*, the clocks keep accurate time: “Four for the quarters, and twelve for the hour / Ever and aye, moonshine or shower” they chime, and the “toothless mastiff bitch” considerably calls back “sixteen short howls not over loud.” Keats lampoons the opening of *Christabel* when he writes to Reynolds, “He drinks glasses five for the Quarter and twelve for the hour” (Letters 1:324). In *Cap and Bells: or, The Jealousies* (written under the pseudonym Lucy Vaughan Lloyd, perhaps a private play on the title of Coleridge's work that Keats owned,

Coleridge Lamb Lloyd), Keats satirizes the “fatal itch to explain everything” and glances at Wordsworth as well as Coleridge:

Well, let us see,—tenth book and chapter nine,—  
 Thus Crafticant pursues his diary:—  
 “‘Twas twelve o’clock at night, the weather fine,  
 Latitude thirty-six; our scouts descry  
 A flight of starlings making rapidly  
 Tow’rds Thibet. Mem.:—birds fly in the night;  
 From twelve to half-past... (409)

Crafticant is relentless in his Will-to-Document: “Five minutes before one—brought down a moth / With my new double-barrel—stewed the thighs / And made a tolerable broth,” he records, waxing more and more minute by the line until we come to “Five minutes thirteen seconds after three” (405). Earlier in *Cap and Bells*, Keats writes of Crafticant, “Show him a mouse’s tail, and he will guess, / With metaphysic swiftness, at the mouse,” apprehending the invisible in the visible and carefully measuring its length and circumference; in his own poetry, however, Keats prefers to keep the dimensions of his stream in *I Stood Tip-Toe* inscrutable, and the reader has to “guess where” it “refreshes” itself.

In lines 230-247 of *Sleep and Poetry*, Keats criticizes compositions that revel in scenes of “trees uptorn, / Darkness, and worms, and shrouds, and sepulchers.” If we accept Hunt’s and Woodhouse’s glosses on these lines, Keats took issue in 1816 with “the morbidity that taints the production of the Lake Poets” (Matthews 62) and Byron, and especially those found in “Christabel by Coleridge & c.” (Sperry 155). Hazlitt

describes it in the June 2, 1816 edition of *The Examiner* as “a veil of Della Cruscan sentiment and fine writing” over a “disgusting... subject” (perhaps the encoded lesbianism of the text) like “moon-beams playing on a charnel-house, or flowers strewed on a dead body” (cited in Jackson 207). Reynolds also sees the poem casting “a sort of Della Cruscan spell” and complains that the writer

seems as enamored of a serpent’s coil, as of [a] nightingale; and would think it no small delight to be eye-bound, for a short season, by a rattle snake. (Reynolds 121)

Yet by February 1818—three months after writing his Negative Capability Letter—Keats begins *Isabella*, a poem filled with “wormy circumstance” that “linger[s] at the yawning tomb.” In July of the following year, he would create his own serpent enchantress, though it is Apollonius, not Lamia, who has the power to kill with a glance. Hazlitt’s lecture on Boccaccio and Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* were the immediate catalysts for these poems, but *Isabella* manifests Keats’s own Geraldine delight in “Darkness, and worms, and shrouds, and sepulchers.” It is interesting to note that despite his reverence for Hazlitt and his apparent adoption, for a time, of his views on *Christabel*, Keats nonetheless chooses the most morbid of Boccaccio’s tales to translate following Hazlitt’s suggestion in his 3 February 1818 lecture. In the winter of 1817-1818, Keats had begun shedding the influence of Hunt and his circle and began to look more closely at *Christabel* and its venomous enchantments.

In the first half of *Christabel*, composed during Coleridge’s *annus mirabilis* of 1797-1798, he wrote as though inspired by a daemon and the poem seemed, “as it were, given to him.” Keats read and appreciated the poem in December 1817 while he was

composing his Negative Capability letter and later echoed it in his own work, especially “The Eve of St. Agnes,” “Lamia,” “The Eve of St. Mark,” and “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” (Lau, 95-101). In particular, critics have argued that Keats was influenced by its Gothic setting, two-part structure, serpentine vampires, trances, dreams, allurements, religious imagery, and sympathetic enchantresses. Christabel “creep[s] as if in stealth,” seems half-eager for Geraldine’s enthrallments, and becomes a partial lamia herself in the second part. Maier points out how Madeline likewise seems somewhat complicit in her fall from innocence (67), and Stillinger points out the ambiguity of such lines as “like a saint” or “sure in language strange.” In his own poetry, Keats learns from Coleridge’s hieroglyphic verisimilitudes, however swiftly the latter let them go by again.

In his review of Edmund Kean composed at the time he was writing to his brothers in December 1817, Keats misquotes line 253 of *Christabel*—“A sight to dream of, not to tell!”—as “A thing to dream of, not to tell!” (*Poetical Works* 229). Rather than indicate Keats’s dismissal of this poem, the imperfect recollection suggests the possibility that it had become “proved upon [his] pulses” much the way Edgar’s question in *Lear* – “Hark, do you hear the sea?” – transforms into a haunting personal refrain with slightly altered wording: “the passage in *Lear*—‘Do you not hear the sea?’—has haunted me intensely” (*Letters* I: 131-132). Coleridge claimed in *Biographia Literaria* that Shakespeare “first studied patiently, meditated deeply, and understood minutely, till knowledge become habitual and intuitive wedded itself to his habitual feelings, by which he stands alone, with no great equal or stupendous power” (191). Keats also describes this process of reading become “proved upon the pulses:” “let him on a certain day read a certain Page of Poesy or distilled Prose and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and

reflect from it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it” (*Letters I*: 231). By this process, one’s reading becomes part of one’s “felt life” and—as with lines in *King Lear* or “a sight to dream of, not to tell!” in “Christabel”—act “as a starting point towards all ‘the two and thirty Pallaces,’ the mental houses of fiction and poetry.

This same line from “Christabel” that sent Shelley screaming into the other room with a vision of his wife with eyeballs for nipples fascinated Keats with its *deinos*<sup>42</sup> indefiniteness and perhaps inspired his own description of Madeline undressing in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. The scene’s obscurity generates its erotic and imaginative intensity that Keats evidently enjoyed:

Her silken robe and inner vest  
Dropped to her feet, and full in view,  
*Behold! her bosom and half her side —*  
A sight to dream of, not to tell!  
And she is to sleep by Christabel.

Coleridge’s line has all the appeal of a nightmare fantasy, simultaneously suggesting something wonderful and something terrible, a seductive or repulsive succubus resembling Spenser’s deformed witch or a maiden from *The Bowir of Blis*. In these lines, one cannot be sure if Christabel sees a dream maiden, a specter from a nightmare, or perhaps a fantasy partaking of both. In the original version of the poem, Coleridge had been grotesquely explicit in this section: “Behold, her bosom and half her side— / Are lean and old and foul of hue” (which Hazlitt remembered as “Hideous, deformed, and pale of hue”)—a description that leaves no doubt about what she sees and removes his

---

<sup>42</sup> Sophocles uses of this word in the second stasimon of *Antigone* to mean a state of being simultaneously canny and uncanny, awful and awe-inspiring, terrible and wonderful. See Heidegger’s *Introduction to Metaphysics*.

erotic suggestiveness.<sup>43</sup> It is difficult to see how Christabel could be half in love with easeful life-in-death in this version; her transformation is an involuntary violation. Hazlitt had seen the poem in its manuscript form, and when it was published without the explicitly descriptive lines, he complained, “We rather wonder at this bold proceeding in the author, as his courage has cooled in the course of the publication, and he has omitted, from mere delicacy, a line which was absolutely necessary to the understanding of the whole story” and “to make common sense out of the first and second part” (cited in *Tryermaine* 32-33). One wonders what Coleridge’s actual motivation for suppressing the lines was –whether “mere delicacy” or with an eye to greater speculative indeterminacy. Unlike Keats, Hazlitt blamed Coleridge for preferring the “*unknown* to the *known*” and the obscure to the clear.

In this scene as it stands in the *Grasmere Notebook*, there is no woman one is “mad to kiss,” and what it gains in clarity, it loses in intensity. Like West’s risibly precise “Death on a Pale Horse” that failed to excite a “momentous depth of speculation” in Keats through the use of sublime obscurity, Coleridge’s description of Geraldine’s cursed bosom does not appeal to him the way the indeterminate revision does. Descriptions of Death and Nightmare Life-in-Death appeal to him when they approach the lines from Book II of *Paradise Lost* that Burke lauded in his *Philosophical Enquiry*:

The other shape  
 (If shape it might be called) that shape had none  
 Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb;  
 Or substance might be called that shadow seemed

---

<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Woodhouse complained of the “Eve of St. Agnes” revisions, “[Keats] has altered the last 3 lines to leave on the reader a sense of pettish disgust, by bringing Old Angela in only dead still & ugly” (*Letters* II: 163).

For each seemed either.

Commenting on this passage, Raleigh remarks, “It is this negative capability of words, their privative force, whereby they can impress the mind with a sense of ‘vacuity, darkness, solitude, and silence,’ that Burke celebrates in the fine treatise of his younger days” (*Style*). The original text describes explicitly what Coleridge later tried to keep suggestively indistinct.

But Coleridge’s later additions and revisions revert back to the explicitness of the suppressed line describing Geraldine’s bosom. In the second part of the poem that he composed in 1800, Coleridge turns the seductively *unheimlich* vision of the first half into something crudely overt: “Again she saw that bosom old, / Again she felt that bosom cold.” This later description of Geraldine does suggest some of what happened to Christabel the night before, but sounds with something like a thud after the first section, producing a “*disharmony* in style,” as Coleridge criticized in Wordsworth, a “feeling of incongruity...excited...by the sudden superiority of some other passage forming the context” (*Biographia Literaria* 265). Piper observes of the two sections of the poem,

The first part is full of ambiguities of situation and character reflected in paradoxical imagery; the second is comparatively unambiguous and its two best images...are straightforward in their relation to the action....Finally, the first part is without explanations and, if a “meaning” is to be given to it, this must be found in an explanation of the symbolism. The second part had full explanations of a psychological kind, and is “novelistic” in Northrop Frye’s sense. (*The Singing of Mount Abora* 74-75)

Perhaps this is why Charles Lamb was “very angry” (Nethercot 25) to learn that Coleridge had added a second section to his poem in 1800 after the “vision and faculty divine” that inspired the first section had left him. Unlike the majority of Coleridge’s friends and admirers, Lamb preferred the first section by itself and encouraged him not to finish the poem, reveling in its unsolved mysteries and unilluminated shadows—a sentiment that Keats might well have seconded. Stillinger notes, “The more revision in a Coleridge poem, the greater the likelihood of receiving determinate (authorial) meanings—and, conversely, the less revision, the greater the indeterminacy in situations where the lines come ‘by chance or magic...as it were, something given” (*Coleridge and Textual Instability* 246 n.9). Yet some of Coleridge’s frames result in contradictory meanings for his poems, as in “Kubla Khan” and *The Ancient Mariner*. In general, however, apart from the suppression of the line about Geraldine’s bosom (“lean and old and foul of hue”), the more Coleridge revised and added to “Christabel,” the less enigmatic it became.

In the first half of the poem, Christabel lies in pleasurable pain after some manner of physical or metaphysical consummation, dreaming “in a sort of wakeful swoon:”

With open eyes (ah woe is me!)  
 Asleep, and dreaming fearfully,  
 Fearfully dreaming, yet I wis,  
 Dreaming that alone, which is —  
 Oh sorrow and shame! Can this be she,  
 The lady who knelt at the old oak tree?

In this passage, Coleridge tantalizingly interrupts the description of the dream image by suggesting that Christabel shamefully revels in memories of sexual initiation, or innocently recalls an evil forced upon her, or perhaps both. It is when Coleridge exhibited his will to reconcile “opposite or discordant qualities” that he seemed to irk Keats; if Keats achieved a balance between contraries in his own work, it is *Stille in Bewegung*, stasis in motion—“might half-slumbering on its right arm.”

In Keats’s own description of a disrobing, he takes great pains to suggest just enough without showing too much, knowing that *Eros* (a state of “having and not having” in Plato) diminishes with total possession even as *philosophia* (a state of “knowing and not knowing”) must reside in half-knowledge.<sup>44</sup> As Keats intimates in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the moment before consummation is the one most charged with passion, and he takes pains to dilate the moment as much as possible. The original draft of “Eve of St. Agnes,” like Coleridge’s original version of Geraldine’s unrobing in “Christabel,” is too explicit: “bursting bodice” tells too much and has none of the voluptuous suggestiveness of “fragrant bodice,” a hieroglyphic trace of Madeline’s presence. Likewise, the phrase “warmed jewels” intimates just enough of her body to entice without being vulgar. Keats also follows Coleridge in leaving the nature of the lovers’ consummation (physical? metaphysical? both?) somewhat vague: as Stillinger points out, Keats’s celestial shorthand for Madeline’s consummation—“St. Agnes’ moon hath set”—owes much to Coleridge’s “A star hath risen, a star hath set.” In this, both poets exhibit what Angus Fletcher calls a “delight in the softening of outline because it

---

<sup>44</sup> “I have no insight into a man so eminently wise,” Coleridge says of Plato, “using words of such half-meanings to himself, which must perforce pass into no-meaning to his readers” (*Biographia Literaria* 142).

permits an intensification of medium” even as it suggests “obscure passions, feelings, other-than-cognitive forms” (*Colors of the Mind* 169).

In 1821, the *Academic* attacked “Christabel” for its “extravagance and absurdity” and suggested, “If it had been furnished, like his *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, with marginal annotations, to explain the incidents and fill up the vacancies of the poem, we might have attempted to extract the substance of its story” (*Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose* 160). In 1824, Coleridge began composing these marginal notes, continuing the process of expounding its mysteries. The first three annotations explain that “The Strange Lady cannot rise, without the touch of Christabel’s Hand; and now she blesses her *Stars*. She will not praise the *Creator* of the Heavens, or name the *Saints*” (*Ibid.* 165 n.3); “The strange Lady may not pass the threshold without Christabel’s help and will” (*Ibid.* 166 n.4); and “The strange Lady makes an excuse, not to praise the Holy Virgin” (*Ibid.*, 166 n.5). All three of these glosses make plain what the original had left in doubt—namely, that Geraldine is a “strange Lady” indeed who cannot cross the threshold without being carried over and cannot speak holy names—conventions of vampire lore that are more familiar to contemporary readers than they were to Coleridge’s readers.

The gloss also explains that in lines 198-203, “The Mother of Christabel, who is now her Guardian Spirit, appears to Geraldine, as in answer to her wish. Geraldine fears the Spirit, but yet has power over it for a time” (*Ibid.* 168 n.7), thereby dispelling any uncertainty on the score. With the aid of the gloss, the reader also knows for certain that in lines 451-457, “Christabel for a moment sees her Mother’s Spirit” (*Ibid.* 174 n.3), a fact not readily discernable in the description: “and on her lips and o’er her eyes / Spread smiles like light!” In the unannotated text, the reader must recall the moment from the

first part in which the narrator wonders of her inexplicable smiles, “What is she knew her mother near?” And the metaphor of “As dreams too lively to leave behind” becomes in the gloss, “Christabel is made to believe, that the fearful Sight had taken place only in a Dream,” giving the reader greater insight into the psychological state of Christabel—perhaps a little too much. After the initial inspiration for the poem left him, Coleridge was at a loss either to recall or account for its power; he seemed to second guess himself into misjudging the locus of its intensity.

When Geraldine says with incantatory strangeness, “In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell, / Which is Lord of thy utterance, Christabel!”, the gloss explicates for us, “As soon as the wicked Bosom, with the mysterious sign of Evil stamped thereby, touches Christabel, she is deprived of the power of disclosing what has occurred” (*Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose* 169 n.4). This spell of the bosom originally could have been one of magical malignity, or seductive guilt, or even a psychologically realistic sense of shame that often torments sexually abused children. The gloss leaves no doubt of its import. Likewise, Coleridge annotates the lines, “(Ah, woe is me! Was it for thee, / Thou gentle maid! such sights to see?)” with this note: “Christabel then recollects the whole, and knows that it was not a Dream; but yet cannot disclose the fact, that the strange Lady is a supernatural Being with the stamp of the Evil Ones on her” (*Ibid.* 174 n.2). Keats’s admired the ambiguous line about Geraldine’s bosom, “A sight to dream of, not to tell!” In the gloss, however, Coleridge *does* tell, and had he continued to annotate and finish the fragment in this manner, he might well have come close to telling all.

Despite his tendency to clear up its mysteries, however, Coleridge does leave several questions unanswered in the 1817 text of “Christabel,” which may explain some

of Keats's fascination with the poem. The poem as a whole is not only a fragment, but composed of two sections that do not wholly fit together and a conclusion to the second section that seems to have little connection to either part—unless one reads “words of unmeant bitterness” as a reference to the command Sir Leoline barks to Bard Bracy after Christabel makes her inhospitable request. Or perhaps—as some critics have maintained—it refers to Coleridge himself, who delights in reconciling opposites in poetry and apparently intended to make the virtuous Christabel “save the wicked” (*Poems* 507): “perhaps ‘tis pretty to force together / Thoughts so all unlike each other.” James B. Twitchell identifies Coleridge with Geraldine's victim: “Christabel / Coleridge is upset over having to share the mother's affections” (46), and given Coleridge's fears of Ebon Thalud and “night-mair” specters, this seems plausible. But Coleridge's claim that the poem was “given to him” curiously echoes Geraldine's cry to the spirit of Christabel's mother, “Off, woman, off!—‘tis given to me,” suggesting that Coleridge was of the daemon's party and did not know it. Geraldine is satanically serpentine, and her movements are those of “the Inventive faculty” that Coleridge identifies in his *Notebook* of December 1799:

Th Serpent by which the ancients emblem'd the Inventive faculty appears to me, in its mode of motion most exactly the emblem of Genius. He varies his course yet still glides onwards—all lines of motion are his—all beautiful, and all propulsive. (I: 609, 4.25)

Later in his *Biographia Literaria*, he again described the ideal movement of mind as “the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power” to explain the activity of the reader: he “should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by

the mechanical impulse of curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of the mind excited by the attractions of the journey” (183), a passage several critics have cited as a possible inspiration for Keats’s Negative Capability letter. Perhaps Coleridge found the mesmeric movement of his otherworldly, pleasurable-painful Geraldine, the creature of his “Inventive faculty,” a bit too unsettlingly seductive.

The preternatural “little child, limber elf” of the conclusion who “always finds and never seeks,” seems another daemon who exhibits negative capabilities and is blissfully free from the terror of positive negation. To arrive at seeming truths from the “Penetralium of Mystery, you must be “lost enough to find yourself,” something that the child Hartley Coleridge seems to do effortlessly. It was more difficult for his father to do. He had innate curiosity and a propensity for verisimilitudes gleaned from the *adytum*, but was seldom content merely to transcribe what he found there. He filled his poetry with hieroglyphics of beauty as well as the interpretations of a hierophant. In his verses that hail from the *mysterium*, Coleridge cannot always escape “the blessed rage to order” what he has found there. Keats views this as a failing and believes that Coleridge murders to dissect; the ephemeral half-truths he finds can no more survive being fixed by fact and reason than a butterfly can withstand an entomologist’s pins.

Coleridge, however, still leaves enough of a sense of mystery behind to tantalize the younger poet. One such mystery he does not solve in his *Christabel* is the relationship between Christabel’s mother and Geraldine. Rather than grow faint after imbibing the “cordial wine” Christabel’s mother had made of “wild flowers,” as one would expect, Geraldine is revived by it. She also communicates with the spirit of

Christabel's mother: "Off, woman, off! This hour is mine— / Though thou her guardian spirit be," without explaining who or what has given this power to her. Geraldine sleeps with Christabel "as a mother with a child" and then proceeds to seduce Sir Leoline the following morning as though attempting to replace Christabel's mother. Coleridge intimates some connection between the dead mother and the nightmare life-in-death Geraldine, but leaves this connection unexplained in his fragment.

He does, however, hint at a possible meaning for Geraldine's enchanted bosom when she says, "This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow," suggesting some undisclosed past transgression. Geraldine derives in part from Spenser, but also perhaps from classical mythology, and in *The Road to Tryermaine*, Nethercot characterizes her as a Lamia. In one story of this creature, she is the mistress of Zeus whose children Hera systematically murders, driving Lamia to feed upon the children of others in insane envy. Perhaps this is why Geraldine bears a mark of shame and sorrow in her bosom whose touch causes Christabel pain and a sense of sin—she is far too old to suckle upon the breast of a mother, and the act bears the stigma not only of lesbianism, but also metaphorical incest. Camille Paglia notes a discrepancy between this description and Christabel's sight of Geraldine's "heaving breasts" the next morning and suggests "that Geraldine is a classical vampire of great age; her breasts withered only when she hungers. After she has sated herself, whether by drinking blood or somehow draining the life-energy of her victim, her breasts are restored to sensual fullness" (222). While Geraldine's bosom is apparently replenished by this suckling, Christabel rises depleted and hissing.

Paglia has suggested that Coleridge left it unfinished because he did not want to kill off his preternaturally intense Geraldine. The poem was not included in the *Lyrical Ballads* because, as Coleridge explained to Humphrey Davy, it “was running up to 1300 lines—and was so much admired by Wordsworth, that he thought it indelicate to print two Volumes with his name in which so much of another man’s was included (*Letters I: 631-2*), and likewise wrote to Thomas Poole, “The truth is, the endeavor to finish *Christabel*, (which has swelled into a Poem of 1400 lines) for the second Volume of the *Lyrical Ballads* threw my business terribly back” (*Letters I: 634*). The poem that was eventually published, however, is merely 677 lines. Coleridge either destroyed his third part (which he claimed to have written in a letter to Byron in 1815), was too ashamed to admit he had not written more, or the poem—like the shadows in his bedroom that grew to monstrous size in the optical illusions of one of his “nightmairs”—loomed larger in his imagination than it did in reality. Whatever the truth of the matter is, if Coleridge did write any more of the intended five parts, these have not come down to us.

Coleridge gave various reasons for his inability to finish “*Christabel*”: dejection, “unutterable disgust” after translating *Wallenstein* (*Letters I: 643*), and the “suspended animation” of his “poetic powers” (*Complete Poems 504*). He claimed he always knew how it would end, however: “The reason of my not having finished *Christabel* is not that I don’t know how to do it; for I have, as I always had, the whole plan from beginning to end in my mind; but I fear I could not carry on with equal success the execution of the Idea—the most difficult, I think that can be attempted in Romantic Poetry—I mean witchery by daylight. I venture to think that Geraldine, as far as she goes, is successful—but I doubt any one being able to go much farther without recourse to some of the

common shifts” (CC I: 409-1410). Byron—whose vampire story was inspired by his recitation of *Christabel* in 1816—also could not finish his “witchery by daylight” and leaves his preternatural Darvell, who walks about in full sunshine, wizened to an aged corpse before he can claim a single victim (“Fragment of a Novel” 22).

*Carmilla*, Le Fanu’s rendition of “Christabel” that completes and revises it, suggests some of the perils of finishing the fragment and indicates some of the reasons Coleridge might have been reluctant or unable to do so. Le Fanu takes up the maternal theme in *Carmilla* and also makes his heroine motherless; yet he explains the link between the guardian maternal spirit and the vampire Carmilla by delineating their genealogy: they are both Karnsteins. Vampires in *Carmilla*, like those in Byron’s “Giaour,” feed upon their own kind:

But first, on earth as Vampire sent,  
 They corse shall from its tomb be rent;  
 Then ghastly haunt thy native place,  
 And suck the blood from all thy race;  
 There from thy daughter, sister, wife,  
 At midnight drain the stream of life. (*Ibid.* 17)

Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, which fleshes out the skeleton of Coleridge’s tale, has to resort “to some of the common shifts” to resolve the story.<sup>45</sup> It seems to lose some of its demonic intensity towards its denouement as a group of men band together to slay Carmilla,

---

<sup>45</sup> Nethercot notes some contemporary continuations and versions of the tale: “Christobell. A Gothic Tale,” published in 1815 and described as “a sequel to a beautiful legend of a fair lady and her father, deceived by a witch in the guise of a noble knight’s daughter;” J. Duncombe’s 1816 *Christabess*. By S. T. Colebritch, Esq.; *Blackwood’s* 1819 parodic continuation in which Christabel gets pregnant, attempts suicide, but ends up drunk on her mother’s wildflower wine; an 1820 “Parody of Christabelle;” W. F. Deacon’s 1824 burlesque; Hogg’s “Isabelle;” Martin Farquhar Tupper’s 1831 “Geraldine;” and Eliza Stewart’s 1841 “Christabel. Continued from Coleridge.” See *Road to Tryermaine* 34-40.

offering ample fact and reason for their deeds along the way in the form of learned monologues that are playfully sprinkled with references to “all the great and little works upon the subject” (146) as though spoofing Coleridge’s urge to document and gloss or Byron’s thorough vampiric footnotes. Nina Auerbach writes, “Laura’s point of view shrivels under this invasion of experts and official language, as does the vitality of Le Fanu’s story” (46). Perhaps Coleridge did well to leave his poem in a state of half-knowledge.

Ultimately, we do not know the truth of Geraldine’s heritage or her status as a supernatural being: is she really Lord Roland’s daughter, or is she merely impersonating her, as Coleridge’s doctor and companion James Gillman suggested? Is she a witch, as Coleridge’s contemporaries tended to call her, or a lamia, or “no witch or goblin, or malignant being of any kind, but a spirit, executing her appointed task with the best good will,” as Derwent Coleridge maintained (Nethercot 41)? A *Champion* reviewer complained, “What is it all about? What is the idea? Is Lady Geraldine a sorceress? or a vampire? or a man? or what is she, or he, or it?” (cited in *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose* 159). We cannot resolve either of these questions about Coleridge’s Geraldine, just as we do not know how to find La Belle Dame’s cave or verify the testimony of the knight-at-arms and his pale, preternatural witnesses.

Despite his preference for the symbolic, in “Christabel,” Coleridge’s use of names verges on the allegorical (Christabel, the “beautiful Christian;” Geraldine, the androgynous spear-wielder; Lionhearted Leoline; Barb Bracy, girded for balladic battle; Lord Roland, stubborn and brave like the hero of an epic), though the poem does not continue far enough for one to determine how true to their names his characters are. Le

Fanu picks up on this tendency in the poem, but turns it on its head and invents an odd linguistic convention for vampires. As he explains the history of Carmilla, a.k.a. “Mircalla” and “Millarca,” he indicates the dangers and limitations of spelling everything out:

Mircalla seemed to be limited to a name which, if not her real one, should at least reproduce, without omission or addition of a single letter, those, as we say, anagrammatically, which compose it. Carmilla did this; so did Millarca. (337)

Carmilla—confined to the mere repetition of life, and a theme and variations on Coleridge’s fragment—does not lack meanings, but drowns in them even as Laura drowns in the “nightmar” visions of water and suffocation. Each variation of her name suggests a host of interpretations: Mircalla, the beautiful (Calla) miracle (Mira); Carmilla, paradisiacal gardens (Carmella) as well as age-old carnage (Carnis + Mille); Millarca, a bridge across the ages. All these names are bounded by her family name and her fate, Karnstein, even as her carnivorous body is bounded by the stone (Stein) crypt where she must sleep. Though she spellbinds with her uncanny beauty, Carmilla herself is bound by the spelling of her name. In “Carmilla” as well as “Kubla Khan,” grammar retains its ancient meaning of “glamour” and spell casting, and the riddle of Carmilla’s demonic identity is a word game. Carmilla feeds upon her own name and her own kind, delaying the death of her descendant Laura in “murderous enjoyment with the refinement of an epicure” (337) the way she does not with her peasant victims.

In Keats’s poems, by contrast, names suggest but do not spell out. La Belle Dame Sans Merci is either mercilessly cruel to the knight-at-arms or mercilessly treated by him; Madeline’s apparent saintliness belies the history of her name; and Lamia is no simple

serpent demon who traffics in illusion and batters on humans. But by the time Le Fanu had written his rendition of “Christabel,” the Romantic *mysterium* had reincarnated as the Victorian mystery novel, and Carmilla’s fate, like the cipher of her name, is ultimately solvable. The implicit, unresolved lesbian vampirism or enthrallment of *Christabel* turns into the explicit, resolved Sapphic seductions of *Carmilla*, and the vampire gets staked in the end. Coleridge abandoned his fragment (or it abandoned him) before this could happen to his text, though the second part of “Christabel” already indicates his move towards full disclosure and suggests some of why Keats was fascinated and frustrated with its “Della Cruscan” enthrallments.

Other adaptations of the story Coleridge began to tell, however, indicate that it could be finished without losing its sublime obscurity. Though Carl Dreyer’s 1932 “Vampyr” was inspired by Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* in particular and *Through a Glass Darkly* in general (Twitchell 129; Kael 812),<sup>46</sup> it seems to have little to do with the vampire lesbian story apart from its female vampire and prey. In its use of shadows and unexplained mysteries, however, it comes closer to its granddame, “Christabel,”—or perhaps “Christabel” as Keats would have revised it. The description of Alan Gray in the film—“for whom the boundary between the real and the unreal has become dim”—seems closer to the end of “Ode to a Nightingale,” betwixt dreaming or waking, or perhaps to Coleridge himself whilst haunted by specters and shadow forms in the grip of opium, than it does to Le Fanu’s Baron Vordenburg. The film succeeds because Dreyer is at

---

<sup>46</sup> Ian Douglas notes yet another way Le Fanu might have inspired Dreyer: “the title of the collection of stories in which ‘Carmilla’ appears is *Through a Glass Darkly*, which may have suggested to Dreyer the extraordinary technique of having Rudolph Mate shoot the film through a gauze filter.” See <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/Douglas/DOUG9.HTM>.

home in the limbo of half-knowledge that generates an intensity “capable of making all disagreeables evaporate.”

Looking at Dreyer’s ability to leave the “Christabel” / *Carmilla* tale of female vampires in mysteries, uncertainties, and shadowy half-knowledge intimates some of the choices Coleridge could have made in finishing “Christabel” if the inspiration had come upon him once again—but one wonders if such a thing would have been possible for him. *Carmilla* suffers from having to resort “to some of the common shifts” (CC I: 409-1410) Coleridge had foreseen would perhaps be necessary for “any one” to take the tale “much farther,” and it is likely that even in 1798, he would have had trouble avoiding them. In a poem he characterized as “witchery by daylight,” the shadows of the *mysterium* have little place to hide and Coleridge’s special effects, seen in the clear light of day, begin to look strained in the second half of the poem. Keats might have agreed with Coleridge’s assessment “that Geraldine, as far as she goes, is successful,” at least in the first section of the poem, though he did mock its tendency to rule out the dimensions of the shadow world in rule and line in a letter, and he mostly likely seconded the disappointment of Charles Lamb and Leigh Hunt with the poem’s second half. But the first section seemed to haunt him with its witchery by midnight, and he echoed it in “The Eve of St. Agnes” and other poems and used a line from it to praise Kean’s Shakespearean intensity. Keats’s substitution of “thing” for Coleridge’s “sight” in his misquotation of “A sight to dream of, not to tell!” is perhaps telling; the former bespeaks of an obscure horror half-seen in the Penetralium of mystery, the later of witchery seen by daylight. If Keats had attempted his own version of the poem, it might have been more along the lines of Dreyer’s 1931 horror film than Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, leaving one in “a luxury of twilight.”

The closest analog for this hypothetical version of the tale is *Lamia*, whose web of seduction and sorcery is only rent by a fatal encounter with fact and reason: the unforgiving clarity of Apollonius' gaze.

## V

### *The Sense of an Ending*

In an essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry," Ann Radcliffe argued that "obscurity, or indistinctness, is only a negative, which leaves the imagination to act upon the few hints that truth reveals to it...Obscurity leaves something for the imagination to exaggerate" (150). Half-glimpsed specters are more terrible than those that appear in full sunlight, and the most horrifying aspect of a nightmare, as Coleridge well knew, is the thing that cannot be expressed in words. In a recent study of Coleridge and dreaming, Jennifer Ford argues that "The nightmair is a powerful illustration of the nothingness, the essential emptiness of sominal experience: the hideous shapes cannot be remembered, nothing can be seen, nothing can be imagined" (111). This is the horror of Positive Negation, the dread of essential formlessness at the limits of the imagination. Coleridge attempted to limn the shadow lines of his imagination in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, "Kubla Khan," and "Christabel," but could not let them remain in the obscure half-light of the *mysterium* for long. He seemed to become increasingly more comfortable examining the poetry of others, or transcendental philosophy, or the mysteries of religion than conjuring daemons from the realm of dreams and "nightmairs." Perhaps his will-to-gloss, to append notes and epigrams and apologies to his poems and write vast metaphysical treatises, arises in part from his insecurity with the shadows he

had called forth; in the light of reason, the horrifying mistiness of the *adytum* diminishes. “When we know the full extent of any danger,” Burke noted, “when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes” (99).

Both Keats and Coleridge were influenced by the Gothic, with its aesthetic of the fragment and obscurity. “Christabel” and “The Eve of St. Agnes” partake of Radcliffean castles, carvings, and Medieval shadow figures; “Kubla Khan” and “Cap and Bells” owe much to the Gothic fetishization of all things Eastern; and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” are the foster-children of old ballads, faux Gothic documents, and antiquated travel writings. Both poets, however, also depart from the Gothic aesthetic: Keats’s quest for “beauty and truth” is opposite to the Burkean definition of the sublime, and Coleridge’s domestic and political poems often partake of the spirit of his age. Keats’s sense of intensity arising from half-knowledge and obscurity ultimately owes more to Shakespeare and Milton than to “Dame Radcliffe” and other 18<sup>th</sup> Century writers. And yet he would have agreed with the assessment of Sterne (to whom he alludes several times in his letters) that “no author” who understands his business

would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader’s understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own. (*Tristram Shandy* 79)

Coleridge, as Pater points out, had “a strong native bent towards the tracking of all questions, critical or practical, to first principles” (145) and full knowledge. If his books are often “bundles of notes” (*Ibid.* 147) and his poems are fragmentary, he nonetheless

provides notes to his notes and frames his fragments with explanations, glosses, and prefaces that are often powerful in their own right.<sup>47</sup> Keats, on the other hand, once said that “he would rather burn the piece in question” than revise it (*Keats Circle* I: 129). Stillinger argues that “where Keats’s creative activity on a poem stopped... when the poem was more or less finished,” Coleridge had the opposite impulse and revised “not just once or twice, but again and again (seemingly obsessively) over a lifetime” (*Textual Instability* 106)—possibly out of a genuine uncertainty about the worth of his own creations. Coleridge kept coming back to many of his works and added, appended, or removed sections until the final work often seemed like a poetic version of Walpole’s Strawberry Hill, composed of bits from a number of periods and in a variety of styles. Coleridge’s gothic ruins have scaffolding; his dreams and nightmar specters have taxonomies;<sup>48</sup> and his forays into the mysterium have road maps unsurpassed in their craftsmanship—even though the shadow terrain they attempt to fix shifts at every moment like the dark tower of Browning’s poem.

By 1817, Coleridge had long ceased to visit that shadow realm voluntarily, whereas Keats was just beginning to explore the “dark passages” leading to the “Penetralium of mystery.” Yet perhaps if Keats had survived his final illness, he would have come to understand Coleridge’s horror of Positive Negation. Even before he left England, Keats began to realize that

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: a

---

<sup>47</sup> For more on the Romantic interest in the fragment, see Marjorie Levinson’s *The Romantic Fragment Poem* (Chapel Hill, 1986), Thomas McFarland’s *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* (Princeton, 1981), Balachandra Rajan’s *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound* (Princeton, 1985)

<sup>48</sup> See Keats’s April 16, 1819 letter in which Coleridge delineates “different genera and species of dreams.”

thing I begin to understand a little....The difference of high Sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this—in the latter we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings and with all [the] horror of a bare shoulderd Creature—in the former case, our shoulders are fledge<d> , and we go thro' the same air and space without fear. (*Letters I: 277*)

As he lay dying in Rome, Keats felt the horror of not having a “palpable design on” him to ease the burden of the mystery. Severn wrote that Keats’s “mind is worse than all—despair in every shape—his imagination and memory present every image in horror, so strong that morning and night I tremble for his Intellect....How he can be Keats again from all this I have little hope” (*KC I: 177*). Coleridge let go of the seeming truths he encountered in the Penetralium of mystery; Keats could not let them go, could not dispel them with Apollonius’s gaze of fact and reason, and his life at its close came to resemble Coleridge’s “nightmair” vision of *Limbo* of the limits of the mind and the limits of existence: “A fear—a future state—‘tis positive Negation!” The mental receptivity that had served Keats so well in poetry also made him susceptible to debilitating apprehension and all the horrors of dying without any sure philosophy to comfort him.

Keats and Suspicion:  
The Negative Aspect of Negative Capability

I

*Wild Surmises*

“Who killed John Keats?”

—Lord Byron

Two months before he died, Keats made a startling confession. He was not dying of consumption, as his friend Joseph Severn had come to believe, but of something more sinister. Shaken and confused, Severn reported the conversation to Keats’s publisher in a letter that was later rather suspiciously mutilated:

his dreadful state of mind turns to {per}secuti{on and some}times even murder—  
he is now under the {*a few words missing*} was administered to him by an  
individual in London— (*Keats Circle* I: 180)

Although most scholars and biographers have attributed Keats’s suspicions of persecution, betrayal, and murder to consumptive dementia, this was not the first time he had made such a charge. Keats’s suspicions had begun long before December 1820 and were not without some justification. As early as his 1817 stay in the Isle of Wight, Keats described being “nervus” and unwell, plagued by his mistrust of his friends, undefined ailments, and visions of dead poets. A year later, he wrote that he had long “suspected everybody” and admitted to his friend Benjamin Bailey feeling “full of suspicions” while in the midst of his *annus mirabilis* (*Letters of John Keats* I: 292). Such thoughts had

inflected and infected his poetry and letters from 1817 onwards until they became a nightmare version of his Negative Capability. The ability to let his “mind be a thoroughfare of all thoughts” (*Letters* II: 213) enabled him to write his best work, but it also made him prone to apprehension and mistrust. He could readily imagine a thousand pleasant scenarios—and a thousand unpleasant ones. Keats famously compared the artist to a spider that is able to weave a “tapestry empyrean” anchored on only a few twigs and leaves of experience. Likewise, his fear and distrust had some basis in facts, but he did not need much to go on. This chapter will investigate the grounds for such misgivings, examine how they influenced his poetry and letters from 1817 onwards, and develop a “wild surmise” about the connection between Keats’s Negative Capability and his capacious suspicions.

Keats’s letters are famous for their empathetic kindness as well as their poetic insights, bespeaking of the “great poet and noble-hearted man” his friends remembered so fondly (Sharp 87). They also tell another story. Despite his amiable nature, Keats was distrustful of his friends and the sisters of his friends, casting a wary eye on strangers and relations alike. Even the friendly overtures of Hunt and Shelley seemed to have ulterior motives. “Does Shelley go on telling strange stories of the death of kings?” Keats wrote cryptically to Hunt in 1817. “Tell him there are strange stories of the death of poets—some have died before they were conceived” (*Letters* I: 140). When Houghton later published Keats’s epistolary accusations of his peers, Hunt complained that Keats had “suspicions to excess...[he] suspected both Shelley and myself” (*Autobiography* II: 202f.). The openness of mind that served Keats so well in poetry was often a torment to him in his personal life. In his suspicious imagination, friends, lovers, and enemies alike

persecuted him, and sometimes the lines between them blurred.<sup>49</sup> As Keats's health deteriorated, these thoughts intensified until he came to mistrust the people who were once closest to him. After hearing of his deathbed revelations, Mr. Finch maintained that the poet had "been infamously treated by the very persons whom his generosity had rescued from want and woe" (*Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley* II: 299-300), and even before Keats left England, villains and loved ones had rung changes in his mind. "I suspect a few people to hate me well enough, for reasons I know of, who have pretended a great friendship for me," he wrote to his fiancée in (*Letters* II: 293). "People are revengeful." Nor was she exempt from his suspicions, as his final poems and agonized letters to her attest.

Keats's suspicions of his friends, fiancée, and rivals—justified or not—were infectious. Fanny Brawne wrote to Keats's sister, "Some day my dear girl I will...give you additional cause to hate those who should have been his friends," adding that Keats had been "murdered by the mere malignancy of the world, joined to want of feeling in those who ought above all to have felt for him" (*Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats* 20). She harbored a particular resentment towards the Reynolds family, who disapproved of her intimacy with Keats. While Fanny gossiped about them, they gossiped about her. "I hear that Keats is going to Rome," Miss Reynolds wrote to Mrs. Dilke (quoted in Murry 62). "His mind and spirits must be bettered by it; and absence may probably weaken, if not break off, a connection that has been a most unhappy one for him." John Reynolds likewise rejoiced in Keats's imminent removal from Fanny and "Leigh Hunt's

---

<sup>49</sup> Walter Jackson Bate writes of Keats's fears of persecution and murder: "He could have been thinking of William Gifford, possibly even some of his own friends" (689).

indecent discourings” (*Keats Circle* I: 156) and complained that Keats had been “haunted by one or two heartless and demented people.”

Surely one of these “heartless and demented people” was the famously narcissistic Benjamin Haydon, who accused Hunt and Shelley of being “abandoned of principles” with the same ink that he wrote of his struggles to keep from raping the sixteen-year old maid in the next room.<sup>50</sup> He ranted against purblind humanity throughout his journals in an unhinged manner; for example, after complaining about the lack of sufficient appreciation for his genius, Haydon fantasized about escaping to the wilderness:

I would...vent my rage on the trees, the stones, the birds, the animals, & glory with extatic rapture, to meet a *solitary human* being *without defence* on whom I might vent my hatred of human nature! And gratify my tiger feelings by tearing out his heart & drinking his blood! And then strip my body, my half clothed & ragged body, & paint it with grinning faces in the blood yet warm and unclotted by the air! Ah, ah, Revenge, Revenge, thou dear, dear, dear passion! Revenge, the great mind’s solace! The balm of disappointed Genius! The nectar of a soul parched & dried up by poverty & ruin! Curses, Curses, Curses, endless, withering, Hellish, from that lower Hell where the most Hellish rebels are down deeper thrown—light, blast, scathe those who could dim a brain so brilliant & a heart so tender to such bitter, bitter solace! (474)

Not surprisingly, Haydon eventually committed suicide.

---

<sup>50</sup> Haydon rationalized, “Was it manly to let a nice girl sleep so near one and at least [sic] without making an attempt?” Perhaps he was successful, for he blacked out the last ten lines he wrote on the subject. See *The Diary of Robert Benjamin Haydon*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 132-137.

Keats's suspicions influenced his friend Charles Brown in a different way: he vented all his rage on Keats's brother. "George is a scoundrel!" he fumed after George took a large chunk of Keats's inheritance back with him to America just a week before the poet collapsed (*Keats Circle* I: 201). "I sit planning schemes of vengeance upon his head....the world will cry aloud for the cause of their Keats's untimely death, and I will give it. O Severn, nothing on my part could stop that cruel brother's hand." Dilke sided with George against Brown after Keats's death, and the friction between the two eventually ended their thirty-five year friendship. Dilke believed that George had only taken what was due to him and could never understand the virulency of Brown's diatribes. If Brown's accusations seem extreme, however, he was taking a cue from Keats himself, who observed, "George ought not to have done this" (Brawne 34) and never wrote to his brother again.

Nonetheless, Brown also came under the fire of Keats's suspicions. Brown flirted with Fanny Brawne and wrote her a bawdy Valentine that ended with the lines, "Pray were you never spanked / At school for being naughty" (Brown xiii-xiv)? Keats jealously warned her to stay away from Brown "and his indecencies" (*Letters* II: 213) and said that Brown's flirtations were "doing [him] to death by inches" (*Letters* II: 203). Brown was not the most prepossessing of Keats's friends, but he had an easy flirtatious manner with women that tormented Keats and left him profoundly distrustful. Brown also made others in their circle uneasy. When rumors began to fly about Dilke Sr.'s mysterious illness, suspicion immediately fell on Brown, perhaps because his own brother had died of poisoning in 1815, leaving him a sizable inheritance (*Everlasting Spell* 22). "Sam whispered something to you concerning Brown and old Mr. Dilke which

had the complexion of something derogatory to the former,” Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne (*Letters II*: 279). “It was connected with an anxiety about Mr. D Sr’s death and an anxiety to set out for Chichester.” Keats acquitted Brown of this offense, but at one point vowed never to speak to his philandering roommate again. Though he eventually forgave his friend, begging him to come to Rome and writing his final letter to him, for a time at least, their friendship was wracked by Keats’s suspicions.

When Brown was not accusing George Keats of his brother’s death or defending his own behavior, he turned his ire towards Keats’s critics. “After twenty years, with all the charity of which my nature is capable,” he reflected in his *Life of Keats*, “my belief continues to be that he was destroyed by hirelings, under the imposing name of Reviewers” (*Keats Circle II*: 95-96). Brown was not alone in this view; several of Keats’s contemporaries, including Severn, Shelley, and Lord Byron, believed Keats had been done in by bad press. “Adonais has drunk poison!” Shelley accused in *Adonais*, popularizing the view that the “savage and Tartarly” critics had slaughtered the young poet. Reading their villainous attacks, Shelley explained, unsettled Keats’s mind so much that he fatally ruptured a blood vessel. Shelley railed at the *Quarterly Review*, “Nor shall it be your excuse that, murderer as you are, you have spoken daggers but used none” (*Complete Poems*, 409-410). Whatever their effect on Keats, the reviews did cause one death: John Scott died in a duel over them. Keats might not have been “snuff’d out by an article,” but he did feel vengeful toward John Gibson Lockhart and his minions. He reveled in Hazlitt’s diatribe against Gifford and wrote to a friend, “If I die, you must ruin Lockhart” (*Finney II*: 746)!

Perhaps one could write off such suspicions, as Hunt does, as “irritable morbidity” arising out of a tuberculosis-induced paranoia. Or perhaps “after all it may be a nervousness proceeding from the Mercury” (*Letters I*: 369) he had been taking or from another drug “of a nerve-shaking nature” (*Letters II*: 262), as Keats himself speculates. Then again, he was inclined to “run into most wild surmises” (*Complete Poems*, 55) in his earliest writings, a characteristic of his strongest writing. Whatever the effect medication (including opium, digitalis, and mercury) may have had on him, he also noted how “illness...relieved [his] Mind of a load of deceptive thoughts and images” and that he had had “haunting and deformed thoughts” while he had “been or supposed” himself “to be in health” (*Letters II*: 260). It was apparently one of these “haunting and deformed thoughts” which he wrote to Brown six months later. In a tantalizingly incomplete letter Keats wrote to him in 1820, Keats reveals a “secret” that may have something to do with his later suspicions of murder. The original of this letter is no longer extant; the only copy available comes from Brown’s *Life of Keats*, and he omitted several lines and possibly paraphrased others. Brown wrote a footnote after each omission (set here in italics) to explain that the missing sentences “contained [a] secret:”

I shall make some confession, which you will be the only person, for many reasons, I shall trust with. A winter in England would, I have not a doubt, kill me; so I have resolved to go to Italy, either by sea or land. Not that I have any great hopes of that,—for, I think, there is a core of disease in my not easy to pull out.\* (Note)

XXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXX If I should die XXXXXX I shall be obliged to set off in a month.

*\*(Brown's Note) The omitted passage contained the secret. He went to Italy in pursuance of his physician's urgent advice. (KC II: 78)*

In his following letter to Brown, Keats again alluded to his “confession;” once again, Brown crossed out words and offered a footnote of explanation:

*+(Note) XXXXXXXX I ought to be off at the end of this week, as the cold winds begin to blow towards evening—but I will wait till I have your answer from this.*

*+(Note) The commencement is a continuation of the secret in his former letter, ending with a request that I would accompany him to Italy. (KC II: 78-79)*

The connection between Keats's fears of poisoning and his “secret” revelation to Brown, like the connection between Negative Capability and suspicion, has never been explored. Keats's friends had already speculated that he might have consumption, and it seems an unlikely candidate for his secret; after all, Brown crossed out the passages *after* Keats had reputedly died of the disease. In 1883, B. W. Richardson attributed Keats's secret to a physical ailment, speculating that he had an “indiscretion” in 1817 for which he took mercury. Since that time, critics have hypothesized that Keats's secret was that he had contracted either syphilis or gonorrhea.

Yet the basis for the theory that Keats had venereal disease is an inconclusive letter he wrote on October 8, 1817 to Bailey:

*After a tolerable journey I went from Coach to Coach to as far as Hampstead where I found my Brothers—the next morning finding myself tolerably well I*

went to Lambs Conduit Street....But do not sacrifice your heal[t]h to Books do take it kindly and not so voraciously I am certain if you are your own Physician your stomach will resume its proper strength and then what great Benefits will follow...The little Mercury I have taken has corrected the Poison and improved my Health—though I feel from my employment I shall never again be secure in Robustness. (*Letters I*: 170-171)

Unless Keats contracted a venereal disease from one of the “handywomen” who assisted in dressing wounds at Guy’s and St. Thomas’s or from the elderly landlady in the Isle of Wight where he wrote *Endymion*, it is difficult to imagine how Keats could have contracted gonorrhoea “*from [his] employment*” (perhaps he simply meant that his activities worsened his health).

Poetry, on the other hand, was often thought in Regency times to be inimical to mental and physical health. Keats’s advice to Bailey to moderate his intense study and save his health reflects this view. In letters from that spring, Keats attributed his growing anxiety, dizziness, and faintness to too much reading and writing: “I thought so much about Poetry so long together that I could not get to sleep at night,” and after “a Week or so I became not over capable in my upper Stories,” he explained to Hunt; he had to avoid being “in continual burning of thought” (*Letters I*: 138). Likewise, he explained to Taylor and Hesse, “I went day by day at my Poem for a Month at the end of which time the other day I found my Brain so overwrought that I had neither Rhyme nor reason in it...instead of Poetry I have a swimming in my head—And feel all the effects of a Mental Debauch....I was not right in my head when I came” (*Letters I*: 146). He continued to make such psychosomatic connections between illness and poetry from 1817 until his

final letter. Negative Capability appeared to have a negative effect on his health: the speculations “necessary for a poem,” he wrote, “are great enemies to the recovery of” the body (*Letters II*: 360).

Keats was not the only one to attribute his “little poison” to an excess of poetry. After his first hemorrhage in 1820, Keats writes, “The Doctor assures me that there is nothing the matter with me except nervous irritability<sup>51</sup> and a general weakness of the whole system which has proceeded from my anxiety of mind of late years and the too great excitement of poetry” (*Letters II*: 287), and he was advised to study geometry to improve his poetically damaged mind and body. Shelley had apparently been given similar advice, and jocularly wrote to Maria Gisborne:

...as to nerves,

With cones and parallelograms and curves

I've sworn to strangle them. (337)

This was a common view at the time, expressed, for example, by the doctor Thomas Beddoes in *Hygëia* when he spoke of Gothic novels “as baneful to health” and prescribed the “universally remarked” cure of “geometrical studies” (169). Dr. Clark in Rome similarly concluded, “His mental exertions and application,” he wrote, “have I think been the sources of his complaints” (*Keats Circle I*: 172). The intensities of poetry he had described in his December 1817 letter to his brothers seemed to have worn out his body. A contemporary physician would have a far different assessment, but Keats must have been a good diagnostician for his time; his doctors early and late tended to agree with his initial self-assessment that his decline was largely due to an extended “mental debauch.”

---

<sup>51</sup> Keats noted in his *Anatomical and Physiological Notebook*, “If doctors don’t know what an ailment is, they call it nervous” (57).

The other letters cited to indicate Keats's contraction of venereal disease are equally inconclusive:

Johnny Martin cant [sic] be there he is ill—I suspect—but that's neither here nor there—all I can say is I wish him well through it as I am like to be. For this fortnight I am confined at Hampstead—Saturday evening was my first day in town—...my Brother Tom look'd very unwell yesterday and I am for shipping him off to Lisbon. Perpaps [sic] I shall ship there with him....he is the only Man 'who has kept watch on Man's Mortality' who has philanthropy enough to overcome the disposition [to an indolent enjoyment of intellect—who is brave enough to volunteer for uncomfortable hours....I have not been well enough to stand the chance of a Wet night....I am affraid [sic] your health will suffer from over study before your examination—I think you might regulate the thing according to your own Pleasure—and I would too—...When you are settled I will come and take a peep at your Church—your house—try whether I shall have grow[n] two [sic] lusty for my chair—by the fire side—and take a peep at my cardials Bower—A Question is the best beacon towards a little Speculation. You ask me after my health and spirits—This Question ratifies in my Mind what I have said above—Health and Spirits only belong unalloyed to the selfish Man—the Man who thinks much of his fellows can never be in Spirits—when I am not suffering for vicious

beastliness I am the greater part of the week in spirits. (*Letters I: 172-175*)

And

I am glad to say you are in a fair Way for Easter—you will get through your unpleasant reading and then!—but the world is full of troubles and I have not much reason to think myself pesterd [sic] with many—I think Jane or Mariane 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—you perhaps at one time thought there was such a thing as Wordly Happiness to be arrived at, at certain periods of time marked out—you have of necessity of disposition been this led away—I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness—I look not for it be it not in the present hour— (*Letters I: 186*)

Apparently, the Reynolds sisters saw a similarity between Tom's symptoms and Keats's illness. Although Tom had not yet begun spitting blood, he was nonetheless unwell enough for his brothers to talk of sending him to a better climate; in his letter to Bailey a month earlier, Keats had spoken of how his "Brother Tom look'd very unwell yesterday and I am for shipping him off to Lisbon. Perpaps [sic] I shall ship there with him" (*Letters I: 172*). Tom was not simply pining for love or indiscreetly complaining of genital lesions to the Reynolds sisters at that time, but coughing and wasting away; perhaps Keats's sore throat, cough, and weight loss had already begun to bother him.

Whatever his condition, Keats feared that a cold, wet night (like the one that would later incite his lung hemorrhage) would make it worse. It is possible that he took a Devon maid for a roll in the clover, but there is no the evidence for it, and certainly not enough to say he was racked by venereal disease. He does not warn Bailey to avoid strumpets in his letter, but not to “sacrifice [his] health to Books” or give in to “disagreeables.” Keats does include some sexual punning in his letter, but he treats the matter playfully and not as a “vicious beastliness,” as has been suggested. At this time, Keats never describes in his rather physically candid letters having any of the symptoms of gonorrhoea or primary or secondary syphilis, nor can we attribute his growing paranoia to the madness of tertiary syphilis that occurs after an asymptomatic period of years or decades, for Keats was just 21 at the time and did not have any of the accompanying symptoms of the late form of that disease (*Essential Pathology* 320).

C.T. Andrews, MD, has pointed out the innumerable ailments for which doctors prescribed mercury in the nineteenth century (33-47), although Sir Astley Cooper, Keats’s most prestigious instructor while he was a medical student, did not advocate the use of it for gonorrhoea. Dr. Sawrey, who did use it to treat this disease, does not appear in Keats’s letters until three months after he writes of taking mercury. The only other time Keats mentions taking mercury (possibly mercurious chloride, used for colds) occurs on September 21, 1818 after he had been suffering a sore throat, not lesions. Although Gittings maintains that Keats would have written “Calomel” (or mercurious chloride, which was prescribed for many illnesses) rather than mercury if he had meant he was taking the compound (448), Keats does not state any other symptoms above a sore throat in September 1818. Furthermore, George Keats writes of taking a dose of Calomel

on January 30, 1820; a few days later, after his own collapse, Keats notes that “George has been running great chance of a similar attack” (*Letters II*: 251).

Another theory about the secret Brown omitted from Keats’s letters was that it was not about venereal disease at all, but his engagement to Fanny Brawne. The Reynolds family apparently did not know the attachment was serious; John Reynolds rejoiced that Keats’s trip would take him away from “That poor idle Thing of womankind, to whom he has so unaccountably attached himself” (*Keats Circle I*: 156), and Mrs. Reynolds likewise wrote that she hoped the separation would cure Keats of his infatuation (Murry 62). Presumably, if they had known that the engagement was fixed, they would not have encouraged Keats to break off his attachment. Yet their lack of knowledge on the subject is scarcely surprising, for Keats would have included them in the group of “Laughers” with whom he had ceased to be intimate because of their criticisms of Fanny.

To Brown, however, Keats had already confessed his love for Fanny back in September 1818, and it would be hard to keep his engagement a secret from a man who lived with Keats in the other half of the Hampstead house he had rented to the Brawne family. The crossed out section of the letter follows an observation about Keats’s illness and is tied to his physician’s insistence that he leave England immediately, suggesting that Keats’s “secret” was connected to his illness. In his biography of Keats, Robert Gittings also takes this view, writing that the letter

contained a mysterious confession, which Brown called “the secret,”  
and refused to reveal to the world. This has universally thought to  
be the news of Keats’s engagement to Fanny; but this cannot have

been news at this time to Brown, when, many months before, friends had noticed that the matter was “quite a settled thing.” The secret was written down after the remark, “I think there is a core of disease in me not easy to pull out,” and Brown himself connected it with “his physician’s urgent advice.” It probably therefore refers to some physical state, real or imagined...It may be that he was referring to some secret physical or medical cause. (*John Keats* 406)

Keats had trained at Guy’s and St. Thomas’s United Hospitals and received a diploma of Licentiate enabling him to practice as an apothecary, an occupation that was no longer simply that of a pharmacist, but closer to that of a general practitioner.<sup>52</sup> Keats entered medical school at the time of the landmark Apothecaries Act in 1815 that allowed apothecaries to receive thorough medical training and practice not only medicine, pharmacy, and botany, but also material medica and chemistry.<sup>53</sup> In addition, as Hermione de Almeida explains, Keats’s five-year apprenticeship to Hammond gave him “the requisite training in surgery, diagnosis, and prescription deemed necessary for a provincial doctor” as well as “familiarity with the full complement of common diseases” well beyond “the range of specialized London physicians or surgeons.”<sup>54</sup> Sir Astley Cooper was impressed enough with Keats’s performance to appoint him to the competitive position of dresser—one of only four at Guy’s Hospital. Later Keats recalled

---

<sup>52</sup> Gareth Evans, “John Keats and the Botanic Pharmacy,” *The Keats-Shelley Review*, 16 (2002), 38. See also Donald C. Goellnicht, *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984), pp. 37-38.

<sup>53</sup> “Fourth Report of the General Committee of Associated Apothecaries of England and Wales,” *The London Medical and Physical Journal*, 31 (1814), 512.

<sup>54</sup> Hermione De Almeida, *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 25.

“opening ... a man’s temporal artery” with “the utmost nicety” (*Keats Circle* II: 56), though the experience unnerved him.

Keats learned much from his dressership and continued to practice informally what he learned there, advising his relatives, his fiancée, his friends, and even his publisher on how to avoid falling ill from the cold weather, bad eating habits, lack of exercise, or noxious London vapors (see, for example, *Letters* I: 343). He evaluated the medical care of his brother Tom (*Letters* I: 196), Reynolds (*Letters* I: 236), and Mrs. Dilke (*Letters* II: 217), nursed his brother Tom in his final illness, and even set a broken leg. When Keats was dying en route to Rome and suffering from seasickness, he still “ascended his bed—from which he dictated surgically—like Esculapius of old in baso-relievo—through him—Miss C was recovered” (*Letters* II: 342). Although Keats gave up his medical studies for poetry, he later considered becoming a ship’s surgeon and remarked in 1818 that he planned to re-read his medical texts (*Letters* II: 277). He also conceived of a poet as a “physician to all men” in *The Fall of Hyperion* (365). Thus, Keats’s speculations and suspicions about his “physical state, real or imagined” and his possible poisoning had some grounding in his sound medical training and knowledge of anatomy. “Keats sees all,” Severn lamented to Haslam; “his knowledge of anatomy makes it tenfold worse at every change” (*Letters* II: 370).

Keats had reason to be suspicious about his illness. None of his doctors could agree on a diagnosis. Dr. Rodd put Keats on a starvation diet and told him not to read or write poetry (*Letters* II: 257); Dr. Bree attributed his illness to an “anxiety of mind” (*Letters* II: 287) and gave him medication to calm his heart palpitations (probably

digitalis);<sup>55</sup> and Dr. Darling sent him packing for Italy, thereby hastening his death. Dr. Rodd and Dr. Bree, however, agreed on one thing: despite his hemorrhage, “both unhesitatingly declared that his lungs were uninjured” (*Letters* II: 280). Finally, when Dr. Clark examined Keats in Rome, he reported that “The chief part of the disease, as far as I can yet see seems seated in his Stomach” (*Keats Circle* I: 172). In his biography of Keats, Walter Jackson Bate commented, “It catches our interest that so intelligent a man as Clark should have begun to speculate in the same way that Rodd and Dr. Bree had done months before” (675). Sir William Hale-White, consulting physician to Guy’s Hospital, says in some perplexity that Clark’s statements on Keats’s health “are difficult to understand” for he “was a shrewd physician with, at any rate later in his life, an excellent knowledge of consumption” (63). Clark’s contemporaries certainly thought so. His *Treatise* on consumption received a favorable report in *Combe’s Physiology Applied to the Preservation of Health*, *The Medical Quarterly Review*, *The Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*, the *Medico-Chiurgical Review*, the *Lancet*, and *The British and Foreign Medical Review*. Clark might not have been a brilliant doctor (he later misdiagnosed a tumor as pregnancy), but he was well-respected in his time and went on to be one of Queen Victoria’s medical advisors. Nonetheless, when Dr. Clark first examined Keats, he did not see signs of consumption. Instead, he worried that Keats was plagued by stomach ailments and had some secret trouble. “I fear,” he wrote, “there is something operating on his mind” (*Keats Circle* I: 172).

In his *Treatise on Pulmonary Consumption*, Clark explained that after taking the patient’s history and inquiring after his symptoms, one should determine whether or not

---

<sup>55</sup> See Thomas Dormandy, *The White Death: A History of Tuberculosis* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 17.

he was particularly susceptible to the illness. According to Clark, this predisposition to consumption, or “Tuberculous Cachexia,” is either acquired or inherited (often from the mother) and frequently runs in families—a theory that, however erroneous, had some basis in the fact that whole families were often wiped out by the infectious disease.<sup>56</sup>

Mentally, the consumptive mind was thought to execute “The intellectual functions...with a preternatural degree of activity,” for “a premature development of the mental faculties” is “a frequent accompaniment of the tuberculous habit” as is a “great sensibility to impressions” (18).<sup>57</sup> In his book *Sanative Influence of Climate*, Clark also wrote that “the digestive organs are very generally deranged” (44) in many cases of consumption, and “palpitation is a frequent symptom” (45). Yet despite the fact that Keats’s mother, uncle, and brother apparently died of consumption (though Clark was uncertain about his brother’s cause of death) and Keats developed his mental faculties quickly at a young age, exhibited a “great sensibility to impressions,” and suffered from stomach “derangement,” heart palpitations, wasting and a cough—all of which Clark later identified as characteristic of the consumptive patient—the doctor nonetheless failed to make a diagnosis of “confirmed consumption”<sup>58</sup> until Keats was on his deathbed.

---

<sup>56</sup> Clark, p. 18. In his belief in inherited consumption, Clark followed such physicians as Thomas Beddoes. See Beddoes’s *Essay on the Causes, Early Signs, and Prevention of Pulmonary Consumption for the Use of Parents and Preceptors*, 2nd ed. (London: Longman and Rees, and Bristol: W. Sheppard, 1799), pp.4-5.

<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Hunt wrote of how Keats’s eyes, “At the recital of a noble action or beautiful thought would suffuse with tears and his mouth trembled. In this there was ill health” (quoted in Murchie 236).

<sup>58</sup> In his book *“Darkling I Listen”: The Last Days of John Keats* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), p. 183, n. 109, John Evangelist Walsh argues that Dr. Clark’s use of this term indicates that he used a stethoscope on Keats, but Laennec’s invention was not widely known at the time and Dr. Clark later admitted to having trouble using it. “Confirmed consumption” was not expressive of a doctor’s certainty so much as a description of an “inveterate or incurable” phase of the disease itself, as Clark writes in his *Treatise*: “No physician, acquainted with the morbid anatomy of Tuberculous Consumption, can for a moment indulge the hope that we shall ever be able to cure what is usually termed ‘confirmed consumption,’” pp. 12-13.

Keats's enigmatic death surprised both his doctor and his friends, some of whom—like Brown—had attributed his predictions of death to a tendency to expect the worst of every situation. Dr. Clark stated in 1820 that he “never met an instance where a patient was so quickly pulled down” (Sharp 84), and Severn reported that he “was taken by surprise at the suddenness of the collapse, as [Clark] had a favorable opinion of his patient, and had encouraged me in thinking that Keats would recover” (Sharp 90). This “most unlooked-for relapse” occurred on December 10th, 1820 after Severn left Keats alone for a few hours. “It has been so sudden upon what I thought convalescence, and without any seeming cause,” he wrote, “that I cannot calculate on the next change.” Long after Keats's death, Severn was haunted by the inexplicability of his friend's collapse:

Here in Rome, as I write, I look back through forty years of worldly changes to behold Keats's dear image again in memory. It seems as if he should be living with me now, insomuch as I never could understand his strange and contradictory death, his falling away so suddenly from health and strength. (“On the Vicissitudes of Keats's Fame” 401)

To a friend Keats once wrote, “They say men near death however mad they have been, come to their senses” before dying (*Letters* II: 68). Whether Keats's fears of persecution, betrayal, and murder were evidence of his insanity or of his final lucidity, they have influenced his poetry and letters in ways that have not yet been elucidated. They not only had an impact on his late writings, but also his major odes, romances, early lyrics, and letters and form the negative aspect of Negative Capability. The perplexing symptoms

his doctors found difficult to diagnose also found their way into his poetry. When Keats wrote in his “Ode to a Nightingale,” “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk” (*Complete Poems* 279), he was not simply engaging in an Anatomy of Melancholy; he actually *did* feel pains in his heart, numbness, and leaden heaviness, as he described in a letter: “my hand feels like lead—and yet it is and [sic] unpleasant numbness it does not take away the pain of existence” (*Letters* I: 287). Elsewhere, he complained of heart palpitations, lethargy,<sup>59</sup> and “oppression” in the chest, symptoms that also appear in “Ode on Indolence”: “summer-indolence / Benumbed my eyes; my pulse grew less and less; / Pain had no sting, and pleasure’s wreath no flower” (284-285).

In addition, the famous fevers and frets in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” appear in his verse as early as the 1816 “I Stood Tip-Toe” (perhaps influenced by his medical studies) and 1817 “After Dark Vapours” that also muses on “a Poet’s death.” He had “fears that [he] may cease to be” even in his early verses. Perhaps he prognosticated his own end early on, or perhaps these early symptoms and suspicions arose out of his “horrible Morbidity.” And yet his sonnet on the Elgin Marbles, with its meditation on early death and “most dizzy pain,” was not simply a poetic conceit, but also a description of the dizzy nervousness he felt at the time: “I feel rather muzzy,” he wrote (*Letters* I: 130), and complained of “a swimming in [his] head” (*Letters* I: 146). This “narvus” dizziness and

---

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, his summer 1818 letters to Bailey (*Letters* I: 287) and the Jeffreys sisters (I: 289) as well as his October 1819 comments to Fanny Brawne (*Letters* II: 223). Keats’s poems are filled with medically and pharmacologically accurate descriptions. His study of botany and pharmacology finds its way into his verse early and late, from the “pipy hemlock” of *Endymion* to the wolfsbane, nightshade, yew, and globed peony of “Ode on Melancholy.” The poisons and poesies do not simply appear in his verse for decoration, but frequently as a way of expressing his bodily feelings and mental processes. They also embody his suspicions. One wonders what poison he imagined had been administered to him in London. There are many candidates, for he describes feeling numb “as though of hemlock I had drunk, / Or emptied some dull opiate.” De Almeida has pointed out that the knight-at-arm’s symptoms are consistent with atropine poisoning; perhaps what ails the wretched wight is not La Belle Dame, but belladonna.

apprehension sent him flying from the Isle of Wight in hopes of better health and a more composed mind in which to write free from fevered imaginings.

By December 1820, Severn was lamenting how “the continued stretch of the imagination has killed him,” but such expansive imaginings had begun much earlier in his first volume of poetry in which he contemplates “the wideness of the sea” and in letters such as his 1817 Negative Capability epistle. For Keats, suspicion is inextricably bound with poetics. Both involve “wild surmises” in which the mind entertains all possibilities but remains “content with half knowledge” and partial evidence. Keats’s “throng of jealousies” and specters of suspicion are the negative extreme of his “vast idea” of poetry. Ironically, it is Keats’s very ability to remain “content with half-knowledge” and in “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts”—his very Negative Capability—which make him susceptible to a suspicion that will eventually hamper his creativity and ulcerate his stomach.

## II

### *Suspicion and Speculation*

“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.”

—*Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*

For Keats, symptoms and suspicions are inextricably bound with poetics. He frequently describes composition as a fever (perhaps an actual one),<sup>60</sup> and the “frets” and “nerves” that plagued him were mental as well as physical troubles. He defines “sensation” in his medical school notebook as “an impression made on the Extremity of the Nerves conveyed to the Brain” (55) and “Volition” as “the contrary of Sensation it proceeds from the internal to the external parts,” but in his letters and poems, the movement seems to work both ways, perhaps reflecting the Regency medical view of “mind and body as a single holistic system rather than as distinct, much less dichotomous entities” (“Keats and Romantic Science” 235). In his Negative Capability letter, he identifies the excellence of art and writing as the ability to elicit a physical, mental, and emotional response all at once in the viewer or reader. A fine picture or play must contain something “to be intense upon” —such as a “woman one feels mad to kiss” or a “face swelling into reality,” the word incarnate—and it must also excite a “momentous depth of speculation.” It is not surprising, then, to find Keats attributing his illness to too much poetry or writing poetry manifesting his illness and suspicions. It is an association that continued to resonate for him from his early work until his final letter: “the knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade,” he wrote to Brown, “all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem are great enemies to the recovery of the stomach” (*Letters* II: 360).<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, his description of feverous composition while nursing his brother Tom (*Letters* I: 370).

<sup>61</sup> “Primitive sense” here refers to the archaic meaning of the term, “to form within,” “to embody,” or “to imbue with a feeling, principle, or quality” as in Keats’s use of the term in his marginalia to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, “Things may be described by a Man’s self in parts so as to make a grand whole which that Man himself would scarcely inform to its excess” (*Poetical Works* 295). Keats again uses the “primitive sense” of the word when he remarks on Book IX, lines 179-91, “Satan...entered the serpent, and inform’d his brutal sense....Whose spirit does not ache at the Smothering and confinement—the unwilling stillness—the ‘waiting close?’ Whose head is not dizzy at the possible speculations of Satan in the serpent prism—no passage of poetry can ever give a greater pain of suffocation” (*Poetical Works* 305). Perhaps

The “primitive sense” of the word “suspicion” itself is akin to “speculation,” one of Keats’s favored words for the activity of an engaged imagination and intense response. It originally meant “to look up to,” “admire” or “respect” (and, indeed, Keats did come to suspect many of the people he had once admired and respected) and comes from the root common to both words meaning “looking.” In *The Mystery of Keats*, Murry defines Keats’s use of “speculation” as “‘contemplation’ or ‘simple looking’” (178) as in Keats’s line, “Full in the speculation of the stars” (*Poems* 52) or in *Macbeth*, “Thou hast no speculation in those eyes / Which thou dost glare with.”<sup>62</sup> Keats, however, also seems to use it as a synonym for “surmise,” as in this sentence to Bailey: “To compare great things with small, have you never, by being surprised with an old melody in a delicious place by a delicious voice, felt over again your very speculations and surmises at the time it first operated on your soul” (*Letters* I: 185)? “Speculation” for Keats retains its association with a speculum, or mirror, and underlies his musings about “diligent indolence” or being receptive to ideas and impressions like flower to the toiling bee. In order to heighten speculation and thus poetic excellence in his own work, Keats tends not to answer his poetic questions and surmises and, indeed, does not think of them as answerable. “Now my dear fellow,” he tells Bailey, “I must once for all tell you I have not one Idea of the truth of any of my speculations—I shall never be a Reasoner because I care not to be in the right” (*Letter* I: 243).

---

Keats derives this older use of the term from Spenser, notably in his *Epithalamion*—“And the chaste wombe informe with timely seed” – or in his “Hymne in Honovr of Beavtie.”

<sup>62</sup> The latter use of the term was also employed by one of Keats’s contemporaries, Henry Matthews, who noted coolly about an execution, “I am inclined to believe that sense and consciousness may remain for a few seconds after the head is off. The eyes seemed to retain speculation for a moment or two” and mused that body parts below spinal injury, “are deprived of sensation, while those above retain their sensibility. And so, in the case of decapitation, the nerves of the face and eyes, may for a short time continue to convey impressions to the brain, in spite of the separation of the trunk” (*Diary of an Invalid* 231). Interestingly, Matthew’s definition of “speculation” is identical to Keats’s definition of “sensation” in his medical school notebook.

This nonsystematic stance enabled him to write poetry without intrusive doctrines or a palpable design on his readers. A positive answer to his imaginative queries would negate the power of his Negative Capability in which “the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration—or rather obliterates all consideration” in favor of “a depth of speculation.” At first glance, it may seem a peculiar opposition, especially if one thinks of speculation as synonymous with contemplation. Both speculation and consideration describe mental processes that are not immediate or simple responses to phenomena or noumena. For Keats, however, they are diametrically opposed. Philosophers consider; poets speculate. Socratic knowledge as it appears in Plato’s *Symposium* can never be more than a state of half-knowledge, but the kind of philosophy against which Keats railed was a scientific one embodied in the figure of Newton. Around the time he was writing his Negative Capability letter, Keats had denounced Newton at Haydon’s Immortal Dinner for his rainbow-unraveling investigations, and later in *Lamia*, he protested that such scrutiny robs the rainbow of its mystery and reduces it to “the dull catalogue of common things.”

Like speculation, suspicion for Keats is opposed to consideration and “a certain philosophy.” He did not simply dislike doctrinaire thinking; his mind had trouble understanding the truth of its conclusions. “I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning” (*Letters* I: 185), he told Bailey, but it is precisely this “consequitive thinking”—consecutive and consequential, logical and sequenced—that he needed to allay his anxieties and fears. One definition of “consideration” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is to “take note of *how, whether, who, why, etc.*”—in short, the kind of thinking that a detective must use to solve a crime,

estimating the rational significance of every mundane detail. Such thinking was alien to a man who thought that the “only way of strengthening one’s intellect is to make up ones [sic] mind about nothing” (*Letters* II: 213). Keats famously wrote that “Whatever the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth”; whatever the imagination seized as suspect also seemed true for his tormented mind. He did not gather facts and reasons and concrete evidence for his suspicions with which to dispel them, but rather engaged in morbid speculation, conjuring up a legion of lovers for his betrothed and assembling a league of assassins for himself with no power to verify or dismiss any of them.

Unlike paranoia, which amasses disparate bits of information into a theory of persecution, suspicion is an open-ended state of mind that constructs myriad fancies for every bit of information. Keats did not develop a fixed delusional system to explain his decline and, indeed, did not think in fixed systems of any kind. His distrust of his contemporaries, fiancée, friends, and reviewers became a “worldwind” of fears that became all the more intense for being unproven. His suspicions never took the form of definite theories of persecution and were undoubtedly influenced by his ill health and use of mind-altering drugs such as mercury and opium. He was put on near-starvation diets, dosed with substances such as digitalis and calomel, and frequently bled whenever he had a hemorrhage. His illness did not invent his fears of persecution or his inability to use “consequitive reasoning,” though it undoubtedly heightened and twisted these innate tendencies.

Even before Keats’s health failed and his mind became fevered by jealousy, he wrote that he was apt to “run into most wild surmises” (*Complete Poems*, 55) because he did not “fret...after knowledge:”

...to philosophize

I dare not yet!—Oh never will the prize,  
 High reason, and the lore of good and ill,  
 Be my award. Things cannot to the will  
 Be settled, but they tease us out of thought.  
 Or is it that imagination brought  
 Beyond its proper bound, yet still confined—  
 Lost in a sort of purgatory blind,  
 Cannot refer to any standard law  
 Of either earth or heaven?—It is a flaw  
 In happiness to see beyond our bourn— (*Complete Poems* 182)

In such poems as “When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be,” “God of the Meridian,” or his poetic epistle to Reynolds, Keats foresaw the negative aspect of Negative Capability he would confront at the end of his life, the limbo of a liminal imagination. It may be true that “philosophy will clip an Angel’s wings,” but overwrought Imagination will send them spiraling downward to darkness. “Let me not wander in a barren dream,” he entreated his daemon in “On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Again,” and during his trip to the highlands in July 1818 he sent up “a prayer / That man may never lose his mind one mountains bleak and bare” (210). Enveloped in mist atop Ben Nevis, Keats looked above into the shrouded heavens and below at the shrouded earth and felt that he was in the position of all humanity, unable to see anything beyond their own two feet in the midst of a vast obscurity. At best we can glean half-knowledge from the penetralium of Mystery; at worst we are lost in a blind purgatory, “straining at particles of light in the

midst of a great darkness—without knowing the bearing of any one assertion” (*Letters II*: 80). In his writings, this negative knowledge inspired and depressed Keats by turns as he vacillated between the extremes of “despair & Energy” (*Letters II*: 113).

Keats necessarily never resolved this debate. His mind was too dialectical to rest on one assertion, and his best poetry tends to embody his internal dialogue, mapping the space between creation and negation. His later verse continued to explore these “dark passages” in which “we see not the ballance [sic] of good and evil” (*Letters II*: 218), such as in the indeterminate “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and “Lamia” in which it is difficult to say who is the victim and who the victimizer, or even “The Eve of St. Agnes” which critics have peopled with vampires, *femme fatales*, or witches, depending on if they read the tale as a love story, a deception, a fond delusion—or perhaps all three. Keats’s odes involve an internal debate of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis and often end on a further note of indeterminacy. Because his mind stopped short at definite resolution, he wrote several fragments and fragments of fragments, such as “Hyperion” and its incomplete reworking as “Fall of Hyperion,” or the fragment “Eve of St. Mark” transformed into the unfinished “Cap and Bells; or, The Jealousies.” Cedric Watts has argued that

Keats’s imaginative nexus is the liminal imperative: the urge to depict a *limen* or threshold; a concern with transition-states—moments or phases of transition from one mode of being to another; and a concomitant feature is the ambiguous status of the modes of being on each side of this threshold. (150)

Keats’s poems early and late describe the shadow realm of the *limen*, describing the transition (sometimes arrested or frozen in an effort to dilate intensity) between joy and

melancholy, faery lands forlorn and forlorn reality, waking and dreaming, the visual and the visionary, or sea and sky. For this reason, he frequently employs oxymorons such as “diligent indolence” or Negative Capability to describe transitive states of being and mental passage. Likewise, he frequently places his characters in thresholds of time (twilight), place (tip toe on a little hill), or sensation (through synesthesia—“heard melodies are sweet”—or by shutting off one sense to awaken another—“Darkling I listen”). His characters flee into storms or hover outside the open casements of Psyche’s fane. They die into life, or deathwards progress to no death, or palely loiter on the edge of Avernus<sup>63</sup> where no birds sing. The bursting of joy’s grape coincides with the death of pleasure in Keats’s poetry, where poets are “half in love with easeful death” and lovers die swooning. “I have two luxuries to brood over...your loveliness and the hour of my death,” he wrote to Fanny Brawne. “O that I could have possession of both in the same minute” (*Letters* II: 133). In his poetry at least, he did achieve such a conceit.

Two poems that seem to have been touchstones for Keats were “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso,” with their co-dependent depiction of pleasurable pains and painful pleasures—“Dancing in the Chequer’d shade” (Keats’s nickname, “Junkets,” appears in “L’Allegro”). Such oxymoronic states appear throughout Keats’s own verse, from “Welcome Joy, and Welcome Sorrow” and “Bards of Passion and of Mirth” to “Ode on Melancholy,” with its banishment of the specter of suicide and its depiction of paradoxical states of emotion: “Ay, in the very temple of delight / Veil’d Melancholy has her Sovran shrine.” Keats liked to engage in disquisitions and “proing and conning” over subjects, refusing to choose between mirth and melancholy or a thesis and its antithesis. This negatively capable “knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade,” as he

---

<sup>63</sup> Latin for “birdless.”

explained to Brown, is “necessary for a poem” (*Letters* II: 360), and admired in Milton “the light and shade—that sort of black brightness—the ebon diamonding—the ethiopian Immortality—the sorrow the pain, the sweet-sad melody...the thousand Melancholies and Magnificences,” though Miltonic writing “leaves no room for any thing to be said thereon” (*Keats’s Paradise Lost* 84-85).<sup>64</sup> Such dialectical thinking was habitual with Keats, as his poetic epistle to Reynolds describing pleasing and vexing visions suggests, or his 1818 letter to Bailey in which he says he feels Milton’s “hateful siege of contraries” (*Letters* I: 368-69). Keats seemed constitutionally prone to this kind of thinking, but it was enforced by his experiences. He explains his propensity “to bode ill like the raven” to Fanny Brawne: “it is my misfortune not my fault; it has proceeded from the general tenor of the circumstances of my life, and rendered every event suspicious” (*Letters* II: 129). When he was not fretting after past wrongs or future horrors, however, Keats comfortably resided in this space between negative and positive fancies, and his best work arose out of his negotiating the space between them.

This tendency to pro and con continued in Rome. He rambled to Severn about friends and enemies, pains and past pleasures, one after the other with no resolution. His apprehensive imaginings became like the characters in *Otho the Great*:

Sway’d here and there, commanded to and fro,  
As though we were the shadows of a sleep,  
And link’d to dreaming fancy. (335)

---

<sup>64</sup> Perhaps this is why Keats “stood on guard...against Milton,” explaining that “Life to him would be death to me” (*Letters* II:213). In another marginal note to *Paradise Lost*, Keats wrote of “the intense pleasure of not knowing” that gives one “power from the fancy’s creating a world of its own by the sense of probabilities,” such as when one imagines the content of lost romances; “but not their realities if we had them nor our fancies in their strength can go further than this Pandemonium” (87). Milton imagined the utmost, leaving little room for further speculation.

Because Keats “Ever let the fancy roam,” his speculations arising out of his symptoms grew over time to until they encompassed nearly everyone in his life. “Where are my enemies?” he wondered in *King Stephen*, and life imitated art in the response: “Here, close at hand” (381). In his 1818 epistle-poem to Reynolds, Keats had wished “that our dreamings all of sleep or wake / Would all their colours from the sunset take, / From something of material sublime,” but his mind could never rest in that exalted region; increasingly, his dreamings tended to “shadow [his] own soul’s daytime / In the dark void of night” (181). Perhaps as Keats confronted the “miseries of the world” in his mature poetry, he could not avoid facing his own miseries. And, indeed, his final works—especially his Fanny poems, “Otho the Great,” “The Fall of Hyperion,” “King Stephen,” and “Cap and Bells; or, The Jealousies,” and “This Living Hand”—center around themes of intrigue, rebellion, or sexual betrayal.

The latter poem (perhaps his last), written upside down on a draft of “The Jealousies,” threatens his would-be murderer—perhaps Fanny Brawne, his reviewers, or one of his friends:

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  
 That thou wouldst 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—

In “To Autumn,” Keats exhibits his ability to see process in the natural world from core to fruit to decay; here he turns this perception on himself. The hand—symbol of fellowship and love as well as the hand of the poet—embodies the negative capabilities of Keats’s suspicious imagination and his tendency to think of speculations in terms of sensations. Nor is it simply a convenient image for his morbid fancies; it also incarnates the numbed and “nerveless” sensations in his limbs he describes in letters<sup>65</sup> and poems from 1818 onwards. After Coleridge shook Keats’s hand, he remarked to Green, “There is death in his hand” (Wu 549), and Severn recounts how Keats would hold out his hands and muse that they were those of a prematurely aged man. In addition, images of declining or half-numbed hands appear frequently in Keats’s verse, from “might half-slumbering on its own right arm” and Porphyro’s “unnerved arm” (237) to Saturn’s “nerveless, listless, dead” hand (368).

In addition to the ailing Saturn, the “Fall of Hyperion: A Dream” also features a dreaming poet undergoing an incubation experience in his temple that—like Bergotte’s dream in *The Captive*—is “a sort of undress rehearsal of the” sickness or poison “that was to carry him off” (quoted in *The Oxford Book of Dreams* 181).<sup>66</sup> The physical descriptions in *Fall of Hyperion* echo many of Keats’s own symptoms and fevered fancies that would eventually get in the way of his poetic speculations:

---

<sup>65</sup> I.e., the example cited above: “my hand feels like lead—and yet it is and [sic] unpleasant numbness it does not take away the pain of existence” (*Letters I*: 287).

<sup>66</sup> Aristotle noted that “The dreamer is sensitive to the slightest disturbances in his organism, and these will affect his dreams” (*Ibid.* 235)—and, therefore, they are “predictions” that “disclose foreknowledge of the dreamer’s state of health” (235). Similarly, after suffering a severe hemorrhage in February 1820, Keats describes to his friend Rice a “Methodist meeting Picture, which gave [him] a horrid dream” in his feverish delirium (*Letters II*: 260), and describes to Dilke how he knows he is improving because Hogarth’s picture no longer gives him “psalm singing nightmare[s].” To Fanny Brawne in March, he also reports improved health as evidenced by calmer dreams: “I rest well and from last night do not remember any thing horrid in my dream, which is a capital symptom, for any organic derangement always occasions a Phantasmagoria” (*Letters II*: 277).

a palsied chill

Struck from the paved level up my limbs,  
 And was ascending quick to put cold grasp  
 Upon those streams that pulse beside the throat.  
 I shrieked, 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  
 Grew stifling, suffocating, at the heart;  
 And when I clasped my hands I felt them not.

*The Fall of Hyperion* is a nightmare version of ancient dream incubation in which an invalid “followed an established ritual...and then spent the night in the temple. In his sleep he would see the god and receive from him advice about the problem that had brought him there, usually a grave illness” (*Arcana Mundi* 231). The illness Keats describes is one of mind as well as body; curiously, is also the means by which he will “die into life” and into a new kind of poetry that confronts the tragedies of the world. He had foreseen this type of poetry in his Negative Capability letter in which he argues that a work’s intensity, such as that found in *King Lear*, will make the “disagreeables” of tragedy dissolve. In his unfinished epic, he is not so sure. Keats leaves the purport of his oneiric vision ambiguous and ends the induction of *The Fall of Hyperion* with lines that could apply equally well to “This Living Hand”: “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.” Perhaps it was a little of both.

The late tragedy *Otho the Great*, written with Charles Brown, is an attempt to write such a negatively capable tragedy, but it becomes an index of Keats's suspicious preoccupations that are the flip side of his speculative imagination. Brown later described the curious manner in which Keats wrote *Otho the Great*:

I engaged to furnish him with the fable, characters, and dramatic conduct of a tragedy, and he was to embody it in poetry. The progress of the work was curious; for, while I sat opposite to him, he caught my description of each scene, entered into the characters to be brought forward, the events, and every thing connected with it. (*Keats Circle* II: 66)

Keats's relationship to his source material was similar to that of Shakespeare, who used only certain details from his sources and kept out others, thereby resulting in Iago's motiveless malignity and Lear's motiveless perversity. Through this means of composition, Keats seems to have wanted to avoid the failing he and his friends saw in some of Shakespeare's histories: "Particular facts kept him in the high road, and would not suffer him to turn down leafy and winding lanes" ("On Kean in Richard," 237). Because Keats did not want his play "ironed and manacled with a chain of facts," unable "to escape the prison house of history," he departed from his source material altogether at the end and "wrote the fifth act in accordance with his own view" (*Keats Circle* II: 66), without any reaching after method. The result was an act wholly unlike the previous four that transformed the intensities of *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Othello* into Ludolph's "wreck of ideas without purpose" (*Keats Circle* I: 181).

Perhaps in part because Brown was "doing [Keats] to death by inches" with his flirtations with Fanny (or because Keats was worried about his fiancée's inclination for

balls and uniformed soldiers), *Otho* details Ludolph's obsession with persecution and sexual betrayal. The other characters are taken aback with his "ghastly ravings" and "fear his brain" (333), a sentiment Severn would later express when he wrote that Keats's mind was "bordering on the insane" (*Letters* II: 373)—but Keats's insanity nonetheless arose out of a fevered genius, a Negative Capability lost in the limbo of illness: "the strangeness of his mind every day surprises us," Severn wrote; "no one feeling or one notion like any other being." Ludolph seems to take Keats's suspicions to their utmost limit, augmenting his fears and anxieties to the point of madness. "The Lover" of the play, Keats told Fanny Brawne, is even "madder than I am" (*Letters* II: 137). In *Otho the Great*, everyone around the Prince seems to "fill him with suspicion" (335), and he suffers from "torturing jealousy" and "villainy" (307). Villains seem friends and friends prove villains in *Otho*; "the good proof" of Ludolph's "keen-eyed suspicion" of Erminia turns out to be not good at all, and he marries the faithless Auranthe. Meanwhile, her treacherous brother wonders, "How many whisperers there are about, / Hungry for evidence to ruin me" (321)? Everyone mutters about everyone else in *Otho*, and a "buzz" of "foul, malignant whisperings" (316) pervades the play until its bitter close. Betrayed at last by the people he least suspects, Ludolph goes completely mad before dying of jealousy. He rants at the end in broken speech like King Lear:

Silent—without revenge—pshaw!—bitter end,—

A bitter death,—a suffocating death,—

A gnawing—silent—deadly, quiet death! (330).

Perhaps Gittings is overly generous when he writes that "Ludolph's picture of his unfaithful bride in the last scene of the play is a picture of Fanny Brawne, drawn in exact

physical detail" (*Living Year* 162),<sup>67</sup> but he rightly points out the echoes of Keats's anguished love letters in the play—as well as the dangers of taking such parallels too far. Nonetheless, *Otho the Great* illustrates the relationship in Keats's work between imagination and suspicion and the negative aspect of vast speculations.

When his brother Tom lay dying, Keats turned to the "feverous relief of poetry," plunging himself into abstract images to forget the sorrows of his life. This relief was harder to achieve in the next two years. He could not allay his suspicions of Fanny by escaping into poetry; these suspicions interfered with his ability to compose. The portion of his mind formerly occupied with speculating on abstract concepts was too busy worrying if she was flirting with others. He invented a thousand guilty scenarios for her and no longer bothered to obscure the relationship between life and art. "Who now, with greedy looks, eats up my feast?" he wondered in a poem called "To Fanny," enjoining her to remain chaste and faithful. It is no wonder he fled to London for a time in the hopes of writing freely. Even there, her words haunted him. "I could recant all my suspicions," he told her, "were it not for some parts of your Letters" (*Letters* II: 292), and begged her, "Do not threat me even in jest....I could die for you." In his poems to her, he cried for "Merciful love that tantalises not," a "One-thoughted, never wand'ring, guileless love, / Unmask'd." With Fanny, Keats's capable imagination worked against him. The intensity of this attachment made him "Forget, in the midst of idle misery, / Life's

---

<sup>67</sup> The resemblance seems to reside chiefly in the nostrils. Ludolph praises Auranthe's "Deep-blue eyes," "white temples, of exactest elegance," "Cheeks fashion'd so tenderly on either side," "Her nostrils, small, fragrant, fairy-delicate; / Her lips—" (337). Compare with Keats's description of the dark-eyed Fanny: "She is about my height—with a fine style of countenance of the lengthen'd sort—she wants sentiment in every feature—she manages to make her hair look well—her nostrills [sic] are fine—though a little painful—he[r] mouth is bad and good—he[r] Profil is better than her full-face which indeed is not full but pale and thin without showing any bone—Her shape is very graceful and so are her movements—her Arms are good her hands badish—her feet tolerable—she is not seventeen—(*Letters* II: 13).

purposes” as “the palate of [his] mind” began “losing its gust” (374). His suspicions hampered his speculations, and he knew it.

Keats even began to believe Fanny Brawne was killing him. Severn was shocked to hear Keats say that he had fallen ill from “the exciting and thwarting” of his passions, a belief present in a canceled line of “To Fanny”: “My temples with hot jealous pulses beat” (*Poetry Manuscripts at Harvard* 226). His later poem often attempts to use negatively capable poetry to counteract his ill-health, as though purging away his illness through cathartic writing; to ease his love fever, he asks “Physician Nature” to “let [his] spirit blood” (376) much the way his own doctors let his blood to calm his racing heart and bring down his fever. Elfinian expresses a similar sentiment in *The Jealousies* when he says, “Feel, feel my pulse, how much in love I am,” though Keats treats the matter comically in this poem (“my heart,” he tells Fanny Brawne (*Letters* II: 304), “[has] been made a football”). *Otho the Great* takes the subject of persecution and jealousy seriously; *The Jealousies* makes a mockery of them. In tone, it is closer to “Pensive They Sit, And Roll Their Languid Eyes” than the Fanny poems, but both deal with similar themes.

Although most critics have dismissed “The Jealousies,” it is a curious allegorical index of Keats’s poetry, passions, and obsessions gathered together by wild surmise rather than logical consideration. The poem details Elfinian’s reluctance to marry the “minx” (an epithet Keats also used to describe Fanny Brawne) Bellanaine and his desire for the human Bertha, who—like her namesake in “The Eve of St. Mark”—is hoodwinked by the hieroglyphics of a book, an emblem for Keats’s own poetry. This conflict between real and ideal women informs much of Keats’s work—from *Endymion*

to *Lamia*—and the poem is a fevered revisiting of the body of his poetry. “The Jealousies” includes such supernatural props as a magic ring so that “Hum the Soothsayer” will “not suspect / Any foul play, or awkward murdering” of the Keats figure, Elfinian (390), and it plays with forensic language such as “evidence” and “verdict: found stone dead” (407). In addition to scoffing at Keats’s own “throng of jealousies” and slyly alluding to his own verse (“woe betide!” one character laments), the poem also manages to lampoon the writers of the day as well as derides the Prince Regent and his minions. Samuel Whitbread becomes the easily decipherable “Esquire Biancopany,” but most characters in the poem are chimerical amalgams. Hum, for example, is an unlikely combination of Hunt, Lamb, and the Prince Regent;<sup>68</sup> “Crafticant” smacks of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, and Boswell; and Elfinian, the diminutive Keats figure in the poem (the name comes from Spenser), has a love affair that parallels that of the Prince Regent and Byron, as Stillinger and Gittings point out — “Farewell! farewell! and if for ever! still / For ever fare thee well” Elfinian cries (402). Stillinger also notes that the journey of Elfinian’s fiancée, Bellanaine, “parallels Princess Caroline’s slow progress from Brunswick to England in December 1794-1795 (*Complete Poems* 483 n.31). Others have identified Bellanaine as Byron’s ex-wife, Annabella Millbank, observing that they have the same nickname (“Bell”); then again, her name means “beautiful dwarf” and seems to refer also to Fanny Brawne (see Brogan 300), Keats’s beloved “B” whom he described as small in stature.

---

<sup>68</sup> Various critics have argued the anaphoric lines 554-560 spoof Hunt’s “A Now, Descriptive of a Hot Day,” and the description of Hum walking backwards “with one shoe...off, and one shoe on, / Like, saving shoe for sock or stocking, my man John” (393) recalls Lamb’s drunken refrain: “The Comptroller went on making his profound remarks, and when any thing very *deep* came forth, Lamb roared out, “Diddle iddle don / My son John / Went to bed with his breeches on / One stocking off & one stocking on, / My son John” (Haydon II: 175). Stillinger also points out that “Hum” was a common nickname for the Prince Regent used by such writers as Shelley and Moore (*Complete Poems* 483 n.188).

Ultimately, it seems Keats's allegory is not a readily decodable one, but a mix of heterogeneous elements whirling "in the tempest of his mind" without a certain plan or resolution, a *reductio ad absurdum* of Negative Capability. It uses the stanzas of Spenser and the satire of Byron, but resembles neither. Perhaps the closest analogue would come a century later in the Circe chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*, a "world-wind" of Bloom's foibles, fantasies, and fears. Although "The Jealousies" (Keats's preferred title for "Cap and Bells") contains humorous references to mundane details of Regency life, it also reads like a hallucinatory mediation on Keats's own jealousies in the manner of Hamlet's encoded raving. Freud writes in his *Interpretation of Dreams* that

those who have had something to say and have been unable to say it without danger to themselves have gladly donned the cap and bells. He for whom the forbidden saying was intended was more likely to tolerate it if he was able to laugh at it, and to flatter himself with the comment that what he disliked was obviously absurd. Dreams behave in real life as does the prince in the play who is obliged to pretend to be a madman, and hence we may say of dreams what Hamlet said of himself, substituting an unintelligible jest for the actual truth: "I am but mad north-northwest; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw" (Act II. sc. ii). (85)

"If I ever come to publish" the poem, Keats wrote, "there will be some delicate picking for squeamish stomachs" (*Letters* II: 327). Brown was mystified by this comment, writing that "there is nothing in the fragment he left, nothing in the intended construction of the story (for I knew all, and was to assist him in the machinery in one part,) but to the honor of women" (*Letters* II: 327-328). Evidently Brown did not know all, for the poem

reflects on Keats's bitterness towards women and the "throng of jealousies" he suffered. Gittings maintains that the poem reflects "his own harassed and obsessed love situation" because like "all people in a nervous and strained state of mind...he kept reverting to the one set of dominating thoughts, which infected, like a disease, everything he did and everything he wrote" (*Mask of Keats* 141). Keats's symptoms and suspicions spread to his poetry and personal relationships until he became "Pensive, full of painful jealousies" (*Poems* 342) in verse and conversation. "The Jealousies" may not be the aesthetic culmination of Keats's work, but it is a fevered revisiting of his work and the fears that eventually hampered his Negative Capability.

In *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, Moneta chastises the poet, "Thou art a dreaming thing, / A fever of thyself" (365), one who "venoms all his days" with morbid fancies. Keats seems to hesitate at this point in the poem, offering the possibility that he is a poet and a "physician to all men" rather than a dreamer. Woodhouse believed he had "intended to erase" one passage and clear up the apparent contradiction, but it expresses Keats's uncertainty at the beginning of the poem about whether the work was a "poet's or fanatic's" (361)—in other words, if his capacious imagination is leading him to beauty and truth or anxiety and suspicion. "Now it appears to me that almost any Man may like the Spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel," he wrote to J. H. Reynolds, explaining that "the points of leaves and twigs on which the Spider begins her work are few and she fills the Air with a beautiful circuiting" (*Letters* I: 231). The process could also work against him, however, for he could also weave a fable of intrigue or murder on little evidence. Every stray detail only seemed "to feed his voracious imagination" (*Keats Circle* II: 181) and add to the web of suspicion. Keats took Brown's indecencies;

Fanny Brawne's flirtations; Lockhart's damning reviews; Hunt's poetic competitiveness; Haydon's narcissism; his relatives' greed; and his friends' disapproval of his engagement and wove them into plots against him, railing at his friends, his relations, his reviewers, and his fiancée alike. "Upon the whole" he wrote to Georgiana Keats in January 1820, "I dislike Mankind" (*Letters* II: 243). Nonetheless, Keats's suspicions, as we have seen, were not entirely groundless, and his symptoms real, contradictory, and long-standing. One might revise Voltaire's adage that "madness means having incorrect perceptions and reasoning correctly from them" (*Fevers and Frets* 277) and say that for Keats, suspicion means having correct perceptions and imagining incorrectly from them, conjuring up all that his morbid "Fancy e'er could feign"—unless one believes, as Keats did at the end of his life, that he had been poisoned by "an individual in London" (*Keats Circle* I: 180).

Ultimately, what gave speculative power to Keats's poetry also robbed him of fortitude at the end of his life. Though he abhorred a "certain philosophy" in poetry, even this would have comforted Keats as he lay dying. Severn noted how "the want of some kind of hope to feed his voracious imagination leaves him to the wreck of ideas without purpose—imagination without philosophy" (*Keats Circle* I: 181). Keats was lost in what he had once called "a purgatory blind" (*Complete Poems* 182), wracked by disease and visions of foul play. His mind had no place to rest, no haven of comfort. As Severn described to Haslam, "this noble fellow lying on the bed—is dying in horror—no kind hope smoothing down his suffering—no philosophy—no religion to support him—yet with all the most knowing [sic] desire for it—yet without the possibility of receiving it" (*Keats Circle* I: 196). "He has no religion," Dr. Clark noted; "he has been robbed of that"

(*Keats Circle I*: 194), presumably by the atheism of Hunt and Shelley.<sup>69</sup> Those discussions came back to haunt Keats now, and he wished for that “last cheap comfort—which every rogue and fool has” (*Keats Circle I*: 197). He had not even Severn’s “little but honest Religious faith” (*Keats Circle I*: 181) and confided in his friend,

I think a malignant being must have power over us—over whom the Almighty had little or no influence—yet you know Severn I cannot believe in your book—the Bible—but I feel the horrible want of some faith—some hope—something to rest on now—there must be such a book—and I know that is it—but I can’t believe it—I am destined for every tor{ment i}n this world—even to this little comfort on my death bed... (*Keats Circle I*: 181)

Back in March 1818, Keats had told Bailey, “You know my ideas about Religion—I don’t think myself more in the right than other people and that nothing in this world is proveable” (*Letters I*: 242). Keats not only eschewed dogma in poetry, but also in Christianity and atheism alike. Nothing was provable in his view—not the “pious frauds of Religion” (*Letters II*: 80), the truth of poetic speculations, or the “throng of jealousies,” anxieties, and fears that beset him on his deathbed. His agnostic stance and Negative Capability might have served him well in poetry, but offered no comfort in life. “Is there another Life? Shall I wake and find this all a dream?” he wondered to Brown (*Letters II*: 346), and tried to console himself with the thought, “There must be we cannot be created for this kind of suffering.” Such tenuous hope was cold comfort to Keats in Rome. To Fanny Brawne he expressed the “wish to believe in immortality” (*Letters II*:

---

<sup>69</sup> Haydon wrote that Keats “had a tendency to Christianity when he first knew [me], & Hunt soon forced his tendencies in another direction” (*Diary II*: 317); he likewise denounced Shelley’s debates on “that detestable religion, the Christian religion” (*II*: 372-373). See also Bailey (*Keats Circle I*: 34-35) and Reynolds (*Keats Circle I*: 156).

293), but the wish itself only distressed him. Perhaps he would have been at peace if he had had Hunt's faith in no faith, or in Godwin-perfectibility, or in the poetic transcendence Shelley later envisioned for him at the end of *Adonais*. The most Keats could hope for was that his life would replay itself "in a finer tone" thereafter.

In his final illness, Keats's mind kept reverting to "all the persecution" and "villainy practiced upon him...his mind was certainly killing him" (*Keats Circle* I: 188). He had never formed the habits of mind capable of exorcising his terrifying surmises. Dying only extended his already vast imagination beyond the reaches of sanity—"his mind," Severn wrote, "is bordering on the insane" (*Letters* II: 373), and his ability to see process in the natural world enabled him to imagine his own end and beyond. He began to speak of living a "posthumous existence" and told Severn in Rome that he could already feel the daisies growing over him. This was the negative aspect of Negative Capability, an openness of mind that also led him to suspicion and apprehension that eventually interfered with his ability to compose, gnawed away at his stomach, and tormented him on his deathbed. The speculative possibilities that had once inspired him turned into the horror of unregenerative negation, of nothing coming from nothing. Whether or not there was any truth to his fears of poisoning and persecution, Keats's suspicions tortured him until he "saw too far into...an eternal fierce destruction" (*Complete Poems* 182), and there was no coming back from that bourn even if he had survived: Severn lamented, "He says the continued stretch for the imagination has killed him—and were he to recover he could not write another line" (*Keats Circle* I: 180).

*The Penetralium of Mystery*

“a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery”

—John Keats

“Before passing the threshold, I paused to admire a quantity of grotesque carving lavished over the front and especially about the principal door; above which, among a wilderness of crumbling griffins and shameless little boys, I detected the date ‘1500’, and the name ‘Hareton Earnshaw.’ I would have made a few comments, and requested a short history of the place from the surly owner; but his attitude at the door appeared to demand my speedy entrance, or complete departure, and I had no desire to aggravate his impatience previous to inspecting the penetralium.”

—Emily Brontë

I

*Strange Bedfellows*

Restoring Keats’s intended meaning of Negative Capability as a threshold state of half-knowledge and wild surmise reveals Keatsian lineages that are quite different from the usual tracing of influence. George F. Ford’s *Keats and the Victorians* traces Keats’s thematic, structural, and linguistic influence on Tennyson, Arnold, Rossetti, Morris, Swinburne, and Wilde in the nineteenth century; Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom have continued the line into the twentieth century with such poets as Yeats, Stevens, and Ashbery. T. S. Eliot famously disseminated the idea of Keats as an objective poet, and

many writers—from F. Scott Fitzgerald to science fiction writer Dan Simmons<sup>70</sup>—have been attracted to Keats’s idea of selflessness and lack of identity. Yet defining Negative Capability as a lack of self rather than a threshold state obscures alternative Keatsian genealogies that become apparent when one stresses his idea of “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts.” Two heirs to this concept are Emily Brontë and Henry James.

Milnes’s biography of Keats appeared the year Emily Brontë died and she never read his Negative Capability letter to his brothers with its discussion of “the Penetralium of Mystery,”<sup>71</sup> and yet *Wuthering Heights* exemplifies much of his ideas of intensity and half-knowledge in the realm of the *mysterium*. Although she does not seem to have read extensively in Keats’s work, she encountered several of his poems in her periodical reading, including early sonnets, excerpts from *Endymion*, and his odes. In addition, several critics have found echoes of Keats in Brontë’s poetry. Chitham, for example, finds a similarity between “How clear she shines!” and Keats’s writings on imagination and fancy (160). Alan Walbank notes a “marked similarity between ‘The Visionary’ and ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’ . . . in theme and in expression” (393). Alan S. Loxterman, comparing the first and second generations at the Heights, describes the book as a “Romantic poem and Victorian novel” (87), and Dorothy J. Cooper remarks on Emily Brontë’s similarity to Keats in “The Romantics and Emily Brontë.” In addition, Emily Brontë and her siblings acted out Lockhart’s damning reviews of the “Cockney School of

<sup>70</sup> Simmons has written of Negative Capability as the negation of the self in various essays and interviews as well as explored the concept in a sci-fi trilogy, *Hyperion*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and *Endymion*.

<sup>71</sup> In the first chapter of *Wuthering Heights* describing the “Penetralium” of *Wuthering Heights*, she also makes the same Latin mistake as Keats had done before her in her attempt to turn *penetralia* until a singular form (in the manner of *adyta* and *adytum*). *The Oxford English Dictionary* lists Keats’s Negative Capability letter as the first usage of the term “Penetralium” and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* as the second. Both Keats and Brontë, however, translated versions of Virgil’s *Aeneid* and worked from similar Latin anthologies, and perhaps the erroneous spelling can be located therein—or perhaps both authors, having “small Latin” but extensive imaginations, independently coined the same neologism to fit their purposes.

Poetry” for years, and several of the themes she developed in her early Keats and Hunt play found their way into *Wuthering Heights*.

Whether or not her early *Blackwood's* reading exposed her to enough of Keats's poems to descry the spirit of aesthetic thresholds behind the verse, Emily Brontë's work shares many similarities with his ideas of “the excellence of every art” that are usually overlooked in the standard readings of Negative Capability. The relationship between *Wuthering Heights* and Brontë's juvenilia on Gondal seems to have been analogous to that of Shakespeare to his sources: Brontë draws some details from Gondal while leaving many of the motivations and origins of characters obscure, giving the reader a sense of histories lying behind the novel that are never fully delineated. Her use of seeming truths in the first three chapters of the novel to excite speculation in Lockwood and the reader is a way akin to Keats's idea that “A question is the best beacon towards a little speculation,” and like Keats, she never completely answers these questions in her text, though the second half of the novel resolves many of Lockwood's queries. In addition, the intensity of Catherine and Heathcliff's passion “makes all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relation to beauty and truth,” as Keats described in his 1817 letter to his brothers. Both Keats and Brontë depict the *penetralium* in their work, and the description of Madeline and Porphyro at the end of *The Eve of St. Agnes*—“And they are gone — aye, ages long ago / These lovers fled away into the storm”—could well apply to Catherine and Heathcliff, who glide as phantoms into the stormy heath at the novel's close.

With Henry James, the connection with Keats is clearer than with Emily Brontë (though we have no record of him staging secret “bed plays”<sup>72</sup> with toys named after “cockney poets,” as we do for Brontë). James seems to have been attracted to Keats for much the same reason the Pre-Raphaelites were: his “intensity and highly-finished pictorial power” (Ford 116). James was undoubtedly an admirer of Keats, if not an acolyte, and he often referred to the poet in his writing. In a letter to Urbain Mengin, he calls Keats “the child of the Gods!” (*Letters* 266); to his sister, he speaks of the “immortal bard” who penned the Elgin marble sonnet; (*Selected Letters* 24); and to Mrs. John Rollin Tilton, he likens himself to “Porphyro in Keats’ poem” (*Letters* 162). James also makes references to Keats in the *Golden Bowl* (comparing Adam Verver to Cortez in Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”), *The American* (Mrs. Tristram quotes from Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”), *The Europeans* (Felix recalls the “Ode to A Nightingale”), and *The Whole Family* (“Dedication” to *Poems, 1817*, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and “Ode to a Nightingale”). In addition, J.U. Jacobs sees “The Jolly Corner” as “a work about art itself” (51) analogous to Keats’s “Ode on A Grecian Urn” and believes its main character “glimpse[s]...the essential truth of Keats’s vision of beauty” (59). Krishna Vaid (*Technique in the Tales of Henry James* 206) and Walter Wright (*The Madness of Art* 192-193) hear Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” echoing in “The Great Good Place.” Adeline R. Tinter points out how James reworks *Endymion* in “The Velvet Glove” (*The Museum World of Henry James* 77) and traces how “Hyacinth’s sensibility and the education James gives him are a mixture of Keats’s life as presented by Monckton Milnes’s book and of James’s own youthful impressions of London.”

---

<sup>72</sup> “Emily’s and my bed plays were established the 1<sup>st</sup> December 1827, the others March 1828. Bed plays mean secret plays; they are very nice ones” (*The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* I: 5).

Several writers have noticed a connection between Keats's ideas of the chameleon poet and negative capability in the late stories: both Martha Banta ("Artists, Models, Real Things, and Recognizable Types" 12) and Harold Beaver ("The Real Thing' and Unreal Things" 56) find echoes of Keats's "negative capability" in "The Real Thing," and John Auchard links the concept to James' "sense of negation" in "The Jolly Corner" (*Silence in Henry James* 51-52).

Yet if James learns from Keats's Negative Capability letter and visits his Mansion of Many Apartments, his characters positively bristle with "an irritable reaching after fact & reason" in an attempt to dispel uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, often with tragic results. His late fiction—which often revolves around an essential absence such as "The Figure in the Carpet," "The Altar of the Dead," "The Jolly Corner," "The Friends of the Friends," *The Wings of the Dove*, or the cracked *Golden Bowl*—are capable negations. As Joyce's Buck Mulligan might say, James has the blessed Keatsian strain in him, only it's injected the wrong way. Likewise, as Alan S. Loxterman has pointed out,<sup>73</sup> if *Wuthering Heights* begins much like a Romantic poem, it ends as a Victorian novel and ultimately moves somewhat away from the initial Keats-like sense of the *mysterium*. This chapter explores the Keatsian strain in Brontë's juvenilia and *Wuthering Heights* as well as James's "The Altar of the Dead" and late fiction, examining their similarities to—as well as departures from—Keats's concept of Negative Capability.

---

<sup>73</sup> See "Wuthering Heights as Romantic Poem and Victorian Novel" in *A Festschrift for Professor Marguerite Roberts*. Ed. Frieda Elaine Penninger. Richmond: University of Richmond, 1975.

## II

*Of Cockneys and Kings*

One evening in June 1828, the Brontë children assembled their toys for an uprising. They had named a set of wooden soldiers for notables of the day featured in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*: John Gibson Lockhart and Christopher North (John Wilson's pseudonym), both of whom wrote damning reviews of Keats's poetry; Sir Astley Cooper, Keats's teacher at Guy's Hospital made famous for his traffic with the Resurrectionists; Leigh Hunt and his cockney friends such as Keats and Haydon; the Duke of Wellington and other notables of the day. The Brontës ranged these toys around an imaginary prison on Vision Island and prepared for battle. Emily's favorites, Mr. Lockhart and his son, reclined oblivious with the young nobles of the land in a magnificent palace resembling Coleridge's pleasure dome; Branwell's Sir Astley Cooper trepanned an assortment of neglected children; and Charlotte's Christopher North downed another pint at a tavern. But below ground, Leigh Hunt and the "wicked cockneys" pounded on the bars of their prison, locked in by the giant Genie "Emmii" Brontë and waiting for their sentence from "that most unjust of judges, Colonel Naughty" (*The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* 24). The cells of "the cockneys and naughty school children," Charlotte Brontë recorded,

are dark, vaulted, arched and so down in the earth that the loudest shriek could not be heard by an inhabitant of the upper world; and in these [...] the most unjust torturing might go on without any fear of detection, if it was not that I keep the key of the dungeon and Emily keeps the key of the cells, and the huge, strong entrances will brave any assault, except with lawful instruments. (*Ibid.*)

The Brontë children had evidently been reading *Blackwood's* attacks on Keats in "The Cockney School of Poetry" (*Ibid.* 24 n.8) describing a "rising brood of Cockneys" and quoting Keats's sonnet, "Written on the Day Leigh Hunt Left Prison" (*Matthews* 99). In addition to "John Bull" and Sir Astley Cooper, Branwell Brontë chose Leigh Hunt—"the meanest, the filthiest, and the most vulgar of Cockney poetasters"—as his representative in the Brontë paracosm that later informed their fictional heterocosms.<sup>74</sup> Emily Brontë, however, chose Hunt's adversary and Keats's fiercest critic, John Lockhart, as her special hero along with his father-in-law, Sir Walter Scott, and young "Johnny" Lockhart. Critics have made much of Byron's influence on Emily Brontë in her poetry and in *Wuthering Heights*,<sup>75</sup> but as a child, she played with John Lockhart, Leigh Hunt, and John Keats.

In these early "Islander" adventures, the Duke of Wellington guards the threshold of the Cockney cells and Emily Brontë holds the keys (*Early Writings* 25). She keeps the cockneys imprisoned, but also protects them. Were it not for her efforts, the body-snatching judge called "Colonel Naughty" would drag "wicked cockneys" into a "dreadful hall" filled with "instruments of torture." Six-year old Catherine Earnshaw had, after all, asked her father for a whip. What she received instead was Heathcliff, hidden beneath her father's jacket during his return trip home from Liverpool. This

---

<sup>74</sup> I use "paracosm" here as defined in David Cohen's 1987 *The Development of Play* (109). Adam Gopnik defined it popularly in the Sept. 30, 2002 issue of *The New Yorker*: "A paracosm is a society thought up by a child—an invented universe with a distinctive language, geography, and history (the Brontës invented a couple of them when they were children)" (81). Unlike the usual play of children, paracosms are sustained throughout childhood and sometimes into early adulthood, developing into elaborate private microcosms.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Winifred Gérin, "Byron's Influence on the Brontës" in *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin* 17 (1966), 1-19; Ann Lapraik Livermore, "Byron and Emily Brontë" in *Quarterly Review* 300 (July 1962), 337-44; Helen Brown, "The Influence of Byron on Emily Brontë" in *Modern Language Review* 34 (July 1939), 374-81; and Harold Bloom's "Introduction" to his Brontë Chelsea House Anthology.

account of Heathcliff's introduction to the Heights curiously parallels the entrance of the toy soldiers into the Brontë household and perhaps suggests a connection between their *Islander* adventures and mature novels:

Papa brought Branwell some soldiers from Leeds....Emily and I jumped out of bed and I snatched one up and exclaimed, 'This is the Duke of Wellington! It shall be mine!' When I said this, Emily likewise took one up and said it should be hers. When Anne came down she took one also. (*Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* 5)

These toys later became the Cockneys, the critics, and the lords of the Brontë *Islander* games that read like a dramatized allegory of the Regency literary climate, full of class snobbery and libelous rebellions. Naughty schoolchildren join Cockney poets in the Brontës' prison for loose rhymes and loose morals, lispingsedition and "nerveless versification"—for "the Cockney School of Poetry," Lockhart informs us, is also the "Cockney School of Politics" (Matthews 104).<sup>76</sup> Perhaps Emily Brontë disliked this "nerveless" aspect of Keats's verse, the sense of "might half-slumbering on its right arm"; Heathcliff scoffs at "the mild-blooded" and "slavering, shivering" Linton (Bedford, 114). Even Hazlitt thought Keats's style a bit effeminate. Aristocrats abound in Gondal, and the favored Lord Byron—with his title, demonic poetry, and what Hazlitt would call a "masculine energy of style"—obviously appealed to Emily Brontë. She also revered Lockhart for his biography of his father-in-law, Sir Walter Scott, and several critics have found influences of Scott in *Wuthering Heights*. Understanding the roles played by the cockney poets and Lockhart in Emily Brontë's early games enables us to understand

---

<sup>76</sup> Charlotte later ridicules the lispingsedition talk of Emily's paracosm—i.e., "a little oldish maun and waman" (*Early Writings* I: 230).

some of Keats's later influence on *Wuthering Heights*, for the novel arose in part out of her dramatizations of Lockhart's articles on Hunt and Keats in *Blackwood's*.

Lockhart's articles on "The Cockney School of Poetry" inspired years of adventures on and off Vision Island. The poetry spoofed therein also finds expression in the Brontë juvenilia. The incarcerated cockney poets of the Islander adventures turn up again in tales of the unfortunate Rhymer, "a Poetaster" (an epithet used by Lockhart in his damning reviews of Keats and Hunt) who is imprisoned for libel and bad poetry. Rhymer, like Keats in his early poetry, is fond of such terms as "leaflets," "poesy," and "poetical" (*Early Writings* I: 182-190) as well as poetical flights to the moon followed by painful descents back to earth and awkward rhymes such as Lockhart had lampooned. Christine Alexander notes that "Rhymer also adopts the attitudes of the Romantic poet: compare, for example, Keats's attraction to death and fascination for the cold moon" (*Early Writings* I: 181). Perhaps this is why Heathcliff later has such contempt for Isabella's sentimental views of love, though the Brontës share with the Romantics a love of the natural world. In addition, Rhymer's idea of the glorious company of contemporary poets and dead bards echoes Lockhart's ridicule for Keats's early sonnet that the Brontës read together, "Great spirits now on earth are sojourning" (quoted in August 1818 *Blackwood's* 520). And like Rhymer's critics, Lockhart insults Keats and Hunt for their political convictions and their social standing, noting that Keats "was bound apprentice some years ago" (*Ibid.* 519) and enjoining him to give up poetry for a common trade.

Emily Brontë initially sided with Lockhart and his minions in her play, but later grew fascinated with the imprisoned cockney toys themselves who, like Hunt, had been

incarcerated for their political views. Several of her poet-heroines write poetry on the walls of the dungeons called “The Palace of Instruction,” inscribing their thoughts in forbidden places much as Catherine Earnshaw will do later on window sills and the margins of books. The members of Cockaigne were, after all, rebels—and like Heathcliff (unless he is an orphaned Asian nobleman, as Nelly surmises), “of the lower orders” (97). Editors of Emily Brontë’s Gondal poems (named for the imaginary kingdom she shared with Anne) are often mystified at their apparent lack of sequence, pointing out that some characters have more than one name and poems often repeat and sometimes radically alter incidents related in earlier verse.<sup>77</sup> But this is most likely because the play of children—like the structure of *Wuthering Heights*—is not linear, but circular, a theme and variations running on into a second generation. The cockney poets and schoolchildren rebelled many times in the Brontëan kingdoms, and Lockhart’s reviling of Hunt’s libelous verses and Keats’s cockney lyrics provided fodder for a series of Brontë adventures that later find their way into *Wuthering Heights*. The theme of imprisonment in her poems, for example, initially mystified Ratchford until she connected them with the early Islander uprisings of “naughty cockneys and schoolchildren”:

Among the many puzzles encountered in reading Emily’s poems are the three manuscript headings: “From the D[uncheon] W[all] in the N[orthern] C[ollege]”; “M.A. Written on the Dungeon Wall N[orthern] C[ollege]”; and “From a Dungeon Wall in the Southern College,” utterly unintelligible until one remembers the school dungeon in *The Play of the Islanders*, which Emily has

---

<sup>77</sup> See, for example, Richard Benvenuto’s *Emily Brontë* (26), Mary Visick’s *The Genesis of Wuthering Heights* (13), and Ratchford’s *The Brontë Web of Childhood*, 133-136.

retained through the years practically unchanged. (*The Brontës' Web of Childhood* 138)

In the novel, this imprisonment takes the form of Joseph locking young Catherine and Heathcliff inside on a Sunday. Like the “wicked cockneys and naughty schoolchildren” of the Islander games, no amount of lashing will make Catherine and Heathcliff learn their verses, stop scrawling in the margins of texts (much as the Emily Brontë did herself), cease throwing holy books into the dog-kennel, or prevent them from plotting “naughty plan[s] of revenge” (59). Under Hindley’s abuse, Heathcliff does not have the benefit of an education and soon becomes as unlettered as he is degraded, becoming like the cockneys of Lockhart’s article who are contemptibly of “low birth and low habits” (Oct. 1817 *Blackwood’s* 39). Emily Brontë might have preferred Byron’s swagger to Keats’s “lisp[ing] sedition” (though her own characters speak in lisp[ing] dialect), but she also sympathized with the plight of the cockney poets in the face of class snobbery and examined this conflict at length in *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff’s infernal tendencies owe more to the Pilgrim of Eternity than to Junkets, but his pain at his low status and lack of university training arise out of years of Gondal play dramatizing the plight of the “wicked cockneys.”

Heathcliff’s contempt of the Lintons, in turn, also echoes moments in the Brontë paracosm that they peopled with wooden soldiers, ninepins, and a couple of “wax headed dolls in linen and muslin frocks” (Barker 864, n. 41). Catherine and Heathcliff spy on the Lintons much the way Charlotte and Emily would spy on each other’s worlds, peering with contempt into each other’s dollhouses. In “A Day at Parry’s Palace by Lord Charles Wellesley,” Charlotte derided the squalid “square building of stone” occupied by Emily’s

low-class, unromantic dolls and wooden figures who speak (like Joseph) in an approximation of Yorkshire dialect (*Early Writings* 230-231).<sup>78</sup> Emily's toys do not live in abbeys or palaces with landscaped parks, but in stolid homes with gardens of local flowers. Perhaps this is because, as Barbara and Gareth Lloyd Evans point out, "Nature is as intimately 'domestic' to her as it was to Keats in his Hampstead garden listening to his nightingale" (123). Emily Brontë disdained the extravagant mansions of Charlotte's realm and later has Heathcliff scoff at the Linton's "splendid place carpeted with crimson, and crimson-covered chairs and tables, and a pure white ceiling bordered by gold, a shower of glass-drops hanging in silver chains from the center." In addition, Heathcliff—whose character derives in part from that of Emily's wooden soldier, "Gravy" that featured in the cockney uprising—calls the Lintons mere "dolls." Later when contemplating his alliance with Isabella Linton, he remarks, "You'd hear of odd things, if I lived alone with that mawkish, waxen face; the most ordinary would be painting on its white the colours of the rainbow, and turning the blue eyes black, every day or two" (107). Mr. Brontë reputedly burned gaily-colored boots, ripped up his wife's silk frock, and arrayed his children in drab gray; Emily apparently grew to share his dislike for frippery and wax dolls, preferring the plain wooden soldiers instead. Her eros derives from the world of Byron's poems, but some of her sympathies are for the cockney school of politics.

---

<sup>78</sup> Likewise, the descriptions in the Brontë juvenilia of the kitchen from the perspective of a "Little Queen" (or perhaps a toy) as gigantic—"it was a large room, built without of brick without any ceiling so that the great beams and rafters that formed the roof were exposed to the eye" and "A fire of a sufficient size and fierceness to roast an ox"—find their parallel in Lockwood's description of Wuthering Heights as a giant's den: "One end, indeed, reflected splendidly both light and heat from ranks of immense pewter dishes, interspersed with silver jugs and tankards, towering row after row, in a vast oak dresser, to the very roof. The latter had never been underdrawn: its entire anatomy lay bare to an inquiring eye" (26).

Emily Brontë's development of Gondal, with its staging of *Blackwood's* articles and other reading, continued on well into her adulthood—and perhaps never entirely ceased. Her diary papers blur the distinction between paracosm and Haworth, slipping without transition from her fantasy realms to her mundane tasks at the parsonage. As Barker points out (864), Emily Brontë records in one of her diary papers that Gondal was still thriving less than a year before she began *Wuthering Heights*:

Anne and I went our first long journey by ourselves together, leaving home on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June, sleeping there and walking home on Wednesday morning....And during our excursion we were, Ronald Macalgin, Henry Angora, Juliet Augusteena, Rosabella Esmaldan, Ella and Julian Egremont, Catherine Navarre, and Cordelia Fitzaphnold, escaping from the palaces of instruction to join the Royalists who are hard driven at present by the victorious Republicans. The Gondals still flourish bright as ever. I am at present working writing a work on the First Wars....We intend sticking by the rascals as long as they delight us, which I am glad to say they do at present. (*Wuthering Heights* 298)

The cockneys and schoolchildren have changed identities over time in Gondal, but are still fighting class wars and imprisoned in “palaces of instruction” where they write poems on the walls. As one of these “wicked cockneys,” Keats entered her paracosm through the lenses of *Blackwood's* articles, Branwell and Charlotte's parroting of these articles, and her own adaptation of the stories and characters in her play, poetry, and later *Wuthering Heights*. Emily Brontë's early reading and play remained vivid to her up to her death. Childhood and the games of childhood are major themes in *Wuthering Heights*, and Catherine's tragedy results from betraying the vision of her youth. The

allegorical staging of *Blackwood's* in her youth stayed with her through the writing of *Wuthering Heights*, though the names and details changed over time as they became "proved upon [her] pulses."

Many scholars and biographers have noted the resemblances of Gondal and *Wuthering Heights*,<sup>79</sup> pointing out, for example, the resemblance between "The Two Children" and Cathy II's relationship to Hareton (Norton *Wuthering Heights*, 283-284); "The Prisoner" and Heathcliff's death-wish toward the end of the novel (Visick, 16); and "But dreams like this I cannot bear" and Lockwood's nightmare in chapter three, both of which feature "a sleeper in the grip of 'an awful dream' induced by the scratching of a ghostly, snow-laden yew" that awakens him to a specter (Ratchford, 240). But in addition to the general themes of betrayal, passion, dreams, and haunting of the Gondal saga, *Wuthering Heights* takes other less obvious elements from the Brontës's early dramatizations of their reading as well, drawing on Lockhart's biographies (and perhaps his novel, *Matthew Wald*)<sup>80</sup> as well as his articles on Keats and Hunt in *Blackwood's*—and it is perhaps worth noting that Lockwood, like his near-namesake Lockhart, is a Romantic biographer who chronicles the lives of the people he encounters at Wuthering

---

<sup>79</sup> For more on this, see Fannie Elizabeth Ratchford, "The Brontës' Web of Dreams," *Yale Review* (Autumn 1931) 139-57, *The Brontës' Web of Childhood* (1964), "Biography" *Wuthering Heights* (New York: Harper and Row 1965) v-viii, *et cetera*; David R. Isenberg, "A Gondal Fragment" *Brontë Society Transactions* 14 (1962) 24-26; Mary Visick, *The Genesis of Wuthering Heights* (1967) and "The Last of Gondal" *BST* 18 (1982) 75-85; Victor A. Neufeldt, "Emily Brontë and the Responsible Imagination" *Victorian Newsletter* 43 (Spring 1973) 15-21 and "The Shared Vision of Anne and Emily Brontë: The Context for *Wuthering Heights*" *DAI* 31 (Aug. 1970) 764A-765A; Gerald L. Gould, "Emily Brontë's Relation to Gondal as Subject of *Wuthering Heights*" *DAI* (Sept. 1974), 1655A-1656A; Inga-Stina Ewbank, "*Wuthering Heights* and Gondal" in *Wuthering Heights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) 480-486; Richard Benvenuto, *Emily Brontë* (1982).

<sup>80</sup> See Joseph Kestner, "John Gibson Lockhart's *Matthew Wald* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*" *Wordsworth Circle* 8 (Spring 1982) 94-96.

Heights out of diaries, letters, and eyewitness accounts<sup>81</sup> with “a potentially ironic, naïve detachment,” much as Lockhart did (*Lockhart as Romantic Biographer* 53).

When Emily Brontë came to write *Wuthering Heights*, she had been enacting many of its scenes for years in Gondal, staging repeatedly the rebellion of cockneys and schoolchildren, the betrayal of lovers, and the mourner’s nightmare Life-in-Death. The result was a novel filled with “fine isolated verisimilitudes” that suggest realities never fully explained in the novel.<sup>82</sup> By drawing on Gondal for material for her novel without fully delineating her characters’ pasts, Emily Brontë exhibits a Keatsian sense of “half-knowledge” and speculation that is akin to the concept of Negative Capability. When Lockwood crosses the “grotesque...penetralium” of *Wuthering Heights*, he plunges into the uncertainties, Mysteries, and doubts of a nightmare. Like the reader, he is neither privy to the history of the place nor the precursor stories of Gondal and can at best glean half-knowledge of this “penetralium of Mystery.” At every turn, Lockwood is baffled by a series of inexplicable phrases and ambiguous signs outside his frame of reference. As a result, what he perceives as mere pleasantries strike the inhabitants as grave insults. His polite chit-chat provokes Heathcliff’s “‘walk in’...uttered with closed teeth” (25), and Joseph “soliloquise[s] in a tone of peevish displeasure” (25) seemingly *apropos* of nothing. Even the hounds attempt to devour Lockwood. On his next visit, his polite

---

<sup>81</sup> One of Lockhart sources for his biography of Sir Walter Scott—Emily’s hero—was Weir’s biography that makes use of “an old nurse who...relates fifty-year-old recollections with such simplicity and minuteness” (cited in *Lockhart as Romantic Biographer* 196-197), though Lockhart apparently was skeptical of “Weir’s principal category of witnesses.”

<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Louis Menand writes in his essay “Goblin Market” for *The New York Review of Books* that his appreciation of Tolkein’s trilogy resulted from its “sensation of historical depth, of stories behind stories behind stories.” He goes on to explain, “What pulled me in as the ‘complete world’ effect, the illusion of spatial and temporal extension beyond the boundaries of the story proper” caused by references to elaborate mythological systems and even a “red and black hand-drawn map, folded and pasted into the back of the hardcover edition, which names places never explored in the book—Haradwaith, Tolfalas, Khand: what went on there?—was darkly wonderful to an eleven-year-old imagination.”

overtures towards the young Catherine Heathcliff only infuriate her. After unwittingly irritating her by assuming she has an authority in the house that Heathcliff has denied her, he attempts to placate her by saying, “Ah, your favourites are among these!” He points “to an obscure cushion full of something like cats” that turn out to be dead rabbits (30). He also mistakes her first for Heathcliff’s wife, then Hareton’s, enraging the one and embarrassing the other. The mistake is understandable in one knowing nothing of the characters’ history. In addition, Hareton confuses Lockwood with his “absence of clear proofs of his condition,” seeming to be somewhere between servant and master, and Lockwood cannot figure out the reasons for his hostility: “the young man,” he says, “looked down on me, from the corner of his eyes, for all the world as if there were some mortal feud unavenged between us” (31). Lockwood, lacking the back story, cannot make out what he has done to insult him.

Some of this sense of lost histories and secret worlds comes from Emily Brontë’s use of her Gondal adventures that she developed from her early reading; some of it comes from her innate sense of the liminal. If it is difficult to determine to what extent Emily Brontë was influenced by some of this material—including her reading of Keats’s poetry—it is because she shares with him a similar relationship to her sources. Both let their reading become “proved upon the pulses” before it influenced their writing. Charlotte Brontë claimed that “Neither Emily nor Anne was learned; they had no thought of filling their pitchers at the well-spring of other minds; they always wrote from the impulse of nature, the dictates of intuition, and from such stores of observation as their limited experience enabled them to amass” (“Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell” 20). Likewise, Keats famously wrote, “O for a life of sensations rather than

thoughts!” Yet both Keats and Emily Brontë read deeply, if not widely, in the works of others; their statements do not necessarily imply that they eschewed “mere book knowledge,” as Morsberger suggests (136); rather, they indicate that while Keats believed that “extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people,” he did not compose his best poetry with Shakespeare’s works propped open in front of him, just as Emily Brontë did not craft Lockwood’s acid vociferations “that smacked of King Lear” while glancing at the aged king’s curses.

Sydney Dobell’s *Palladium* review of *Wuthering Heights*—which Charlotte Brontë excerpts from her censure of her sister’s critics—notes the “instinctive” quality of Emily Brontë’s writing and describes a similar process by which principle becomes instinct<sup>83</sup> and reading becomes felt life:

All art that is the application of principles, however astutely those principles be applied...smacks not of the artist, but the artisan....All improvement in the creation must first exist in the creator. Say not to the artist, write, paint, play, but such and such a rule, but *grow* by it. Have you literary principles?—write them in your leisure hours on the fleshly tables of your heart. Have you theories of taste?—set your brain in idle time to their turn....Then, when your

---

<sup>83</sup> Similarly, in her 1850 “Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights*,” Charlotte Brontë excuses her sister’s creation of the “evil genius” Heathcliff by writing: “But this I know; the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that at times strangely wills and works for itself. He may lay down rules and devise principles, and to rules and principles it will perhaps for years lie in subjection; and then, haply without any warning of revolt, there comes a time...when, refusing absolutely to make ropes out of sea-sand any longer, it sets to work on statue-hewing, and you have a Pluto or a Jove, a Tisiphone or a Psyche, a Mermaid or a Madonna, as Fate or Inspiration direct. Be the work grim or glorious, dread or divine, you have little choice left but quiescent adoption. As for you—the nominal artist—your share in it has been to work passively under dictates you neither delivered nor could question—that would not be uttered at your prayer, nor suppressed nor changed at your caprice.” (*Wuthering Heights* xix).

error is no longer a trespass to be condemned by judgment, but an impiety at which feeling revolts—...strike off the clay mould from the bronze Apollo, throw your critics to one wind and their sermons to the other, let Self be made absolute as you take up your pen and write, like a god, in a sublime egotism, to your own likes and dislikes are unquestioned law. (312)

To write by “the application of principles” is to make a “palpable design” alien to the genius of Keats and Brontë: “If, as Keats said, we hate poetry that has a palpable design on us,” Rosalind Miles remarks, “then that is why we love Emily Brontë” (“Baby God” 76). Both write works of great intensity arising out of beauty and truth rather than facts and reasons laid down by others. For this reason, the traces of Emily Brontë’s early *Blackwood’s* reading are faint in her mature work, appearing here and there like the ghostly signposts half-submerged in the snow outside Wuthering Heights. She read and re-read her favorite periodicals and poems and novels, dramatized them with her siblings, transformed them into her Gondal paracosm, and later reworked them into *Wuthering Heights*. Rosalind Miles also notes another similarity in their creation of insular worlds:

She too could well have declared, as he did in a letter to Reynolds of April 9, 1818, “I never wrote one single Line of Poetry with the least shadow of public thought”; or again, “my imagination is a monastery and I am its monk” (letter to Shelley, August 1820). Who more than Emily Brontë felt able to “refuse the poisonous suffrage of a public” in the knowledge that “the soul is a world of itself, and had enough to do in its own home” (Keats’s letter to Reynolds, August 25, 1819)?” (70)

The realms of Emily Brontë's poems and novel are distinctly her own, strange and wild as her imagination. She tends to absorb her reading and make it a part of her paracosm, internalizing the works of Byron, Scott, Lockhart, Milton, and Keats without directly imitating them. Yet despite her dislike of filling her pitcher "at the well-spring of other minds," she does echo her reading from time to time in her writing—including some of Keats's poems.

Emily Brontë encountered several of his poems in her periodical reading for which we have definite documentation, including excerpts of his early poetry such as *Endymion*. The Brontës also liked his odes. If Chitham is correct, Emily Brontë's favorite Keats poem was "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (163). She echoes it in her poem "Castle Wood" much as Charlotte echoed "Ode to a Nightingale,"<sup>84</sup> using some of Keats's words and phrases if not his lushness of expression. In the penultimate stanza, for example, she writes, "But I was brede the mate of care, / The foster-child of sore distress," adopting his unusual usage of the word "brede" and mimicking the line, "Thou foster-child of silence and slow time." Her poem's style in general, however, is radically different than that of Keats; it is stark and irregular and often dissonant. But the speaker's sentiments in Keats's ode seem to have been those of her poet-hero locked in the Palaces of Instruction, who muses, "Dark falls the fear of this despair / On spirits born of happiness." Living a posthumous existence, he might well yearn to be far above "breathing human passion... / That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed, / A burning

---

<sup>84</sup> Despite her early fondness for Wilson and dislike of "poetasters," Charlotte Brontë later quoted from *Endymion* favorably in her letters and seemed to admire his odes. Ratchford argues that "Vesper" "echoes faintly of Keats" (47), especially the lines "Then I will sit and listen: not a voice / Disturbs the unbroken stillness of this hour; / No nestling bird, with faintly rustling noise, / Raises the leaflets of the vernal bower, / Or bend the spray where blooms the fruit-betokening flower. / Even the chorister of night is still! / Sweet Philomel restrains her 'customed song; / Hushed are the murmurs of the unseen rill / Creeping through matted grass and weeds along; / And silence soon will reign these solemn shades among!" Note the Huntian / Keatsian use of "leaflets."

forehead, and a parching tongue.” Hazlitt similarly wrote of Greek statuary in “On Gusto,” an essay that undoubtedly influenced Keats’s ode:

The gusto in the Greek statues is of a very singular kind. The sense of perfect form nearly occupies the whole mind, and hardly suffers it to dwell on any other feeling. It seems enough for them to be, without acting or suffering. Their forms are ideal, spiritual. Their beauty is power. By their beauty they are raised above the frailties of pain or passion; by their beauty they are deified. (*Selected Writings* 269)

Such aesthetic escape is a constant theme in Emily Brontë’s work. When she was suffering away from home as a student and later a teacher, she became the imprisoned poets of Gondal yearning for freedom. As with much of Keats’s work, Emily Brontë’s poems often dramatize a desire for transcendence followed by a fall back to “the cold hill’s side.” “Even as I stood with raptured eye / Absorbed in bliss so deep and dear,” she writes, “My hour of rest had fled by / And given me back to weary care” (Norton *Wuthering Heights* 271). Both also create a “material sublime” in their use of the sensory world as a starting point for visionary experience. In Brontë’s “Shall Earth no More Inspire Thee,” for example, the earth says, “I know my magic power / To drive thy griefs away” (Norton *Wuthering Heights* 275), but its ability to tease her out of thought is temporary. Though her use of language is often stark and unembellished, unlike the musical luxuries of Keats’s verse, she shares with him this yearning for—and increasing skepticism of—such visionary transcendence inspired by the physical world.

Despite these similarities in theme, Emily Brontë’s fondness for Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” at first seems a bit peculiar. In tone the poem seems closer to “Autumn,”

“Ode to a Nightingale,” or perhaps sections of “Drear-Nighted December.” One would think she would have preferred his descriptions of thrushes, moths, nightingales, or violets to Grecian artifacts—and yet they also fascinated her with their half-expressed tales of distant times and places. Her Gondal characters lived in the north but also in the warm south in places such as “Grecia,” the “classic plain” where Alexander meets Zenobia. In addition, she would have most likely responded to the speculative possibilities excited by the series of unanswered questions in “The Ode on a Grecian Urn,” for she used a similar technique in her own work.

Lockwood—like the reader—is left with a series of questions after his encounter with the denizens of Wuthering Heights. In the space of two pages, he asks question after question of Nelly, including:

“Is [Heathcliff] not rich enough to keep his estate in good order?”

“He had a son, it seems?”

“And that young lady, Mrs. Heathcliff, is his widow?”

“Where did she come from originally?”

“Then...my predecessor’s name was Linton?”

“And who is that Earnshaw, Hareton Earnshaw, who lives with Mr. Heathcliff? Are they relations?”

“I see the house at Wuthering Heights has ‘Earnshaw’ carved over the door. Are they an old family?”

“He must have had some ups and downs in life to make him such a churl.

Do you know anything of his history?” (50)

Nelly’s responses only provoke further queries, and his questions do not seem

completely answered. J. Hillis Miller adds to these queries from a reader's perspective, "How have things got the way they are at Wuthering Heights when Lockwood first gets there? What is the original cause lying behind this sad disappearance of civility? Why is it that the novel so resists satisfactory reasonable explanation" (Repetition and "The Uncanny" 380)? Because Keats felt that "the best beacon towards a little speculation" was a question, he also uses a series of questions to excite the imagination in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" when he writes, "What men or gods are these? What maidens loath? / What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / ... What wild ecstasy?" Likewise, Lockwood could well have asked of the inhabitants of Wuthering Heights, "Who are these people going to the sacrifice?" Like the structure of *The Arabian Nights* the Brontës had loved in their youth, *Wuthering Heights* invites its audience in by offering tantalizing bits of information at every turn without giving away the whole story. In particular, the first portion of *Wuthering Heights*, filled with Lockwood's uncertainty and half-knowledge, excites the "momentous depth of speculation" that Keats says is necessary in a negatively capable work.

As in many of Shakespeare's plays, the reader enters *Wuthering Heights* in *medias res*, with a sense of the portentous history of the place and fragments of seeming truths about its inhabitants that derives in part from her early reading and elaborate Gondal paracosm. Keats writes admiringly of the colloquy between Goneril and Reagan, "How finely is the brief of Lear's character sketched in this conference" that suggests Lear's history without extensive enumeration. He esteemed Shakespeare's hieroglyphic art, arguing in a review of Kean that "A melodious passage in poetry is full of pleasures both sensual and spiritual. The spiritual is felt when the very letters and points of

charactered language show like the hieroglyphics of beauty;—the mysterious signs of an immortal freemasonry” (“On Kean in Richard” 237)! The intensity that arises from such hieroglyphic writing, he explains in his Negative Capability letter, redeems any “disagreeables” within it, such as King Lear’s curses, Gloucester’s blinding, or the series of deaths at the play’s end. Emily Brontë apparently also admired this quality about *King Lear* and has Lockwood utter “several incoherent threats of retaliation that, in their depth of virulency, smacked of *King Lear*” (36). Such disagreeables in the novel—its curses and abuses—nonetheless evaporate in the intensity of Catherine and Heathcliff’s passion.

Brontë shared with Keats and Shakespeare the ability to conjure up a whole scene out of a few hieroglyphic phrases.<sup>85</sup> In chapter three, Lockwood enters the *adytum* of Wuthering Heights, Cathy’s old room, and discovers her marginal writing on the Testament is written in a “faded hieroglyphics” that he must “decypher” (38).<sup>86</sup> He also sees “a name repeated in all kind of characters, large and small” (38) scratched on the sill of the window, on the threshold of Wuthering Heights and the outside world. These three variations of Catherine’s name contain in cipher form the entire history of the novel.

Later on in the novel, as Kermode has pointed out,

---

<sup>85</sup> For more readings of Brontë and Shakespeare, see A. J. Tough, “*Wuthering Heights and King Lear*” in *English* 21 (Spring 1972), 18-28; Arnold P. Drew, “Emily Brontë and *Hamlet*” in *Notes and Queries* n s 1 (Feb 1954), 81-82; Ellen Serlen, “The Rage of Caliban: Realism and Romance in the Nineteenth Century Novel” in *DAI* 36 (Aug 1975), 911A; William H. Marshall, “Hareton Earnshaw: Natural Theology on the Moors” in *Victorian Newsletter* 21 (Spring 1962), 14-15; Lew Girdler, “*Wuthering Heights and Shakespeare*” in *Huntington Library Quarterly* 19 (Aug 1956), 385-92; and Jean N. McIlwraith’s “Introduction” to the 1907 Doubleday edition of *Wuthering Heights*.

<sup>86</sup> Keats wrote that “A Man’s life of any worth is a continual allegory—and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life—a life like the Scriptures, figurative—which such people can no more make out than they can the Hebrew Bible....Shakespeare led a life of Allegory; his works are the comments on it. (*Letters* II, 67). Charlotte Brontë seems to have felt similarly about her sister: “an interpreter ought always to have stood between her and the world” because “Too often reviewers,” not adept threshold readers, “remind us of the mob of Astrologers, Chaldeans, and Soothsayers gathered before ‘the writing on the wall,’ and unable to read the characters or make known the interpretation” (*Wuthering Heights* 319).

When you have processed all the information you have been waiting for, you see the point of the order of the scribbled names, as Lockwood gives them: *Catherine Earnshaw, Catherine Heathcliff, Catherine Linton*. Read from left to right they recapitulate Catherine Earnshaw's story; read from right to left, the story of her daughter, Catherine Linton. (cited in Jacobs 356)

Catherine, like many naughty schoolgirls (as etchings and scribblings in innumerable wooden desks can attest), was apparently defacing the paint with her name out of rebellious boredom, then trying it out with the last names of her beaux, seeing how it looked in each permutation; but the order in which Lockwood arbitrarily records them turns out to be not arbitrary at all by the novel's end. First-time readers will obviously not understand the significance of their sequence, even as Lockwood does not, but nonetheless feel they are traces of some lost history and wonders what secret relationship they have to one another. As Lockwood reads these hieroglyphics, he begins to doze and becomes haunted by linguistic ghosts: "a glare of white letters started from the dark, as vivid as specters—the air swarmed with Catherines" (38). The action of "spelling over" (38) her names seems to cast a conjuring spell as well, and he soon dreams or sees a vision of her trying to get into the room.

Emily Brontë is careful to make his experience in Catherine's room ambiguous, either a true vision or merely a seeming truth. Like Coleridge before his vision of "Kubla Khan," Lockwood, too, reads a text while falling asleep that informs his dreams: "I saw a red ornamented title—'Seventy times Seven, and the First of the Seventy-First. A Pious Discourse delivered by the Reverend Jabes Brandersham, in the Chapel of Gimmerton Sough' ....I sank back in bed, and fell asleep" (40). This text inspires in him a

persecution nightmare that he attributes to “the effects of bad tea and bad temper” (40), a reasonable enough explanation—as Keats once told Fanny Brawne, “any organic derangement always occasions a Phantasmagoria” in dreams (*Letters* II: 277). Lockwood then describes waking up to the tapping of a branch on the window, a sound that has made him dream a congregation was beating him. Critics have often wondered if Brontë had intended to use these details of “Jabes Brandersham” in a later part of the novel and forgot, perhaps because they are later additions she included hurriedly after her publisher insisted on a third volume. But whatever other use she might have had for Lockwood’s first dream, it does encapsulate the novel’s sense of persecution and violence, and it also makes the status of Lockwood’s second dream uncertain. Perhaps it is true, as the adage goes, that “We are close to waking when we dream we are dreaming,” for like the dream within a dream of the poet in “The Fall of Hyperion,” Lockwood’s dream of dreaming brings him closer to the truth of his waking experiences in *Wuthering Heights*.

If Lockwood had simply passed from one dream to another without describing an interval of waking, one would assume he was having a typical oneiric experience in which scenes and times change *apropos* of nothing, crossing abruptly from one to the other with no transitional passage between—much like *Wuthering Heights* itself, which opens directly onto the “house” proper “without any introductory...passage” (26). But after Lockwood describes being awakened by the tree branch, he says, “I listened doubtingly an instant, detected the disturber, then turned and dozed, and dreamt again; if possible, still more disagreeably than before” (42). But what Lockwood dreams is the reality of his situation in Catherine’s room, and his description of what happened next

throws in doubt whether Catherine's appearance is indeed a dream or an actual preternatural encounter:

This time, I remembered I was lying in the oak closet, and I heard distinctly the gusty wind, and the driving of the snow; I heard, also, the fir-bough repeat its teasing sound, and ascribed it to the right cause; but it annoyed me so much, that I resolved to silence it, if possible; and, I thought, I rose and endeavored to unhasp the casement. The hook was soldered into the staple, a circumstance observed by me when awake, but forgotten. (42)

It is true, as Proust frequently describes, that dreaming sometimes enables one to recall memories forgotten while awake, but Lockwood's description reads like a waking experience. He is still annoyed by the bough; he wishes to get back to sleep; but when he tries to open the window, he finds it is soldered shut—a curious detail in itself, suggesting either that someone wanted to keep the living Catherine locked inside Wuthering Heights, or the dead Catherine out. Lockwood tries to explain away his experience by appealing to fact and reason, carefully recording minute details to ground his vision in reality. Perhaps he is attempting to convince himself as much as his audience that his experience was not an occult one.

“Many a man can travel to the very bourne of heaven,” Keats writes to Reynolds in 1818, “and yet want confidence to put down his half- seeing” (*Letters* I: 224).

Lockwood is one of those people, and his account of his night spent at the Heights is guarded and rational. Both Byron and Coleridge used facts and reasons to lend an air of verisimilitude to their tales of marvels, a technique followed by later writers such as Le Fanu, Bram Stoker, Henry James, Wilkie Collins, and Charles Dickens, who (perhaps as

a spoof of Collins) cites medical authorities in *Bleak House* to attest to the truth of spontaneous combustion. Lockwood seems the least likely person to believe in the supernatural; this is why his narration is so terrifying. In his description of what happens next, he moves from realistic description to nightmare reality, breaking through the final threshold:

“I must stop it, nevertheless!” I muttered, knocking my knuckles through the glass, and stretching my arm out to seize the importunate branch; instead of which, my fingers closed on the fingers of a little, ice-cold hand! (42)

When the specter identifies herself as “Catherine Linton,” Lockwood wonders, “why did I think of *Linton*? I had read *Earnshaw* twenty times for Linton” (42). He has improbably hit upon the very name she had when she died, thus once again throwing the status of the dream in doubt; had there actually been a waif of Catherine outside the window, it would have given the same name. Lockwood finally screams “in a frenzy of fright” only to find to his “confusion...the yell was not ideal” (43) but actual, sending Heathcliff running into the room. Lockwood’s raving monologue about the “minx” Catherine Linton and her twenty years of spectral exile understandably sends Heathcliff into a frenzy, for Lockwood speaks truths about her that from Heathcliff’s perspective he could not possibly have known. The end of the chapter leaves Lockwood wondering, like the speaker at the close of “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Was it a vision, or a waking dream? /...do I wake or sleep?”

Lockwood’s vision or waking dream significantly occurs in the novel’s penetralium of Mystery, a chamber kept perpetually locked. After Lockwood passes the threshold of Wuthering Heights, he moves progressively inward literally and figuratively,

passing from the sitting-room into the *adytum* of Catherine's bedroom and thence into the house's holiest of holiest for Heathcliff, Catherine's bed inside an oak cabinet. But the "fine isolated verisimilitudes" Lockwood encounters in this mysterium are necessarily only seeming truths, mysterious phrases of half-knowledge that lead him into further uncertainties and terrifying obscurities. Carol Jacobs points out:

The entrance to *Wuthering Heights* is marked by the metaphor of the doorway.

Passage through that threshold will generate a crisis both in the voice of the self and in the logic of the good text, for in *Wuthering Heights* one dreams of finding its center only to find that the center is a dream. (353)

Both Keats and Emily Brontë explore the liminal passages of the mind, and both frequently describe this process in architectural terms such as "a chamber of consciousness" and "dark passages" of the mind, or a literal "penetralium" (*Wuthering Heights* 26) and domesticated "Sanctum" (46). Like the *Arabian Night's Tales* the Brontës loved in their youth as well as Coleridge's magic poems and Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes," "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," the odes, "Lamia," and "The Fall of Hyperion," *Wuthering Heights* uses frames within frames and thresholds opening into thresholds to sustain intensity as it recounts the beauty and truth of Catherine and Heathcliff's passion.

Emily Brontë follows the Romantics in her use of literal thresholds to depict mental or emotional transition; she also learns from them how to use metaphor and metonymy to express the passage from sanctum to labyrinth. Angus Fletcher argues that "the great Romantic rediscovery" (*Colors of the Mind* 187) was the use of metaphor to depict passage:

Metaphor has always been the figure of the threshold, of passing over. Its symbolic function has always been transfer, transference, metamorphosis, shifting across, through, and over. Metaphor is the semantic process of balancing at the threshold. Metaphor draws the edge of the limen with surgical exactness. (*Ibid.*)

For this reason, when Catherine at last gives her own account of her metaphysical passion, she says she can only give “a feeling of how” she feels (83) and resorts to metaphor—“I *am* Heathcliff!”—to describe her emotions in the threshold that cannot be directly expressed. She famously describes her “love for Linton...like the foliage of the woods,” mutable and fleeting in its beauty “as winter changes the trees” and contrasts it to her love for Heathcliff that “resembles the eternal rocks beneath—a source of little visible delight, but necessary” (87). The best way to define the reality of her situation is by likening it to her dreams, exemplifying Keats’s idea that “The imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream: he awoke and found it truth”; for Emily Brontë, “real are the dreams of” daemons. In her outpouring to Nelly, Catherine attempts to describe “The feel of not to feel it” that Keats says “was never said in rhyme,” using metaphors to bridge the gap between the speakable and unspeakable that results in negatively capable prose poetry.

Likewise, when she is dying, her mind slips between dream and reality and sanity and insanity. She yearns to cross the threshold of the window to get back to Wuthering Heights and does not recognize her own face in the mirror, a liminal symbol of a divided self, a soul in exile; mourners in Victorian England covered their mirrors when someone died in the house. Even Catherine’s conception of heaven is not an ethereal realm, but

caught between two realms: the “material sublime”<sup>87</sup> of the moors. By the end of the novel, Heathcliff will wish “To cease upon the midnight with no pain” “in whose bourne alone,” as Barbara and Gareth Lloyd Evans write, “in a paradox typical of the Romantics, the final reconciliation of body and spirit will take place,” a sentiment akin to “the poignant longings of John Keats” (121). Emily Brontë’s writing, like that of John Keats, describes passage between dream and waking and imagination and reality, content in the space between cliff and heath or heights and wuthering storm.

And yet in the second half of the novel (perhaps added after her publisher requested another volume), Emily Brontë explains away some of the mystery found in the early *penetralium*; as the novel becomes more Victorian, it also moves further from the aesthetic of the *mysterium* that Keats discusses in his Negative Capability letter. The speculation excited in the first three chapters of the novel fades somewhat as Nelly one by one addresses Lockwood’s many questions. Alan S. Loxterman, comparing the first and second generations at the Heights, describes the book as a “Romantic poem and Victorian novel” (87), and various other critics have identified its two halves as “essence” and “substance.” The attributes of the first generation become watered down and dispersed in the second. Linton Heathcliff, for example, has the pallid weakness of the Lintons and the petulance of Heathcliff; Catherine Linton has a tamer version of her mother’s beauty, and the Linton good nature checks the intensity of her passions. Hareton Earnshaw, in turn, is as rough and unlettered as Heathcliff and yet has some of his father’s hauteur, but he is better natured than any of his biological or spiritual fathers and in the end settles down to a comfortable domesticity with Catherine, thereby

---

<sup>87</sup> Richard Benvenuto points out the similarities between Keats’s “Epistle to J. H. Reynolds,” *King Lear*, and Emily Brontë’s essay on the “Butterfly” (79).

reversing, through their union, the progression of her mother from Earnshaw to Heathcliff to Linton.

Nevertheless, Emily Brontë still leaves many questions unanswered by the end of her novel. Heathcliff's origins and identity remain obscure at the book's close, and even his mortal status is in doubt; one wonders along with Isabella, "is he a ghoul or a vampire?" Likewise, Heathcliff's carriage and gambling prowess indicate how he might have acquired his fortune, yet Lockwood never finds out for certain. Though Sydney Dobell in his 1850 Palladium review was convinced of Catherine's virtue—"in the very arms of her lover we dare not doubt her purity," (*Wuthering Heights* 309-310)—the contemporary reader wonders just what was going on out there in the moors. Similarly, Catherine the second seems to spring, Minerva-like, out of her mother's delirious brain, presumably because the delicate minded Nelly foregoes any mention of Catherine's pregnancy, but all the while giving the effect of Cathy II as an acausal changeling. Even with the novel's final line (which itself seems to echo the closing line of one version of "Frost at Midnight"), the reader is still in a state of half-knowledge, not knowing if Catherine and Heathcliff do indeed walk the moors or if it would be foolish to "imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleeper in that quiet earth" (285).

If one could draw back the veil for a moment of the origin of Emily Brontë's liminal genius, one would perhaps find her curled up with a book as a child like Jane Eyre at the beginning of Charlotte Brontë's novel,<sup>88</sup> sitting on a window ledge between the outside world and her inner paracosm:

---

<sup>88</sup> The early chapters of *Jane Eyre* also contain many echoes of their childhood play that are found in *Wuthering Heights* such as scenes of reading and transgression, imprisonment leading to a fit, specters of the self in mirrors, and class snobbery. In a diary paper drawing, Emily depicts herself cloistered in the tiny room beneath the stairs where she liked to retreat to read and write.

I soon possessed myself of a volume, making sure that it should be one stored with pictures. I mounted into the window-seat: gathering up my feet, I sat cross-legged like a Turk; and, having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close, I was shrined in double retirement. (5)

As with many of Keats's poems, *Wuthering Heights* ends in liminal intensity, hovering in the space between certainty and doubt, ignorance and knowledge, mystery and revelation. Whether or not Emily Brontë divined something of Keats's Negative Capability from his early poems, *Endymion*, and odes she encountered in her periodical reading, or remembered something of her staging of the cockney rebellions in the Brontë paracosm, a narrative Negative Capability presides over *Wuthering Heights*. Perhaps—to adapt Blake's famous statement on Milton—Emily Brontë was of Keats's party and did not know it.

### III

#### *The Chamber of Consciousness and the House of Fiction*

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million.... These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at the best, mere holes in a dead wall...

—Henry James, "Preface" to *Portrait of a Lady*

John Keats, Emily Brontë, and Henry James all would have agreed with Emily Dickinson that

One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted—

One need not be a House—

The Brain has corridors—surpassing

Material Place— (333)

Whether describing the not so “Jolly Corner” where Spencer Brydon meets the self he would have been had he stayed in America,<sup>89</sup> Catherine’s haunted bedroom, or “Melancholy’s Sovran shrine,” all three writers frequently portray changes in consciousness in architectural terms. These structures of consciousness often take the form of mental fanes, temples, pagodas, *penetralia*, *adyta*, or haunted chambers, as when Keats builds a fane in “some untrodden region of the mind” (277) to express what was never said in rhyme, Lockwood penetrates the “Penetralium” of mysteries at Wuthering Heights, or James constructs an altar in the mind of George Stransom to honor the “eternally absent” in “The Altar of the Dead” (*Complete Stories 1892-1898* 450). In the Victorian era, however, Keats’s “material sublime” gives way to a sublime materiality, and we are never to forget that the heath haunted by Catherine and Heathcliff is a material place or that “The Spoils of Poynton” and the *Golden Bowl* involve literal treasures, fires, and fissures.

In Keats and James, the urge to describe mental processes in terms of architectonics is particularly strong, from Keats’s *Mansion of Many Apartments* to James’s *House of Fiction*. In Keats’s case, the mental mansions and “two-and-thirty

---

<sup>89</sup> Dickinson’s poem continues, “Far safer, through an Abbey gallop, / The Stones a’ chase— / Than Unarmed, one’s a’self encounter— / In lonesome Place—”

palaces” of the imagination tend to be immaterial places described in material terms.

Coleridge maintained that one was born either a Platonist or an Aristotelian, but Keats seems to hover between the two in what he called a “material sublime”—or perhaps maps the uneasy travel between dream and waking as well as illusion and reality. He eschewed logic and reason in his Negative Capability letter in favor of a “half-knowledge” akin to Socrates’ definition of *philosophia* in *The Symposium*, and yet strove by the end of his short life to incorporate the “miseries of the world” into his work: “I have of late been moulting,” he told Reynolds; “not for fresh feathers and wings: they are gone, and in their stead I hope to have a pair of patient sublunary legs. I have altered, not from a Chrysalis into a butterfly, but the Contrary, having two little loopholes, whence I may look out into the stage of the world” (*Letters* II: 128). If Keats did not quite believe Aristotle’s claim that knowledge is derived from sensory observation, he nonetheless thought that “Nothing ever becomes real until it is experienced—Even a Proverb no Proverb to you till your Life has illustrated it” (*Letters* II: 81) and “axioms of philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses” (*Letters* I: 279). Until experience becomes part of what James called one’s “felt life,” they remain what Kant called empty “concepts without intuition.”

In 1818, Keats expanded on Wordsworth’s line about “dark passages” by discussing changes in mental states in terms of movement between mental chambers:

I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me—The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think—We

remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle—within us—we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden Thought, than [sic] we become intoxicated wit 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 [sic] of good and evil.

(*Letters I*: 280-281)

As Keats's consciousness develops, he envisions moving through a series of chambers, from the "infant Chamber" (which reads like a prototype of William James's theories of infant perception) to the "Chamber of Maiden Thought" in which—like the young Henry James in his autobiographical *A Small Boy and Others*—the spectator "gapes" at the bright spectacle in wonder and delight from the "two little loopholes" of a chrysalis. Eventually, however, the thinking mind comes to "dark passages," a state in which Keats found himself while writing his letter. This architectural staging of the growth of the

mind also finds expression in James's work. As Sallie Sears notes, "Things, objects in their sensuous particularity—the architecture of both the natural and social world—are vividly represented" in James's fiction, "but as analogues for the shifting states of mind, patterns of perception of the character" (*The Negative Imagination* 160). In the *Wings of the Dove*, for example, he similarly describes "dark passages" in the life of Milly Theale in which "we see not the balance of good and evil," though he stages them in an actual passageways through which she must walk to confront a portrait of a long dead woman who uncannily seems a mirror reflection of her. Likewise, in *The Golden Bowl*, Maggie circles around the issue of her husband's infidelity while circling around a literal house, and Isabel Archer describes the relationship between Osmond and Madame Merle by seeing the way they are arranged in the room.

In his late fiction, James frequently stages his characters' mental transformations and, indeed, conceives of writing itself in this way. He was not successful in his attempts to write plays and have them staged, but he mastered the art of mental theater in his novels. Perhaps this is why his notebook entries frequently read like stage directions to himself and his prefaces explain the blueprints of his thought. Likewise, in "The Art of Fiction," James discusses the process of weaving art out of one's "felt life" in entomological and architectural terms:

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue (351-352).

This passage recalls both Keats' "Chamber of Maiden Thought" epistle as well as another he wrote to J. H. Reynolds on 19 February 1818:

Now it appears to me that almost any Man may like the Spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel—the points of leaves and twigs on which the Spider begins her work are few and she fills the Air with a beautiful circuiting: man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine Webb of his Soul and weave a tapestry empyrean... (*Letters* I: 66).

Both James and Keats think of themselves as spider-artists, weaving art out of their own interior life like Shelley's high-born maiden or Tennyson's later Lady of Shalott. In James's metaphor, experience is a spider web that catches every stray event in the chamber of consciousness, a figure for a sensibility alive to the slightest touch and bristle of contact. Keats's emphasis, however, is on the scarcity of tangible events on which one needs to anchor the "tapestry empyrean"; as he writes in a letter, "Byron describes what he sees—I describe what I imagine—mine is the hardest task." It is the "beautiful circuiting" of the artist in the chamber of consciousness, not "the points of leaves and twigs on which" she "begins her work," that determines the beauty and truth of art for Keats. James watches what will stray into his web, alive to every tremble and chance encounter; Keats flits branch to leaf to twig of tangible experience, weaving a web oblivious to the gadflies around him. One imagines James springing upon whatever falls in his web, whereas Keats would be dismayed to see his airy fabric rent.

There are other Keatsian echoes in James's theories of writing. Elsewhere in his "Art of Fiction," he stresses how "there will be no intensity at all" to this literary web, "and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say" (*Tales of Henry James*

350)—including the freedom to choose “the disagreeable” as well as “the ugly” (357), for “in proportion as” the artist’s “intelligence is fine will the novel, the picture, the statue partake of the substance of beauty and truth” (361), whatever its *donnée*. James’s language here is akin to that of Keats’s Negative Capability letter in which Keats writes how “the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship to Beauty & Truth.” Both writers acknowledge “the disagreeable” possibilities of art—such as Cordelia’s hanging or Milly’s broken end—but believe in something they call “intensity” to make even such painful subjects (in James’s words) “partake of the substance of beauty and truth.” Experience for the spider artist is not always pleasant, but one can nonetheless weave from it a “tapestry empyrean” or a golden web of intrigue and deception.

This intensity for Keats and James also derives from a work’s use of verisimilitude and partial knowledge, the few twigs upon which one spins tales and poems. In such works as *The Golden Bowl*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Aspern Papers*, *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Sacred Fount*, “The Altar of the Dead,” and the late tales in general, James explores the process by which the mind reacts to such half-knowledge and seeming truths. He seems to have inherited this sense at least in part from his Romantic precursors, figures which often appear in his fiction from *The Aspern Papers* (Shelley and Byron) and “The Coxon Fund” (Coleridge) to *The Princess Casamassima* (with its politically passionate Keats figure, Hyacinth) and *The Golden Bowl* (Adam Verver as “stout Cortez”). In his Preface to *The American*, James describes the romantic as something which “stands...for things that, with all the facilities in the world, we never can directly know; the things that reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of

our thought and desire” (279). James’s novels frequently explore such “beautiful circuit” and uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, as when Maggie contemplates the enigma of her “situation” in the *Golden Bowl* which

had been occupying, for months and months, the very centre of the garden of her life, but it had reared itself like some strange, tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful, beautiful, but outlandish pagoda, a structure plated with hard, bright porcelain, colored and figured and adorned, at the overhanging eaves, with silver bells that tinkled, ever so charmingly, when stirred by chance airs. She had walked round and round it—that was what she felt; she had carried on her existence in the space left for her circulation, a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow; looking up, all the while, at the fair structure that spread itself so amply and rose so high, but never quite making out, as yet, where she might have entered had she wished. (327)

Maggie’s pagoda, however wonderful and beautiful in its impenetrability, nonetheless provokes in her a bristling, if not “irritable,” desire to make out, to see, and to understand its mysteries. She grows restless contemplating the outlandish structure of surmise and cannot rest simply standing outside of it, admiring its strange beauty. Unlike the figures in Keats’s poems who often long to linger in bowers (though Lycius in *Lamia* brings about her downfall by yearning for a public display), Maggie grows discontented with her pagoda, unable to gain admittance and distrusting its glittering beauty. The novel she inhabits does not so much revel in the unchartable *mysterium* as explores the way characters build consciousness in the face of human mysteries and deceptions.

This tracing of the growth and change of consciousness is typical of James's late fiction in general. Keats often said that he wanted to get back to the sensuous, concrete English of Chaucer and its later imitator, Chatterton, free from Latinate terms and "Miltonic inversions"; James, however, often uses words derived from French or Latin precisely because they seem less concrete than their Anglo-Saxon counterparts. His sentences are labyrinths of thought and syntax, hovering at the edge of meaning. One early caricature of James shows him trapped in the Lady of Shalott's tower, entangled in the web of his own sentences. It is an apt image in some ways, for James frequently does entangle his characters in towers or pagodas of thought. In his preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, James describes the way in which he constructed a sense of accumulating consciousness in his novel:

The building-up of Kate Croy's consciousness to the capacity for the load little by little to be laid on it was...to have been a matter of a many hundred close-packed bricks as there are actually poor dozens....Infinitely interesting to have prepared and organised, correspondingly, [Milly Theale's] precipitations and liabilities, to have constructed, for Drama essentially to take possession, the whole bright house of her exposure. (43)

There is a curious sense of solidity to James's description, and one can almost feel the texture of the "close-packed bricks" forming "Kate Croy's consciousness." And yet this "bright house" is something of an immaterial place as well. Like the House of Fiction with its thousand windows, the bricks of Kate Croy's consciousness are a Charles Bovary's hat of a description, somehow both palpable and abstract at once.

For Keats's *Lamia*, however, the impalpability of her nuptial bower is all too evident by the end of the poem. The "bright house of exposure" turns out to be nothing more than the mind's illusions projected onto the landscape like an image from a magic lantern, brushed by the sound of spectral wings:

About the halls, and to and from the doors,  
 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 as the whole charm might fade. (354)

The bricks of her banquet-room, however solid in appearance, have less substance than gossamer and vanish after Apollonius penetrates through the veil of her illusion with a killing glance. The fanes erected by the imagination ultimately dissolve into mundane solidity, as if to illustrate the line from *Ode on Melancholy*: "Ay, in the very temple of Delight / Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine" (284). In contrast, James tends to frame "the whole bright house of exposure" in actual houses, describing, for example, Maggie peering into lit windows and seeing the truth of relations within, or Milly turning her face to a figurative and literal wall.

William James once complained to his brother about the style of his late novels, "The bare perfume of things will not support existence, and the effect of solidity you reach is but perfume and simulacrum" (*Letters of William James* 278). Ironically, the writer who coined "the stream of consciousness" failed to appreciate its manifestation in the work of his own brother, objecting to his "interminable elaboration of suggestive

reference” (*The James Family* 339) even though such elaborations parallel his own ideas in *The Principles of Psychology*:

We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantiative parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use....All dumb or anonymous psychic states have, owing to this error, been coolly suppressed; or, if recognized at all, have been named after the substantive perception that they led to, as thoughts ‘about’ this object or ‘about’ that, the stolid word *about* engulfing all their delicate idiosyncrasies in its monotonous sound. (245-246)

Henry James and Keats attempt to portray these very transitive parts of thought in their work, though the latter without “interminable elaborations and all.” Keats frequently uses material phenomena “as a starting post towards all the ‘two-and-thirty Pallaces”” (*Letters* I: 233) of the imagination, standing “tip-toe upon a little hill” in preparation for a flight aloft into the visionary realm. In James, this movement is often in reverse. In an effort to achieve “an effect of solidity” (*Letters of William James* 278) in his fiction of mental transformation, he materializes his characters’ liminal moments, making his novel’s written passages and literal passageways become rites of passage for his characters. Mental thresholds, brinks, elevations, inner sancta, and amazements become literal thresholds, alpine precipices, staircases, private rooms, and mazes. When Milly first comes to divine her doomed state in *The Wings of the Dove*, for example, she is poised over a literal abyss in the Alps to indicate that she will encounter figurative

abysses in her “complicated passage” of life (150), and she realizes her doomed state after passing from a literal and mental labyrinth into the heart of the “mystic circle” (237) of the house where she has “The pink dawn of an apotheosis” (240). Likewise, James represents the transformation of consciousness that Maggie and the Prince undergo in *The Golden Bowl* as literal breakage in a room become sacred space: “Hadn’t [Maggie] fairly got in the labyrinth with him?—wasn’t she indeed in the very act of placing herself there, for him, at its centre and core, whence, on that definite orientation and by an instinct all her own, she might securely guide him out of it?” (437-8). In his early writings James attempts to novelize drama; in his late work, he dramatizes consciousness and stages its rites of passage in the very architecture of his House of Fiction.

In contrast, the visionary structures Keats builds for his characters seldom abide for long, and even the chambers of consciousness darken and open onto a labyrinth of dark passages as though his mental fanes and mansions are more like a living entities than wooden structures. In “Psyche,” he decorates a temple “With the wreathed trellis of a working brain,” drawing on his anatomical studies at Guy’s Hospital in his image to depict the felt life of composition. His temple to Psyche will evolve as his consciousness does, and mental structures for Keats are often dynamic ones to accommodate all the transformations of mind. In a letter to Rice in 1818, Keats wishes to erect a resting place for his thoughts that will remain comfortably fixed and stable, but finds the desire a vain one:

What a happy thing it would be if we could settle our thoughts, make our minds up on any matter in five Minutes and remain content—that is to build a sort of mental Cottage of feelings quiet and pleasant—to have a sort of Philosophical

Back Garden, and cheerful holiday-keeping front one—but Alas! This can never be: for as the material Cottager knows there are such places as France and Italy and the Andes and the Burning Mountains—so the spiritual Cottager has knowledge of the *terra semi incognita* of things unearthly. (*Letters I*: 254)

These are the “fine isolated verisimilitudes caught from the Penetralium of mystery,” and as such cannot be mapped or clearly delineated, remaining eternally “*terra semi incognita*” and best represented in gnostic half-light. Perhaps this is why characters in Keats’s poems often awaken “with a painful change” to real life, the airy palaces of the imagination—with their twilight chambers and “Charmed magic casements”—vanishing in the clear light of dawn.

One place where the difference between Keats’s Negative Capability and James’s capable negations is evident is in their depictions of mental altars and fanes in “The Altar of the Dead” and “To Psyche.” In both, the tributes are “wring / By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear” and reflect on absent figures. Stransom’s “immense escape from the actual” (266) comes from a need to respond to the silent call of the dead, “there in their simplified, intensified essence, their conscious absence and expressive patience, as personally there as if they had been stricken dumb.” Keats’s ode likewise begins with a feeling of spirit voices of no tone as he speaks “tuneless numbers” in his verse, though the absent goddess will, one imagines, eventually inhabit the mental fane with its “casement ope at night, / To let the warm love in!” They both construct mental altars, in other words, in memory of absent figures.

James first records his idea for “The Altar of the Dead” after an entry reflecting on Fennimore’s death, and is in part inspired by James’ own roll call of the dead. His

account of the story's inception in his "Preface" is that the "imaged appeal of the lost Dead" (242) had "always, or for so ever so far back, been there" (241) because

it was impossible for any critic or 'creator' at all worth his wage not, as a matter of course, again and again to ask himself what may not become of individual sensibility, of the faculty and fiber itself, when everything makes against the indulgence of it save as a conscious, and indeed highly emphasized, dead loss.

(242)

Writing fiction itself for James was the construction of mental altars to the dead—including the projection of his own dead self—even as Keats's "Ode to Psyche" is also an ode to the imaginative process of writing poetry that explores the dark passages of the human mind. "The Altar of the Dead" is not so much an expression of James's fears that he "may cease to be" as it is a sober meditation on how "the illustrious dead," as Keats phrased it, survive in our consciousness. Stransom, in attempting to keep the memory of his dead alive in the midst of the vast forgetting of London,<sup>90</sup> becomes not so much like the poet in "Psyche" as Isabella weeping "o'er her sweet basil evermore" (196). Both *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* and "The Altar of the Dead" are case studies in mourning and melancholia. In his "Preface," James explains that his story "commemorates a case of" nurturing "the finer flowers" of the dead and keeping them "tended and watered...with an exasperated piety" (245). Both the poem and the tale detail the activity of minds refusing to let go of grief and, indeed, seeking to prolong this grief by finding a tangible symbol of it. "If you stare too long into the abyss," Nietzsche warned, "be careful the abyss does not stare back into you"—and in these two works, the protagonists imagine they hear the dead calling back to them. After Lorenzo appears to Isabella in a

---

<sup>90</sup> "Mourir, à Londres, c'est être bien mort!" (245).

dream and tells her where to dig him up, she puts his head in a pot and broods over it; Stransom hears the silent call of the dead and responds with “great offices, . . . solemn and splendid ritual” (267).

Although Stransom has “a mortal dislike” of “lean anniversaries, and . . . disliked them still more when they made a pretense of a figure” (265), it is the lack of such rituals which prompt him to erect a fane to the dead in an “untrodden region of his mind.” James explains that “an altar . . . reared itself in his spiritual spaces” because Stransom felt that the dead “ask for so little that they got, poor things, even less, and died again, died every day, of the hard usage of life” (266). Stransom becomes like Tennyson in his *In Memoriam*, mourning the loss of mourning, and grieves for the double death of forgetfulness. “They had no organized service, no reserved place, no honor, no shelter, no safety” (266) he mourns in a way reminiscent of Keats’s lament for Psyche:

temple thou hast none,  
 Nor altar heaped with flowers;  
 No 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  
 Of pale-mouth’d prophet dreaming. (*Complete Poems* 276)

Stransom’s altar, however, is not to a living psyche, but an Altar of the Dead; it is as if he failed to heed Keats’s injunction in “Ode on Melancholy,” “Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be / Your mournful psyche” (*CP* 283). If Stransom does not think of his dead

as “cloudy trophies hung” (*CP* 284) in his temple, he nonetheless “had formed little by little the habit of numbering his Dead” (266) and eventually “almost caught himself wishing that certain of his friends would now die, that he might establish with them in this manner a connection more charming than, as if happened, it was possible to enjoy with them in life” (275). He seems to gloat over them, a spider-artist waiting for a new victim to fall into his web and become an apotheosis. Keats does not quite go so far as to establish a private “religion of the Dead” (267) in his poems, but he nonetheless pays homage to what he called “the mighty dead” in many of his poems, from his early 1817 verse to the dream bower in the *Fall of Hyperion* where he “drinks pledging all the mortals of the world, / And all the dead whose names are in our lips” (*Complete Poems* 362). Perhaps if Fanny Brawne had died, his worship of Psyche and Eros would have taken on a different tone. In a tormented letter to her, Keats tells her that his religion is Love, and he could die for it; Stransom’s religion is the Dead, and he lives for them. “They had looks that remained,” Stransom reflects, “as great poets had quoted lines” (270).

However much he was inspired by the natural world in his poetry, Keats’s altars to Psyche and Saturn can nonetheless exist only in the mind, wreathed with mental plants and indescribable flowers sown by the fancy, or with walls “Builded so high, it seemed that filmed clouds / Might spread beneath, as o’er the stars of heaven” and “So old” that he “remembered none / The like upon the earth.” The altar in Stransom’s “mind, in his soul” is likewise “more splendid to the spiritual eye than in any actual church” and “lighted in the gloom of his own soul” (*Notebooks*, 98-99), and yet he grows to find these “temples of the spirit” (267) inadequate for his worship. Keats’s narrators frequently

watch their mental altars collapse under the weight of mundane reality, though his later poetry moves toward addressing “the giant agony of the world” (365). For Stransom, however, the immaterial soon becomes not enough, and he desires to manifest his mental altar in an actual material place. He wanders into a church on the anniversary of his fiancée’s death and becomes bathed in the light of its candles:

Stransom subsequently quite lost himself, floating away on the sea of light....The things became, as he sat there, his appropriate altar, and each starry candles had an appropriate vow. He numbered them, named them, grouped them—it was the silent roll-call of the Dead. They made together a brightness vast and intense, a brightness in which the mere chapel of his thoughts grew so dim that as it faded away he asked himself if he shouldn’t find his real comfort in some material act, some outward worship. (272)

The hallowed chamber in his mind where he has enshrined his beloved grows dim in the blaze of the actual, becoming a “mere chapel of his thoughts” that craves manifestation in reality. Keats is content with his incorporeal fane built in his mind, but Stransom’s “unapproachable shrine he had erected in his mind” (272) becomes another emblem of the absence he cannot fill. He does not grow restless to enter within it, as Maggie does outside her pagoda, but he nonetheless becomes discontented with its remoteness. His mental “Mansion of Many apartments” is a haunted one, echoing with what is missing: “He had tried to put into his existence whatever else might take up room in it,” James writes, “but he had never made it anything but a house of which the mistress was eternally absent” (265).

Abandoning his mental fane, Stransom establishes an actual altar in a Catholic church and fills it with candles to commemorate his dead. Over his years of worship, as the candles steadily gather into a blaze of light, he notices another adherent worshipping at his shrine and strikes up a strange friendship with her based on the things they do not do together. "It was odd that when nothing had ever really brought them together he should have been able successfully to assume that they were in a manner old friends—that this negative quality was somehow more than they could express" (278), James writes of their deepening intimacy, and later:

For long ages he never knew her name, any more than he had ever pronounced his own; but it was not their names that mattered, it was only their perfect practice and their common need.

These things made their whole relation so impersonal that they had not the rules or reasons people found in ordinary friendships. They didn't care for the things it was supposed necessary to care for in the intercourse of the world. They ended one day (they never knew which of them expressed it first) by throwing out the idea that they didn't care for each other. Over this idea they grew quite intimate. (280)

His dead are many, her "Dead are only one" (281), but they share a desire for a physical manifestation of the metaphysical. Their common need is their worship of those who are absent, and their intimacy has what James calls a "negative quality." Even when Stransom finally enters her bedroom after her aunt's death, it is not "To let the warm love in!", but to discover that her One is his None: the dead man she worships is the only lost friend Stransom refuses to commemorate with a candle, for Acton Hague had done him

an unpardonable wrong that is never defined in the story. Hague has used her ill, too, but she has forgiven him. “What was it he did to you?” Stransom asks (287). “Everything!” she replies, her everything becoming yet another nothing in a story of absences.

As with the temple of the spirit he abandoned, Stransom’s material altar comes to symbolize for him a lack he cannot fill. “These days of her absence proved to him of what she was capable” (292), and this sense of capable negations increases as the story draws to a close. The idea of Hague separates Stransom and the mourner, provoking in him an “irritation [that] proved perhaps the greatest misfortune that had ever overtaken him” (295). His nettled desire to find out why she prefers the dead man leads him to become haunted by her call for “One more, one more” candle, and he arranges and rearranges the candles on his altar in a vain attempt to fill in this vacancy even as he grows steadily closer to death himself. Hearing of his failing health, the mourning woman finds him on the verge of death in front of his altar of candles. ““They say there’s a gap in the array—they say it’s not full, complete,” Stransom murmurs (301). “Just one more,’ he went on, softly—‘isn’t that what you wanted?’” “‘Ah, no more—no more!’ she wailed,” suddenly struck by the grim significance of the line. He collapsed in her arms and “his face had the whiteness of death” (301).

Stransom, like many of James’s characters, is not at ease in half-knowledge, but “tormented by really not knowing” (292). Confronted with the Penetralium of mystery, Keats can erect a fane to Psyche “in the midst of this wide quietness” and “dress” it “With the wreathed trellis of a working brain”—a negatively capable state in which “the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.” Keats is at home in quiet moments of awakened sensation and

heightened speculation, in “delicious diligent indolence” inside Psyche’s fane. James’s late stories often revolve around Keatsian “wild surmises,” but dramatize the bristling reaching of characters in the face of them. Like Emily Brontë, James frequently leaves his readers in speculative thresholds, wondering if the governess in “The Turn of the Screw” is haunted or deluded, or if characters in the *Sacred Fount* really do have a sinister influence on one another in a way that is similar to Keats’s liminal poetry; and yet the stories themselves detail the vain attempts of characters to cross over into certainty.

The “bristling” of James’s late fiction is often both a desire to know and a horror of the unknowable—“*Inhorresco, in quantum dissimilis ei sum,*” St. Augustine describes his hair-raising encounter with the wholly other in the *mysterium* (*Confessions* ii: 9, I). Yet this “bristling,” like many of Keats’s favored words, is simultaneously a tactile, mental, and emotional term. James does not seek to fill in the absences and silences of his late fiction so much as stage his characters’ bristling reactions to them, spinning capable negations around them in mental space become physical space. The resulting depictions of mental passage in material passageways is somehow more solid and less actual than many of Keats’s descriptions, as though reversing the Keats’s idea of a “material sublime”—“the effect of solidity you reach,” William James observed, “is but perfume and simulacrum” (*Letters of William James* 278). “Dramatize, dramatize!” James would say to himself when he had the germ of a story. What his late fiction dramatizes is the vale of soul-making: human minds circling around the Penetralium of mystery, trying “to make out” its dimensions, pass its barred threshold, and dispel at last its “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts.”

## IV

## Negative Capabilities and Capable Negations

As Emily Brontë moves closer to a Victorian novel in the second half of *Wuthering Heights*, she grows further away from Keats's aesthetics of the *adytum* in a way analogous to Le Fanu's transformation of the Romantic *mysterium* into the Victorian mystery novel<sup>91</sup> or the "poets of sensation" into the "sensation novelists." By the time we get to Henry James, who begins writing in the Victorian era and ends in that of the modernists, the aesthetics of negative capability has come full circle. Literature by James, Kafka, Borges, or Yeats is characterized by, if not Negative Capability, then something closer to "capable negations" that also recognizes the unknowability of the Penetralium of Mystery but describes the human attempts to penetrate it, as with the seeker in "Before the Law," the interpreters of "The Figure in the Carpet," the detective in "Death and the Compass," or the metaphysician Yeats in his intricate mapping of the *mysterium*.

In his own verse, Keats emulated Shakespeare's ability to remain in half-knowledge and partial revelation in the face of the *mysterium*, giving us just enough information to excite speculative intensity. Rather than detail the motivations behind his characters' actions, Shakespeare creates "motiveless malignities" and half-knowledge. When he has Brabantio muse aloud, "this is not unlike my dream," he does not subject his dream to proto-Freudian analysis, but leaves it up to his audience to fill in the details and wonder why Brabantio is dreaming of his daughter's nocturnal activities. Indeed,

---

<sup>91</sup> For more on this subject, see Loxterman, Alan S. "Wuthering Heights as Romantic Poem and Victorian Novel" in *A Festschrift for Professor Marguerite Roberts*. Ed. Frieda Elaine Penninger. Richmond: University of Richmond, 1975.

literature after Freud, in general, is largely a literature of more or less capable negations, searches after fact and reason to explain human behavior. Keats's sense of negation is, after all, not *Verneinung*. Oddly, some of what seems to have motivated Freud's search for human motivation was his own sense of standing outside the main of humanity in a way analogous to many modernist heroes, or perhaps Shakespeare in Borges's "Everything and Nothing" (named for a line in Keats's chameleon poet letter) who puts confessions of his lack of human identity in his works. When Freud's friend, for example, responds to *The Future of an Illusion* by describing the "oceanic" sense of eternity "present in millions of people" (*Civilization and Its Discontents* 11), Freud admits, "I cannot discover this oceanic feeling in myself." Likewise, in his essay on "The Uncanny," he writes, "The writer of the present contribution, indeed, must himself plead guilty to a special obtuseness in this matter," for it has been "long since he has experienced or felt anything which has given him an uncanny impression" (369). This sense of being an outsider crops up again and again in Freud's writings, making him seem like one of Kafka's protagonists trying to get inside the *penetralium* of human motivation but always remaining somehow on the periphery.

It is outside the scope of this chapter to trace the emergence of this sense of being on the outside like Maggie Verver and her pagoda or K. and the impassable Castle, but it seems to arise in the wake of the Victorian loss of faith in any system to make sense of the *mysterium* as well as a skepticism of the earlier Romantic belief in the power of the individual artist. No writer after Freud can ignore the depths of the human *mysterium*, and yet the subconscious has fled further into the subconscious in the light of dream theory. Faced with these depths that can be neither explained away nor ignored, writers

in the modernist period often employ a daedal weaving of capable negations around this unknowable center as though writing a poetics of quantum mechanics. Scott remarks in his “Preface” to *Negative Capability*: “to look at Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, Kafka, Joyce, and Brecht is to face writers who had a great ‘rage to order’ and who were profoundly committed to a search for myths and metaphysics whereby the uncertainties, mysteries, doubts of modern experience might be allayed, or at least reduced to a tolerable manageability by the imagination”(xiv). Likewise, in his “Franz Kafka” essay, Benjamin notes that Kafka’s work is a multiplication of interpretations that do nothing but reveal the inscrutability of the center—a kind of capable negation encapsulated in Kafka’s phrase, “the incomprehensible is incomprehensible—and we know that already” (122). For example, after vainly trying to gain admittance to the law for a lifetime, the seeker in Kafka’s “Before the Law” begs to be allowed to ask one more question:

“What is it you want to know?” asks the doorkeeper. “You are insatiable.”

“Surely everyone strives to reach the law,” says the man. “How does it happen that for all these many years no one except me has ever asked for admittance?”

The doorkeeper recognizes that the man is at his end, and in order to reach his failing ears he raises his voice and bellows at him: “No one else but you could ever have been admitted here, since this entrance was intended for you alone.

Now I am going to close it. (166)

The point of Kafka’s parable—like the “Parable on Parables”—seems to be that human life consists of a desperate and persistent desire to cross a threshold that can never be crossed. Like Keats, he recognizes that the truth of the Penetralium of Mystery will always be a partial one, but his stories dramatize vain seeking for full disclosure. In his

fiction, the ultimate meaning of life is the futile attempt to find ultimate meaning. “Gibs Auf!” the policeman cries in “Give it Up,” but Kafka’s protagonists never do, even if they are forewarned that *The Way* is a labyrinth.

Even Yeats—whose interest in the *mysterium* might, one imagines, render him adept at negative capabilities—nonetheless could not resist that “blessed rage to order” Stevens describes. Bloom remarks, “there is, of course, no irritable reaching after mere fact and reason in Yeats: he reached instead for everything the occult sub-imagination had knocked together in place of fact and reason. But his motive was his incapability ‘of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts,’ and the results are more mixed than recent criticism will admit” (“Introduction” to *Yeats* 5). Postmodern literature, with its emphasis on surface and simulacrum, perhaps has found another way to respond to the *mysterium*, though the resulting *doppelgänger* images are themselves uncanny—and the blank stare, in its terrifying impenetrability, is ultimately more disconcerting than the “penetrating gaze” of Gothic villains.

Examining Keats’s intended meaning of Negative Capability elucidates an alternate Keatsian lineage that begins with Shakespeare and continues into the twentieth century in the works of such writers as Henry James and Wallace Stevens. It is applicable to various genres and media—Keats discusses a painting by Benjamin West, plays by Shakespeare, and the poetry of Coleridge’s in his December 1817 letter to his brothers—and is useful in discussing the intensity of Carl Dreyer as well as the indeterminacy of Ambrose Bierce. Examining Keats’s definition of Negative Capability in detail also allows one to see the aesthetic issues driving and dividing the Regency literary scene; the haunting of Keats by Shakespeare in the Isle of Wight that resonated

throughout his verse, engendering hieroglyphics of beauty and truth and intensity; the positive negation behind Coleridge's poetry that the nightmare reverse of Negative Capability; the manifestation of negative capability in Keats's own verse as well as the negative effect it seems to have had on his consumptive body and suspicious imagination as he lay dying in Rome; the connections between Emily Brontë's "wicked cockney" toys, *Wuthering Heights*, and Keats's concept of liminal poetics; the capable negations and sublime materiality of mental place in the work of Henry James; and the cinematic *mysterium* of Dreyer's "Vampyr."

Ultimately, however, Negative Capability remains more of an ideal against which to examine texts than a clearly defined and realized school of thought—a concept more often honored in the breach than in the observance. Perhaps this is because it has been widely understood to mean a negation of the self rather than an aesthetic concept of half-knowledge. Keats formulated it at a time when he was just beginning to come into his own as a poet, before he felt "old enough to annihilate self," and like the idea of the chameleon poet that critics usually equate with Negative Capability, it was also malleable in Keats's dialectical mind, an idea of the moment used to define artistic excellence in the work of Shakespeare and flaws in that of Coleridge. Despite his admiration for chameleon poetry, his odes often take the form of self-reflections (whether or not the persona within represents the poet's voice), detailing how his "heart aches" or celebrating his own psyche, and Keats's late lyrics to or away from Fanny Brawne describe his excruciating jealousy and increasing illness in intensely personal terms. Likewise, one would expect that his idea of poetic thresholds should itself undergo a rite of passage in his poetry if he had survived to write and had the inclination to do so: "He says the

continued stretch for the imagination has killed him,” Severn lamented in Rome, “and were he to recover he could not write another line” (*Letters* II: 180).

Keats’s final poems and plays—*Otho the Great*, *Lamia*, *To Autumn*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, the Fanny poems, *King Stephen*, *The Jealousies; Or, Cap and Bells*, as well as his intended poem on *Comus*—seem to represent new modes, but which would have dominated his later poetry had he lived? Would he have written more works like the tragedies, the skeptical *Lamia*, the emblematic “Autumn,” the Miltonic *Hyperion*, the anguished self-reflections, the satiric *Cap and Bells*, or the *Comus* song with its palpable moral design on us? How many of these modes would these have been characterized by Negative Capability? “Could Keats have a day or two on earth / Once every year!” Rossetti wrote in his *Notebooks* (*Works* 246), but failing that, any speculation on Keats’s hypothetical later work will necessarily end in “wild surmise.” Keats himself would no doubt be baffled by such “irritable” queries, if he recalled that he had written about something called Negative Capability at all. Had he survived past his twenty-fifth year or been allowed to compose past his twenty-fourth, the “dark passages” of Negative Capability would have opened onto another chamber of thought, perhaps the tragic vision he had foreseen in his early poetry, or more dark passages, or what Crane called “an improved infancy.” Most likely Keats would have moved on to something else, something equally evasive and tantalizing for doctoral dissertations, some utterly unforeseen mode of thought shimmering on the edge of the actual.

## Bibliography

- Abrams, M. H. *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1984.
- . *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1985.
- , ed. *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*. 2nd Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- . *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1958.
- . *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1958.
- Adair, Patricia M. *The Waking Dream: A Study of Coleridge's Poetry*. London: Edward Arnold LTD, 1967.
- Adorno, Theodor. "Lyric Poetry and Society." *Telos* 20 (1974): 56-71.
- Andrews, C. T. "Keats and Mercury." *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin* XX (1969): 37-43.
- Arcana Mundi: Magic and Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*. Trans. Georg Luck. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Trans. John Warrington. New York: London, 1963.
- . *The Poetics of Aristotle*. Trans. Stephen Halliwell. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987.
- Arnold, Matthew. "John Keats." *Essays In Criticism*. London: MacMillian, 1925.
- Ashton, Rosemary. *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Biography*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Auchard, John. *Silence in Henry James: The Heritage of Symbolism and Decadence*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986.
- Auchincloss, Louis. *Motiveless Malignity*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1969.
- Auerbach, Nina. *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Austen, Jane and Charlotte Brontë. *The Juvenilia of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë*. New York: Penguin, 1986.

- Badwadi, M. M. *Coleridge: Critic of Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.
- Banta, Martha. "Artists, Models, Real Things, and Recognizable Types." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 16 (1984): 7-34.
- Barker, Juliet. *The Brontës*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.
- Barnard, John. "An Echo of Keats in 'The Eolian Harp.'" *Review of English Studies* 28 (1977): 311-311.
- Bate, Jonathan. *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986.
- Bate, Walter Jackson. *John Keats*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1964.
- . *Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939.
- . *The Stylistic Development of Keats*. New York: Humanities Press, 1962.
- Beaver, Harold. "'The Real Thing' and Unreal Things: Conflicts of Art and Society in Henry James." *Fabula* (Villeneuve d'Ascq) 1 (March 1983): 53-59.
- Beddoes, Thomas. *Essay on the Causes, Early Signs, and Prevention of Pulmonary Consumption for the Use of Parents and Preceptors*. 2nd edition. London: Longman and Rees, and Bristol: W. Sheppard, 1799.
- . *Hygëia: or Essays Moral and Medical on the Causes Affecting the Personal State of Our Middling and Affluent Classes*. 3 vols. London: R. Phillips, 1802-03.
- Beer, John, ed. *Coleridge's Variety: Bicentenary Studies*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Franz Kafka." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.
- Benvenuto, Richard. *Emily Brontë*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982.
- Beyer, Werner W. *Keats and the Daemon King*. New York: Octagon Books, 1969.
- Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (October 1817): 39.
- . (August 1818): 519-520.

- Bloom, Harold. "Introduction." *John Keats*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985.
- . "Introduction." *Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner.'* Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- . "Introduction." *Yeats: Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- . *The Ringers in the Tower*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.
- , ed. *Romanticism And Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1970.
- . *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- . *The Western Canon*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
- Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Nightingale of Keats." *Other Inquisitions: 1937-1952*. Trans. Ruth C. Simms. New York: Washington Square Press, 1966.
- Bostetter, Edward E. "The Nightmare World of *The Ancient Mariner*." *Coleridge: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Kathleen Coburn. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967.
- Boyers, Robert. *Lionel Trilling: Negative Capability and the Wisdom of Avoidance*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1977.
- Brawne, Fanny. *The Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1937.
- Brisman, Leslie. "Coleridge and the Ancestral Voices." *Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner.'* Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- "*The British Critic 1799*." *The Lyrical Ballads and Related Writings*. Ed. William Richey and Daniel Robinson. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002.
- Brock, Lord. *John Keats and Joseph Severn: The Tragedy of the Last Illness*. London: Keats-Shelley Memorial Association, 1973.
- Brogan, Howard O. "'The Cap and Bells, or...The Jealousies'?" *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 77 (Spring 1974): 298-313.
- Bromwich, David. *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic*. New Haven: Yale University Press,

1999.

- Brontë, Branwell. *The Works of Patrick Branwell Brontë*. 2 vols. Ed. Victor A. Neufeldt. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*. Vol. I. Ed. Christine Alexander. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987.
- . *Jane Eyre*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971.
- and Emily Brontë. *The Belgian Essays*. Ed. and Trans. Sue Lonoff. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Brontë, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Brontë*. Ed. C. W. Hatfield. New York: Columbia University Press, 1967.
- . *Wuthering Heights*. Ed. Linda H. Peterson. New York: Bedford Books, 1992.
- . *Wuthering Heights*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990.
- Brooks, Cleanth. "History Without Footnotes: An Account of Keats's Urn." *The Well Wrought Urn*. New York, 1947.
- Brown, Charles. *Some Letters & Miscellanea of Charles Brown the Friend of John Keats & Thomas Richards*. Ed. Maurice Buxton Forman. London: Oxford University Press, 1937.
- Brown, Helen. "The Influence of Byron on Emily Brontë" *Modern Language Review* 34 (July 1939): 374-81.
- Bunn, James H. "Keats's 'Ode to Psyche' and the Transformation of Mental Landscape." *ELH* 34.4 (December 1970): 581-594.
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. 2nd edition. London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1759.
- Burney, Charles. "Review in *The Monthly Review*." *The Lyrical Ballads and Related Writings*. Ed. William Richey and Daniel Robinson. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002.
- Bush, Douglas. "Keats." *Keats: Twentieth Century Views*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964.
- Byron, George Gordon, Lord. *Byron's Complete Works*. 2 vols. Chicago: W. B. Conkey Company, 1897.

- . *Selected Letters and Journals*. Ed. Leslie A. Marchand. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- . "Fragment of a Novel." *Three Vampire Tales*. Ed. Anne Williams. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Calmet, Augustine. *The Phantom World: or, The Philosophy of Spirits, Apparitions, &c.* Vol. II. Trans. Henry Christmas. London: Richard Bentley, 1850.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Disowning Knowledge*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1996.
- Chitham, Edward. *A Life of Emily Brontë*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1987.
- Clark, James. *A Treatise on Pulmonary Consumption: Comprehending An Inquiry into the Causes, Nature, Prevention, and Treatment of Tuberculous and Scrofulous Disease in General*. Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Blanchard, 1835.
- . *The Sanative Influence of Climate: With an Account of the Best Places of Resort for Invalids in England, The South of Europe, &c.* Third Edition. London: John Murray, 1841.
- Clarke, Charles Cowden and Mary Cowden Clarke. *Recollections of Writers*. London: Sampson, Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1878.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Aids to Reflection*. Ed. Thomas Fenby. Edinburgh: John Grant, 1905.
- . *Biographia Literaria*. Ed. Nigel Leask. Rutland, VT: Everyman, 1997.
- . *Biographia Literaria*. Ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- . *Coleridge's Literary Criticism*. London: Oxford University Press, 1938.
- . *Complete Poems*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1997.
- . *Critical Review* 19 (February, 1797): 194-200.
- . *Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare and Some Other Old Poets and Dramatists*. London: Everyman, 1907.
- . *The Friend*. 2 vols. Ed. Barbara E. Rooke. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969.
- . *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Vol. I. Ed. Earl Leslie Griggs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.

- . *Notebooks*. Ed. Kathleen Coburn. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961.
- . *Specimens of the Table Talk of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. H. N. Coleridge. London: John Murray, 1865.
- Colvin, Sidney. *John Keats: His Life and Poetry, His Friends, Critics, and After-Fame*. London: Macmillan & Co., 1917.
- Cook, Albert. *Thresholds: Studies in Romantic Experience*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.
- Cooper, Dorothy J. "The Romantics and Emily Brontë" *BST* 12 (1952): 106-12.
- Cuddon, J.A. *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Dante. *The Divine Comedy I: Hell*. Trans. Dorothy L. Sayers. New York: Penguin Books, 1949.
- Davis, Michael. *Aristotle's Poetics: the Poetry of Philosophy*. USA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1992.
- De Almeida, Hermione, ed. *Critical Essays on John Keats*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1987.
- . *Romantic Medicine and John Keats*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991
- De Man, Paul. "The Negative Road." *John Keats*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1960.
- Dickstein, Morris. "Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the 'Conversation Poems.'" *Centennial Review* (1972): 367-383.
- . *Keats and His Poetry: A Study in Development*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.
- Dirda, Michael. "Walter Jackson Bate: Portrait of a Scholar." *The Washington Post*. August 12, 1979.
- Dobell, Sydney. "Palladium Review of *Wuthering Heights*." *Wuthering Heights*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990.

- Douglas, Ian. "Figures of Sight, Figures of Light." *Film & Meaning: An Integrative Theory*. Ed. Horst Ruthrof.  
<<http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/Douglas/DOUG9.HTM>>
- Douglas Jerrold's Weekly Newspaper*. (January 1848): 302.
- Drew, Arnold P. "Emily Brontë and *Hamlet*." *Notes and Queries* n s 1 (Feb. 1954): 81-82.
- Dreyer, Carl, Dir. *Vampyr*. Perf. Julian West, Henriette Gérard, Jan Hieronimko. 1932.
- Eilenberg, Susan. "Voice and Ventriloquy in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.'" *Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Ed. Paul H. Fry. Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's, 1999.
- Empson, William. "The Ancient Mariner." *Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner.'* Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- . *Some Versions of Pastoral*. London: Hogarth Press, 1986.
- Ende, Stuart A. *Keats and the Sublime*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.
- Engell, James and W. Jackson Bate. "Introduction." *Biographia Literaria*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.
- English Review* 8 (September 1786): 180-184.
- Enright, D. J., ed. *The Faber Book of Fevers and Frets*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989.
- European Magazine* 10 (August 1786): 102-104.
- Evans, Gareth. "John Keats and the Botanic Pharmacy." *The Keats-Shelley Review* 16 (2002): 31-55.
- Ewbank, Inga-Stina. "Wuthering Heights and Gondal." *Wuthering Heights*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.
- Ferguson, Frances. "Coleridge and the Deluded Reader: 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.'" *Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Ed. Paul H. Fry. Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's, 1999.
- Fielding, Henry. "*Joseph Andrews*" and "*Shamela*." New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, 1972.
- Finney, Claude Lee. *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1936.

- Fletcher, Angus. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964.
- . *Colors of the Mind: Conjectures on Thinking in Literature*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Fogle, Richard Harter. *The Imagery of Keats and Shelley*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1949.
- Ford, Jennifer. *Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Ford, Newell F. *The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats: A Study of the Beauty-Truth Identification and Its Implications*. Stanford University, 1951.
- “Fourth Report of the General Committee of Associated Apothecaries of England and Wales.” *The London Medical and Physical Journal* 31 (1814): 512-513.
- Fraser, Rebecca. *The Brontës: Charlotte Brontë and Her Family*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1994.
- Fraustino, Daniel Victor. *Negative Capability and the Poetry of John Keats*. Ann Arbor, MI, 1977.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1989.
- . *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. A.A. Brill. 3rd ed. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923.
- . “The Uncanny.” *Sigmund Freud: Collected Papers*. Vol. IV. Trans. Joan Riviere. New York: Basic Books, 1958.
- Fruman, Norman. *Coleridge, the Damaged Archangel*. New York: George Braziller, 1971.
- Frye, Northrop. *A Study of English Romanticism*. New York, 1968.
- Garrod, H.W. *Keats*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926.
- Gaskell, Elizabeth. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. New York: Penguin, 1997.
- Gerard, Albert. “Coleridge, Keats and the Modern Mind.” *Essays in Criticism* I (1951): 249-261.

- Gérin, Winifred. "Byron's Influence on the Brontës." *Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin* 17 (1966): 1-19.
- Gibson, G.S. *John Gibson Lockhart*. Commencement Address. Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 1944.
- Gill, Stephen. *William Wordsworth: Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Girdler, Lew. "Wuthering Heights and Shakespeare." *Huntington Library Quarterly* 19 (August 1956): 385-92.
- Gisborne, Maria and Edward E, Williams. *Maria Gisborne and Edward E, Williams, Shelley's Friends: Their Journals and Letters*. Ed. Frederick L. Jones. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951.
- Gittings, Robert. *John Keats*. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.
- . *John Keats: The Living Year, 21 September 1818 to 21 September 1819*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954.
- . *The Mask of Keats: A Study of Problems*. London: William Heinemann LTD, 1956.
- Goellnicht, Donald C. *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984.
- Gopnik, Adam. *The New Yorker* (Sept. 30, 2002): 80-84.
- Gould, Gerald L. "Emily Brontë's Relation to Gondal as Subject of *Wuthering Heights*" *DAI* (Sept. 1974): 1655A-1656A.
- Hakluyt, Richard. *The Portable Hakluyt's Voyages*. Ed. Irwin R. Blacker. New York: Viking Press, 1965.
- Hale-White, Sir William. *Keats as Doctor and Patient*. London: Oxford University Press, 1938.
- Hardy, Barbara. "Keats, Coleridge and Negative Capability." *Notes and Queries* 197 (1952): 299-301.
- Hart, Francis Russell. *Lockhart as Romantic Biographer*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1971.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970.
- . "Representation in *The Ancient Mariner*." *Samuel Taylor*

- Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner.' Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- Hayden, John O. *Romantic Bards and British Reviewers*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1971.
- Haydon, Robert Benjamin. *The Diary of Robert Benjamin Haydon*. 5 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960-63.
- Hazlitt, William. *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*. New York: AMS Press, 1967.
- . *William Hazlitt: Selected Writings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Hewlett, Dorothy. *A Life of John Keats*. New York: Barnes & Nobles, Inc., 1970.
- Hilton, Timothy. *Keats and His World*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1971.
- Holmes, Richard. *Coleridge: Darker Reflections, 1804-1834*. New York: Random House, 1998.
- . *Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772-1804*. New York: Random House, 1989.
- . *Shelley: The Pursuit*. London: Flamingo, 1995.
- Hunt, Leigh. *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt*. London: Cresset Press, 1949.
- Isenberg, David R. "A Gondal Fragment" *Brontë Society Transactions* 14 (1962): 24-26.
- Jacobs, J. U. "The Alter Ego: The Artist as American in 'The Jolly Corner.'" *Theoria* 58 (1983): 51-60.
- James, Henry. "Altar of the Dead." *Collected Stories of Henry James*. Vol. II. Ed. John Bayley. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.
- . *Autobiography: A Small Boy and Others, Notes of a Son and Brother, The Middle Years*. Ed. Frederick W. Dupee. New York: Criterion Books, 1956.
- . *The Golden Bowl*. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.
- . *Henry James: Selected Letters*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- . "The Jolly Corner." *Collected Stories of Henry James*. Vol. II. Ed. John Bayley. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.
- . *Notebooks of Henry James*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1961.

- . "Preface to *The Altar of the Dead*." *The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and the Practice of Fiction*. Ed. William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- . "Preface to *The American*." *The Art of Criticism: Henry James on the Theory and the Practice of Fiction*. Ed. William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- . *Selected Letters of Henry James*. London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1989.
- "The Spoils of Poynton." *The Spoils of Poynton and Other Stories*. New York: Doubleday, 1971.
- . *The Wings of the Dove*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- James, William. *The Letters of William James*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1920.
- . *The Principles of Psychology*. 2 vols. New York: Dover Books, 1950.
- Jones, John. *The Egotistical Sublime: A History of Wordsworth's Imagination*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1970.
- . *John Keats' Dream of Truth*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1969.
- Kael, Pauline. *5001 Nights at the Movies*. New York: Henry Holt, 1985.
- Kafka, Franz. *The Transformation and Other Stories*. Trans. Malcom Pasley. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.
- Kandl, John. "The Politics of Keats's Early Poetry." *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*. Ed. Susan J. Wolfson. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Kaplan, Fred. *Henry James: The Imagination of Genius*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1992.
- Keats, John. *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- . *John Keats: The Major Works*. New York: Oxford, 2001.
- . *John Keats's Anatomical and Physiological Notebook*. Ed. Maurice Buxton Forman. New York: Haskell House, 1970.
- . *Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*. Ed. Hyder Edward Rollins. 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958.

- . "On 'Don Giovanni,' A Pantomime." *The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats*. Ed. H. Buxton Forman. 8 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939.
- . "On Edmund Kean." *The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats*. Ed. H. Buxton Forman. Vol. 5. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939.
- . "On Kean in Richard." *The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats*. Ed. H. Buxton Forman. Vol. 5. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939.
- . "On Retribution, Or the Chieftain's Daughter: A Tragedy Acted at Convent Garden Theatre." *The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats*. Ed. H. Buxton Forman. 8 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Romantic Image*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957.
- Kestner, Joseph. "John Gibson Lockhart's *Matthew Wald* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*." *Wordsworth Circle* 8 (Spring 1982): 94-96.
- Kohli, Devindra. "Coleridge, Hazlitt and Keats's Negative Capability." *The Literary Criterion* 8.2 (Summer 1968): 21-26.
- Krause, Florence Phyfer. *Negative Capability and Objective Correlative in Shakespeare's Sonnets*. *Tennessee Studies in Literature*. Knoxville, TN: 1975, 20.
- Lamb, Charles. *Complete Works and Letters of Charles Lamb*. New York: Modern Library, 1935.
- Lau, Beth. *Keats's Reading of the Romantic Poets*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Leavis, F.R. *Revaluation*. London, 1936.
- LeFanu, Sheridan. "Carmilla." *Best Ghost Stories of J. S. Le Fanu*. New York: Dover,
- Levinson, Marjorie. *Keats' Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*. Oxford, 1988.
- . *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986.
- Lipking, Lawrence. "The Marginal Gloss." *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- Livermore, Ann Lapraik. "Byron and Emily Brontë" *Quarterly Review* 300 (July 1962),

337-44.

- Lochhead, Marion. *John Gibson Lockhart*. London: John Murray, 1954.
- Lowell, Amy. *John Keats*. 2 vols. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925.
- Lowes, John Livingston. *The Road to Xanadu*. New York: Vintage Books, 1955.
- Loxterman, Alan S. "Wuthering Heights as Romantic Poem and Victorian Novel." *A Festschrift for Professor Marguerite Roberts*. Ed. Frieda Elaine Penninger. Richmond: University of Richmond, 1975.
- MacDonald, George. "The Fantastic Imagination." *The Complete Fairy Tales*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.
- Magnuson, Paul. *Coleridge's Nightmare Poetry*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974.
- Maier, Rosemarie. "The Bitch and the Bloodhound: Generic Similarity in 'Christabel' and 'The Eve of St. Agnes.'" *JEGP* 70 (1971): 62-75.
- Matthews, G.M., ed. *Keats: The Critical Heritage*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971.
- Matthews, Henry. *Diary of an Invalid: Being the Journal of a Tour in Pursuit of Health in Portugal, Italy, Switzerland and France in the Years 1817, 1818, 1819*. London: John Murray, 1820.
- Marshall, William H. "Hareton Earnshaw: Natural Theology on the Moors." *Victorian Newsletter* 21 (Spring 1962): 14-15.
- Mellor, Anne. *Romanticism and Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- , ed. *Romanticism and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- McCalman, Iain, ed. *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- McIlwraith, Jean N. "Introduction." *Wuthering Heights*. New York: Doubleday, 1907.
- Menand, Louis. "Goblin Market." *New York Review of Books*. (January 17, 2002): <http://bjohnson.manilasites.com/2002/01/16>.
- Miles, Rosalind. "Baby God." *Wuthering Heights*. New Haven: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- Miller, J. Hillis. "Wuthering Heights: Repetition and 'The Uncanny.'" *Wuthering*

- Heights*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990.
- Morner, Kathleen and Ralph Rauch, eds. *NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Chicago, Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1991.
- Morsberger, Robert E. "Keats vs. Coleridge On Negative Capability." *Par Rapport I* (Summer, 1978): 132-138.
- Motion, Andrew. *Keats*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.
- Muir, Kenneth. "Keats and Hazlitt." *John Keats: A Reassessment*. Liverpool, 1958.
- . *Shakespeare's Sources*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Methuen, 1965.
- Murchie, Guy. *The Spirit of Place in Keats*. London: Newman Neame Limited, 1955.
- Murry, John Middleton. *Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life from 1816 to 1820*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1951.
- . *The Mystery of Keats*. London: Peter Nevill Limited, 1949.
- . *Studies in Keats*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930.
- Nethercot, Arthur H. *The Road to Tryermaine: A Study of the History, Background, and Purposes of Coleridge's "Christabel"*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1962.
- Neufeldt, Victor A. "Emily Brontë and the Responsible Imagination" *Victorian Newsletter* 43 (Spring 1973): 15-21.
- . "The Shared Vision of Anne and Emily Brontë: The Context for *Wuthering Heights*." *DAI* 31 (Aug. 1970): 764A-765A.
- "*New London Review*." *The Lyrical Ballads and Related Writings*. Ed. William Richey and Daniel Robinson. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy, Or: Hellenism and Pessimism. New Addition With an Attempt at a Self-Criticism*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1967.
- Norton, Carol Jacobs. "At the Threshold of Interpretation." *Wuthering Heights*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990.
- O'Neill, Judith, ed. *Critics on Keats: Readings in Literary Criticism*. London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1967.
- O'Neill, Michael. *Keats: Bicentenary Readings*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

- for the University of Durham, 1997.
- O'Rourke, James. *Keats' Odes and Contemporary Criticism*. University of Florida Press, 1998.
- Paglia, Camille. "Christabel." *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- Pater, Walter. "Coleridge." *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.
- Patterson, Charles I. *The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970.
- Peacock, Thomas Love. *Nightmare Abbey / Crochet Castle*. Ed. Raymond Wright. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- Perkins, David. "The Imaginative Vision of Kubla Khan: On Coleridge's Introductory Note." *Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination*. Ed. Barth and Mahoney. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press 1990.
- . *The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats*. Cambridge, MA, 1959.
- Piper, H. W. *The Singing of Mount Abora*. Toronto: Associated University Press, 1987.
- Plato. "Symposium." *The Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. Seth Bernadete. New York: Bantam Books, 1986.
- . "The Republic." *Great Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. W.H.D. Rouse. New York: Penguin, 1984.
- Polidori, John. "The Vampyre." *Three Vampire Tales*. Ed. Anne Williams. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Praz, Mario. *The Romantic Agony*. Trans. Angus Davidson. New York: Meridian Books, 1956.
- Preminger, Alex and T.V.F. Brogan, eds. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. New York: MJF Books, 1993.
- Radcliffe, Ann. "On the Supernatural in Poetry." *The New Monthly Magazine* 16 (1826): 145-152.
- Rajan, Tilottama. *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

- Ratchford, Fannie Elizabeth. "Biography." *Wuthering Heights*. New York: Harper and Row 1965.
- . "The Brontës' Web of Dreams," *Yale Review* (Autumn 1931): 139-57.
- Reynolds, John Hamilton. *Selected Prose Works of John Hamilton Reynolds*. Ed. Leonidas M. Jones. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966.
- Richardson, Alan. *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- . "Keats and Romantic Science." *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*. Ed. Susan Wolfson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Richardson, Joanna. *The Everlasting Spell: A Study of Keats and His Friends*. London: Trinity Press, 1963.
- Ridley, M.R. *Keats's Craftmanship: A Study in Poetic Development*. New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1962.
- Roe, Nicholas. *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Rollins, Hyder Edward, Ed. *The Keats Circle*. 2 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Ed. William Michael Rossetti. London, 1911.
- Rossetti, William Michael. *Life of John Keats*. New York: AMS Press, 1971.
- Rubin, Emanuel and John L. Farber. *Essential Pathology*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1995
- Ryan, Robert M. *Keats: The Religious Sense*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976.
- , ed. *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1999.
- Sayers, Dorothy L. *Gaudy Night*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.
- . *Wilkie Collins*. Ed. E. R. Gregory. Toledo: The Friends of the University of Toledo Libraries, 1977.
- Schneider, Elisabeth. *Coleridge, Opium, and "Kubla Khan."* New York: Octagon

## Books, 1966.

- Scott, Nathan A. *Negative Capability: Studies in the New Literature and the Religious Situation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969.
- Sears, Sallie. *The Negative Imagination: Form and Perspective in the Novels of Henry James*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1968.
- Serlen, Ellen. "The Rage of Caliban: Realism and Romance in the Nineteenth Century Novel." *DAI* 36 (Aug 1975): 911A.
- Severn, Joseph. "On the Vicissitudes of Keats's Fame." *The Atlantic Monthly*. Vol. XI (April 1863): 401.
- Sharp, William. *The Life and Letters of Joseph Severn*. London: Sampson low, Marston & Company, 1892.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley, ed. Frederick L. Jones*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964.
- . *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2002.
- Smith, Hillas. *Keats and Medicine*. Newport, Isle of Wight: Cross Publishing, 1995.
- Smith, Huston. *The Religions of Man*. New York: Harper and Row, 1986.
- Southey, Robert. "Review of William Wordsworth and S. T. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*," *Critical Review*, 24 (1798): 197-204.
- Sperry, Stuart M. *Keats the Poet*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Spurgeon, Caroline Frances Eleanor. *Keats's Shakespeare: A Descriptive Study*. London: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Starr, Nathan Comfort. "Negative Capability in Keats's Diction." *Keats-Shelley Journal* XV (Winter 1966): 59-68.
- Sterne, Laurence. *Tristram Shandy*. London, 1956.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Palm at the End of the Mind*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- Stillinger, Jack. *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

- . *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays*. Urbana, Ill., 1971.
- , ed. *John Keats: Poetry Manuscripts at Harvard: A Facsimile Edition*. Bellknap Press, 1990.
- . "Keats and Coleridge." *Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination*. Ed. Barth and Mahoney. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press 1990.
- . *Reading the Eve of St. Agnes: The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction*. New York: Oxford, 1999.
- Suther, Marshall. *Visions of Xanadu*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1965.
- Swaminathan, S.R. "Keats and West." *Keats-Shelley Journal* Vol. XVIII [1969]: 15.
- Swingle, L. J. *The Obstinate Questionings of English Romanticism*. New Orleans: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.
- Thayer, Mary R. "Keats and Coleridge: 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci.'" *Modern Language Notes* 60 (1945): 270-272.
- Thelwall, John. *The Natural and Constitutional Right of Britons to Annual Parliaments, Universal Suffrage, and the Freedom of Popular Association*. London: Symonds, et al., 1795.
- Thorpe, Clarence Dewitt. *The Mind of John Keats*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1926.
- Tinter, Adeline R. *The Museum World of Henry James*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1986.
- Tough, A. J. "Wuthering Heights and King Lear." *English* 21 (Spring 1972): 18-28.
- Trilling, Lionel. *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism*. New York: Viking Press, 1955.
- Tsur, Reuven. "Two Critical Attitudes: Quest for Certitude and Negative Capability." *College English*. Bloomington, IN: 1975, 36.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995.
- Twitchell, James B. *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1981.
- Urkowitz, Steven. *Shakespeare's Revision of "King Lear."* Princeton: Princeton

- University Press, 1980.
- Vaid, Krishna B. *Technique in the Tales of Henry James*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964.
- Vendler, Helen. *The Odes of John Keats*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- Visick, Mary. *The Genesis of "Wuthering Heights."* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1965.
- . "The Last of Gondal" *BST* 18 (1982) 75-85.
- Walbank, Alan. "Letter to the Editor: 'The Visionary' and 'The Eve of St. Agnes.'" *TLS*. (June 18 1954): 393.
- Walsh, John Evangelist. *Darkling I Listen: The Last Days of John Keats*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.
- Ward, Aileen. *John Keats: The Making of a Poet*. New York: Viking Press, 1963.
- Wasserman, Earl. *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems*. Greenwood Publishing Co., 1983.
- Watts, Cedric. *A Preface to Keats*. New York: Longman, 1985.
- Wells, W. A. *A Doctor's Life of John Keats*. New York: Vantage Press, 1959.
- Whalley, George. "The Mariner and the Albatross." *Coleridge: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Kathleen Coburn. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967.
- White, R. S. *Keats as a Reader of Shakespeare*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.
- Wilson, Douglas B. "The Dreaming Imagination: Coleridge, Keats, and Wordsworth." *Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination*. Ed. Barth and Mahoney. Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press 1990.
- Wolf, Robert and Stephen Hebron. *John Keats*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997.
- Wolfson, Susan J. "The Language of Interpretation." *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- . *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry*. Ithaca: University of Cornell Press, 1986.

Wordsworth, William and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. *"Lyrical Ballads" and Related Writings*. Ed. William Richey and Daniel Robinson. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002.

---. *Selected Poems and Prefaces*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965.

Wright, Walter. *The Madness of Art: A Study of Henry James*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962.

Wu, Duncan, ed. *Romanticism: An Anthology*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

Yarlott, Geoffrey. *Coleridge and the Abyssinian Maid*. London: Methuen and Co. LTD, 1967.

Zak, William F. "The Confirmation of Keats's Belief in Negative Capability: The 'Ode on Indolence.'" *Keats-Shelley Journal* 25 (1976): 55-64.