Looking Through Death's Veil: Keats, Mortality, and Medicine

Sarah Lauren Garvey
sgarvey@wellesley.edu

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Looking Through Death’s Veil: Keats, Mortality, and Medicine

Sarah Lauren Garvey, Class of 2015
English Honors Thesis
Advisor: Luther Terrell Tyler
Associate Professor of English

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Often praised for having developed a style heavily loaded with sensuality and more epicurean and alive than any poet before him, John Keats (1795-1821) has been characterized as the quintessential Romantic poet. Continuously attempting to reconcile opposites such as mortality with immortality, and pleasure with pain, Keats strove to find beauty on both sides of every opposition. In his short literary career he left behind a body of work consisting of both poems and letters, expressing his youthful passion, his musings on love, art, philosophy, death, and an extraordinary intensity for life itself.

Keats left an impact that remains all the more remarkable because of the brevity of his literary career, his life cut short by tuberculosis at the age of 25. Because of his medical training and a family history of the disease, Keats was aware of his impending death, and as a result of that awareness, many of his works reflect a desire to reconcile his own mortality with his desire to achieve immortality through his poetry.

Keats has become known as the poet of “silken Phrases, and silver sentences” (Letter to Fanny Brawne, 16 August, 1819), harnessing language in beautiful and mystifying ways. What often remain overlooked, however, are the hard realities of his extensive medical background, and their presence in his poetry. Keats biographer David Goellnicht criticizes a scholarly tendency to label the Romantic period as “the era of imagination, of anti-intellectualism and of total revolt against the eighteenth-century Age of Reason” (Goellnicht, 3). According to Goellnicht, this narrow view fails to take into account the profound intellectual significance of Romantic thought, particularly when it comes to Keats, who valued intellect and reason to the same degree as beauty and
imagination. Between 1810 and 1816, Keats was apprenticed to Dr. Thomas Hammond, an Edmonton surgeon and apothecary. In March of 1816 Keats began his duties as a dresser to the surgeons at Guy’s Hospital in London, while undergoing rigorous medical training. He passed his examinations at Apothecaries’ Hall later that year, making him eligible to become a surgeon, physician, or apothecary. Keats thus studied medicine for six years of his short life, a longer period of time than he was active as a poet. Yet Keats critics and biographers have tended to omit this from their consideration of his works, ignoring or even denying the influence of this history with disease and medicine on his intellectual development, both as a poet and human being. Keats’s medical training and experience with suffering becomes essential to understanding his poetry and broader perspective on life.

Much of Keats’s familiarity with the nature of suffering stemmed from his acquaintance with tuberculosis. As doctor-witness and patient-participant to such suffering, he sought throughout his life to come to terms with disease and find meaning in affliction other than in the conventional pieties, Christian and otherwise, that he rejected. One of Keats’s surmises about poetry, which later became an abiding philosophy, was that it was in essence a healing art—a characterization to which he dedicated the entirety of his life. Keats equated poetry with medicine, and strove throughout his short literary career to become a poet-physician, administering to others, healing with the balm of words.

This thesis examines how Keats’s medical training and personal history with disease, primarily tuberculosis, influenced his poetry and other writings. His letters, uncensored, frank, often explosive and full of motion, chronicle the development of the
poet’s artistic and philosophic mind, and contain some of the most comprehensive inner musings on theodicy\textsuperscript{1} and the creation of art that any single poet has ever produced. A close analysis of Keats’s poems within the context of his life and letters allows for a more complete understanding of the meaning that imbues his works. In his poetry, Keats negotiates the divisions that define human nature. In attempting to conciliate mortality with the desire for immortality, Keats explains how essential it is to remain firmly grounded on earth within the human experience, embracing life’s pains in addition to all its joys. Especially notable for someone so surrounded by death, Keats was in love with life, more particularly with a “life of sensation,” and tried fervently to embrace it. His poetry, then, becomes the instrument and the symbol of a man who was fiercely dedicated to “doing the world some good” by alleviating the suffering of others. Keats’s writings contain an essential message to all who read it: by analyzing the human condition, he questions what it means to be mortal in a world of persistent suffering.

\textsuperscript{1} Later in the thesis I make the distinction between conventional theodicy and Keats’s own theodicy
Chapter I

To Thy High Requiem:  
Keats and Immortality

One of Keats’s major poems most centered on an examination of mortality versus immortality is *Ode to a Nightingale*. Written in May of 1819 as a part of his now famous spring odes, the poem serves as an analysis of human nature, and was in part inspired by a long line of nightingale-centered literature. The figure of the nightingale has its origins in mythology, and has been prevalent in texts going back at least as far as Homer’s *Odyssey* from the 8th century BCE (Fox, 19). Because of the violence associated with Homer’s version of Philomela and Procne, the nightingale’s song has long been interpreted as a lament. The nightingale has often been used as a symbol of poets and their poetry, most likely because of the bird’s spontaneous and expressive song. During the Romantic era, the bird began to represent the artistic muse, a superior art that could “inspire the human poet” (Doggett, 570). To John Keats, the nightingale became a representation of the immortality he longed for in his poetry. As the poem nears its conclusion, however, it becomes apparent that the speaker does not want immortality on the nightingale’s terms, and chooses instead to embrace his worldly cares.

The immortality of poetry was an attractive notion to Keats; he often alludes to the great minds of the past—his poems and his letters both frequently refer to Shakespeare and Milton, and even to his contemporaries such as Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley, thus placing himself among the literary minds that so inspired him. It is no coincidence that Keats’s famous prediction—“I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death” (Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 25 October 1818)—centers
around the word “among,” placing himself side by side with them as equals, as if literary immortality “were a congenial gathering of geniuses rather than a row of marble busts” (Scott, 559). Keats’s writings immortalize the intellect and poetic wit he possessed so conspicuously, and which he valued among his close circle of friends.

*Ode to a Nightingale* serves as an allusion to literary history, using the very structure of the poem itself to pay homage to the great literary minds of Keats’s past. Keats structures *Ode to a Nightingale* and his other odes from the spring of 1819 in a way that combines elements of both Shakespeare’s writings and Petrarch’s works. His stanzas are a unique combination of the Shakespearian quatrain, with its rhyme sequence of *a b a b*, preceding a Petrarchan sestet, with the rhyme sequence of *c d e c d e*. The regular rise and fall of the iambic pentameter syllables brings to mind a steady heartbeat, exemplifying the poem’s comprehensive theme of remaining connected to the physical body while being inspired by passion. Furthermore, an “Ode” is an ancient Greek song, usually performed in praise of its subject. Keats clung firmly to the notion that, “Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject” (Letter to Reynolds, 3 February 1818). This type of poem is appropriate for Keats, the poet of beauty who believed wholeheartedly that the beauty of poetry lies in the inherent beauty of its subject.

Supposedly born of an impassioned revelation within a fleeting moment, *Ode to a Nightingale* adds to the ephemeral and transient quality of the themes captured within its lines. Keats’s close friend and sometime roommate Charles Armitage Brown recollects the composition of the poem, claiming that Keats, feeling “a continual and tranquil joy in the nightingale’s song, returned one morning from sitting on the grass-plot under a plum-
tree with some scraps of paper in his hand…[which] contained [Keats’s] poetic feeling on the song of the nightingale” (O’Rourke, 174). Despite some critics’ contention that Brown has exaggerated the truth of the poem’s composition, the notion that the poem was written in one sitting on mere scraps of paper is an attractive one, as it captures the image of a young man in the midst of poetic and existential epiphany. Brown’s further assertion that it was “difficult to arrange the stanzas” suggests to some that the ode’s movements are hard to track, since it shifts between “opposition between the poet’s self-conscious numbness and the happiness of the nightingale through alternating synecdochal, idealizing turns” (J. N. Cox, 457). Regardless of its manner of composition, the poem maintains a certain sporadic movement between the stanzas and a transient quality within its lines, born of Keats’s own impassioned impulsivity.

In reality, Keats most likely wrote the ode keeping in mind a long line of literary allusion to the nightingale; Anne Finch, Mary Hays, George Dyer, Joseph Warton, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and even Coleridge had all written upon the perennially metaphorical figure of the immortal bird (J. N. Cox, 457). Keats wrote, upon meeting Coleridge on Hampstead Heath in April of 1819, the month before the composition of Ode to a Nightingale, that during their walk they spoke of “Nightingales, Poetry—on Poetical sensation—Metaphysics—” (Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 19 February 1819), implying that the young poet was inspired by Coleridge and had long been contemplating this idea of writing about the desire for poetical immortality. The idea that saturates Nightingale, of mortality warring with immortality within one man, is one that Keats supported throughout his short literary career, from poems as early as Sleep and Poetry in 1816 until his death in 1821.
In *Nightingale*, “forces contend wildly…not only without resolution, but without possibility of resolution” (Wasserman, 178). This notion of unresolved chaos is appropriate only under a certain definition of “resolution,” because Keats intended—and succeeded—to write a poem with the purpose of examining man’s chaotic connection with immortality. As for the poem itself, critic Allen Tate believes that the ode “at least tries to say everything that poetry can say” (Tate, 168), but it remains more fitting to pronounce that *Ode to a Nightingale* reflects less on what poetry as an art form can accomplish and focuses more on what the poet himself can say; Keats expresses his views on the mortality of humankind, and his own constant yearning for poetical immortality. Rather than centering on unearthly and inhuman aspects of existence, an “extra-human ascent” beyond the realm of human existence with a dissolution that “can only trace its further disintegration” (Sharp, 184), the poem seems to focus around a deliberate examination of that which remains essentially human: the desire to evade the inherent transient quality of human life by leaving an impact that lasts after death.

With this notion in mind, it only becomes possible to fully interpret Keats’s poetry by keeping in mind his complicated mortality-haunted past, particularly the months immediately preceding May of 1819 when *Ode to a Nightingale* was written. In a letter to Benjamin Bailey the year before, Keats justifies his musings on death along with the miseries of life. He writes,

“I have two Brothers one is driven by the ‘burden of Society’ to America the other, with an exquisite love of Life, is in a lingering state. My Love for my Brothers from the early loss of our parents and even for earlier Misfortunes has grown into an affection ‘passing the Love of Women’” (Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 10 June 1818).
In 1819, Keats’s melancholy stemmed from a variety of factors: the grief from his brother Tom’s death, the distress from the physical separation of his other brother George in America, and the first perceptible signs of his own impending struggle with tuberculosis. All this is heightened, as Keats says, by the three brothers’ intense shared love that exceeded even the passions accompanying romantic affections, born of having been orphaned so young, leaving them to care for one another. Thus, the “Misfortunes” that Keats refers to both fuel his misery and sustain his sense of the “sorrow” of mortal life, especially since his brother Tom’s death just preceded the composition of *Ode to a Nightingale*. Therefore it is vital to keep in mind how Keats’s personal history shaped his ideology, both in general and especially in this poem. Critic Ronald Sharp argues that the pain and senselessness described within the memorable opening lines of *Nightingale* stem from Keats’s own emotions, and that neglecting to keep in mind “Keats’s ideological system will not open the poem to us” (Sharp, 185). Bernice Slote seems inadvertently to summarize what has become a consensus view, not just the view of Keats’s poetry, but of “the poetic” within British Romanticism: “because of that particular poetic quality of his life, Keats’s poems are nearly always viewed autobiographically, with Keats as the poet-hero” (Slote, 4). It becomes nearly impossible, therefore, to separate the poet from the speaker of the poems, and the themes can (as in cases such as *Ode to a Nightingale*) be traced back to Keats’s life.

In a letter to his acquaintance Haydon, Keats referred to his “love of gloom,” and how it is best expressed not “by writing an ode to darkness,” but rather by “looking upon [him]self,” and lifting “mental weights,” (Letter to Haydon, 8 March 1819). Here, Keats channels his dual sense of pain and pleasure into “lifting mental weights,” a mental
exercise in the form of writing poetry that expresses his sentiments. He admits to “looking upon” himself and then drawing from the sentiment he feels therefrom. The “lifting of mental weights” also refers to the freedom of mind Keats required of his own writing, of being able to write unrestrictedly and have poetry come “as naturally as the leaves to a tree” (Letter to John Taylor, 27 February 1818). The letters, while less nuanced than the poems, were also deliberately written and tailored to their individual recipients, therefore it remains suspicious that poetry always came this naturally to him. But because of Keats’s notion that intuitive poetry stems from introspection, the sentiment expressed in Ode to a Nightingale—and indeed the majority of his writing—can be interpreted as representative of Keats’s own thoughts and feelings, as he drew upon his own experiences.

In the opening lines of Ode to a Nightingale, Keats describes falling into a trancelike state upon hearing the nightingale’s song. The poem begins with a sense of irresistible yearning and unease:

“My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:” (Keats, 1-4).

The opening meter immediately gives one pause, with three stressed syllables in a row, forcing the reader to feel the slow trance-like state described in Stanza I. Juxtaposition arises within the combination of “ache,” “numbness” and “pain,” as if the speaker remains trapped within the uneasy confines of two separate states of being, one of misery (“ache”) and the other of acute desensitization. The consecutive references to hemlock and opium, however, leave behind the “ache” and instead further the allusion to desensitization. Hemlock was traditionally used as a means of execution in ancient
Greece, most famously in the case of Socrates. Plato described the process as “a slowly ascending paralysis, beginning in the feet and creeping steadily towards the heart” (Brickhouse, 2001). The speaker evokes this sense of creeping numbness in the opening lines. By thus connecting the speaker to classical times, the reference to hemlock furthers the reference to the past made within the overall structure of the stanzas, connecting the speaker to classical times. Similarly, opium, while historically used as a way to quickly and painlessly put people to death, was also used in medicine as a crude form of anesthesia and pain relief (Fox, 19). In its most basic sense, opium was also used as a drug to elicit a trance-like state of blissful oblivion, a purpose for which Coleridge was known to have habitually used the drug. The speaker sinks “Lethe-wards” into even more oblivion: in Greek mythology, the river “Lethe” in the underworld causes people to forget their memories with just one taste. Thus, an antique sense of thoughtless, carefree obscurity permeates the opening lines, establishing both tonal and temporal referents for the rest of the poem.

It remains ambiguous whether the nightingale’s song evokes a pleasurable or a painful sensation. The speaker says, “’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,/ but being too happy in thine happiness,—” (lines 5-6) revealing that the “ache” of before is due, at least in part, to pleasure. The “ache” therefore seems to refer to both pleasure and pain simultaneously—a deeply rooted yearning and a painful happiness both elicited by the nightingale’s song. The bird, “in shadows numberless,/ Singest of summer in full-throated ease” (10); since Ode to a Nightingale was written in and inspired by Spring, the bird acts as a harbinger of the summer season to come, heralding warmth, light, and promise of new life. Yet the juxtaposition of pleasure and pain emphasizes “the
instability of the poet’s condition, for the perfection of the nightingale’s happiness underscores the uneasiness of the poet’s” (Wasserman, 188). The first stanza ends with the speaker understanding that his happiness has depended on being joined with that of the bird. This notion leads to another comprehension, that the pure happiness that possesses the nightingale eludes the speaker, so that the stanza ends in despondency.

In stanza 2, this new distance at first leaves the speaker yearning “for a draught of vintage!...tasting of Flora and the country green,/ Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth!” (11-14). He longs to escape his sorrow and experience “mirth” and joy instead. This escape, however, further alludes to slipping into a carefree oblivion, such as the relief that accompanies intoxication. The wine is a “symbol of the misguided effort to engage in the sensory essence of nature without pain” (Wasserman, 191). This “vintage,” however, remains as inextricably tied to nature as the bird had been, distilling the earth down to its powerful, intoxicating essence. The wine represents various aspects the speaker desires; “Flora,” the Roman goddess of flowers, embodies romance, while “Provence” lies in the south of France and remains famous for the troubadours’ lyric poetry of the High Middle Ages (Cox, 458). “Hippocrene,” the fountain of the Muses in Greek mythology, represents artistic inspiration. The speaker yearns after romance, poetry, and inspiration. He wishes to “drink, and leave the world unseen,/ And with [the nightingale] fade away into the forest dim” (19-20). This language of leaving “the world unseen” and “fading away” expresses the speaker’s desire to quietly escape the natural world, thereby creating another juxtaposition within the language of the poem, a simultaneous embrace of and escape from the natural world he lives in. These “shadows numberless” and “forest dim” that exist away from the world represent the realm of
death; therefore the only way to embrace both would be for the two parts of himself—his physical body and incorporeal spirit—to separate upon death. His spirit would “fade away” while his body’s imagined union with nature would remain, embraced by the earth while buried within it.

The first two stanzas depict the speaker’s admirable but failed efforts at union with the bird, and through it, with nature. But stanza 3 seems instead to confront the distance that separates them. He feels bound to earth rather than liberated by it, and now longs to “Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget/ what thou [the nightingale]…hast never known,/ the weariness, the fever, and the fret” (21-23). He seems exhausted by the sickness (“fever”) and worries (“fret”) that plague mankind, and longs for dissolution, to terminate his worldly existence by allowing his soul to escape, like a trail of vanishing smoke, into thin air and the shadows that exist beyond the veil. He remains dissatisfied with the natural occurrences of aging, especially when it comes to the inevitable fading of Beauty itself, which Keats valued above all things.

Keats was not traditionally religious; there is little evidence of religion in any of his poems or letters. This is evidenced specifically toward the end of his life; his friend Joseph Severn, who accompanied him to his death in Rome, wrote that Keats was “dying in horror…with no philosophy, no religion to support him” (Letter to William Haslam, 15 January 1821). What Keats did famously believe in above all other things, however, was beauty. In a letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey, Keats writes, “I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of imagination—what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not” (Letter to Bailey, 22 November, 1817). Beauty as the epitome of truth is the one thing Keats
declares himself absolutely convinced of. He goes so far as to elevate it to a divine status, describing it as “holy,” thereby imbuing beauty with the same reverence and worship one might attribute to God. At the end of Stanza 3 of *Ode to a Nightingale*, the speaker describes the world he lives in as a place “where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,/ Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow” (29-30). Beauty becomes dull by losing her “luster,” and Love is fleeting, not lasting “beyond to-morrow.” In his mortal realm, which the speaker in Stanza 3 makes himself confront, both beauty and love inevitably fade, and thus Keats expresses his own worst fear: the loss of his beauty, his “truth,” that which infuses his life with certainty and meaning.

Keats explores the impact of this loss of beauty and truth within the next few lines in Stanza 3. The world in which he lives, he calls simply “Here”:

“Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs” (24-28).

These lines express an overarching weariness of the world and all its accompanying miseries. His own mind, which had once been the means of imagining an escape, now saddens him, because of what it now “thinks” and imagines: that grief and death are present “Here.” Regardless of how it now appears, “youth” he now knows as an insubstantial, frail artifact that eventually withers and dissipates into nothing, as though it had been but an apparition. The injustice of his brother Tom’s death, just five months before the composition of this poem, would have been weighing heavily upon Keats, and probably fueled much of the sense of grief and sorrow that imbues the poem. Many
critics agree with this notion, that “his brother Tom’s death is thought to have been the inspiration for this particular line” (O’Rourke, 345).

Additionally, allusions within the poem to similar works serve as further evidence of the autobiographical quality of Nightingale. Keats’s echoing of Lord Byron’s poetry at the very moment when it was thought to be autobiographical supports the conviction that Keats incorporated aspects of his personal life into his poetry. Again expressing a general weariness toward his human, mortal existence in the line, “where but to think is to be full of sorrow,” Keats echoes Byron’s words from the opening lines of his dramatic poem, Manfred, which reads, “Sorrow is knowledge: they who know the most/ Must mourn the deepest o’er the fatal truth,/ the Tree of Knowledge is not that of Life” (Byron, 11-13). Manfred, written shortly after Byron fled England on account of being ostracized by London society for his apparent affair with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh, contains a hero “tortured by his own sense of guilt for an unmentionable offence,” and has thus been considered to be autobiographical or even confessional in nature (Gordon, 14). Similarly, Ode to a Nightingale’s lines 24-28 reflect musings Keats had previously expressed in a letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey: “I have suspected every Body…I am never alone without rejoicing that there is such a thing as death—” (Letter to Bailey, 10 June 1818). These generalized distrusts and misgivings of humankind fit into the Nightingale speaker’s impatience for the “groaning” of men. Keats admits that contemplation of death fills his hours, and he even “rejoices” in the notion of its promise: only Death can release him from the sorrowful contemplation of death.

Added to these worries was the exacerbation of his own illness, for it was not long after his brother Tom’s death that Keats himself began to show the first signs of
tuberculosis. As a result of his experience nursing both his mother and his brother during their illnesses, along with his knowledge of illness gleaned from his physician’s training, Keats would not have been ignorant of the threat to his own life. In an emotional letter to Brown, written just after the Maria Crowther was released from quarantine in Naples, Keats laments, “O, that something fortunate had ever happened to me or my brothers! — then I might hope, —but despair is forced upon me as a habit.” (Letter to Brown, 1 November 1820). Sensing the looming threat of his own death from the same illness that robbed him of both his brother and his mother, he admits to being “habitually” in despair, referring to it as a familiar aspect of his life; the sentiment in his letter reflects a lifetime of suffering and enervation that he had developed as a result. Thus, the weary and harrowing language of Ode to a Nightingale continues to reveal itself as having strong foundations within the poet’s own life.

Stanza 4 heralds a dramatic shift away from musings on the inequity of mortal existence and towards an examination of Keats’s definition of immortality. Keats specifies his connection with the bird and what immortality ultimately means to him. Poetry, rather than an easy escape from life—kindred to other means such as poison or wine—is instead what will ultimately connect the poet with everlasting life. He says to the nightingale, “I will fly to thee,/ Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,/ But on the viewless wings of Poesy” (31-33). Bacchus is the Greek god of wine, thus the speaker renounces the desire, voiced in the previous stanzas, of finding oblivion through “a draught of vintage.” In Greek mythology, Bacchus further represents freedom and is also called “the liberator,” whose wine and music frees his followers from fear and care, and “subverts oppressive restraints” (Sutton, 382). It was also believed that Bacchus could
feed the dead through blood-offerings, thus acting as a divine communicant between the living and the dead (Riu, 105). Keats rejects such notions of embracing freedom through inebriation and escape through drink, and pronounces that he will meet immortality on the “wings of Poesy.” It is poetry that will lift him out of the miseries and toils of life, as poetry, like the premise of the nightingale’s song, is timeless.

This idea of finding immortality through poetry reveals itself in Keats’s letters, from as early in his short literary career as 1817, when he just decides to abandon his medical training to fully embrace being a poet. An undeniable self-doubt nonetheless accompanies this decision. He writes, “I have asked myself so often why I should be a Poet more than other Men…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” (Letter to Leigh Hunt, 10 May 1817). Keats expresses his fear of being unable to become a poet of high esteem and enduring stature. His humility reveals itself as well, as he speculates why he should be so lucky to become more successful than other men in his endeavors. The idea of poetical success, to him, remains “monstrously” beyond his reach, just as the Queen-moon rests high above him in the sky (36), equally unattainable. The use of the word “Phaeton” alludes back to mythology, as Phaeton is the son of Apollo, and legend states that he attempted to prove his worth by driving the chariot of the sun for a day, only to find himself unable to control the flying horses, and was struck down by Zeus’s thunderbolt (Norton, 82). Phaeton, therefore, represents Keats’s notion of overreaching, and the looming consequence that accompanies failure.

In his “Sleep and Poetry” as well, written considerably before Nightingale in 1816, rests evidence of this strenuous quest to find a strong poetic voice, suggesting at
the extent to which Keats feared that his ambition to become an immortal poet superseded him. He writes,

“O Poesy! for thee I grasp my pen
That am not yet a glorious denizen
Of thy wide heaven; yet…I may die a death
Of luxury, and my young spirit follow…the great Apollo
Like a fresh sacrifice” (53-60).

Poetry itself possesses its own “wide heaven,” in which Keats humbly does not yet feel he has earned a rightful place. Yet he is willing to “sacrifice” his own spirit to Apollo, the Greek god of poetry, who was also incidentally the god of truth and healing. As already expressed, this notion of poetry and beauty as truth is one of Keats’s enduring themes, as is the notion of poetry as a healing essence. Here, it would “heal” the conditions that accompany mortality.

To Keats, poetry was more than just an art; it was an antidote to lighten the load of the world’s hardships. According to Scott, “Keats saw a vital connection between poetry and the ‘real world,’ the world of suffering and misfortune that beset those closest to him” (Scott, p. xxi-xxii). Indeed, Keats wrote to his friend Richard Woodhouse that he was “ambitious of doing the world some good,” and he meant through his poetry. While it is true he began his adult life training to be a physician, he chose to abandon this craft to become a poet, “healing with the balm of his words” (Scott, p. xxii). These lines thus allude to Keats’s compassionate nature and his life intent to alleviate the crushing weight of the world’s maladies. This is a particularly powerful notion coming from a man who, at so young an age, had already experienced such an inordinate amount of suffering and loss, and who also had abundant reason to imagine the future full of more suffering (echoing the line, “Here…where to think is to be full of sorrow”).

20
In spite of his large ambitions for himself as poet and healer, Keats maintains a humbled and unhindered awe towards nature, seeming at times to contradict the his own notion of what poetry should be. Returning to the *Nightingale*, he claims that “the dull brain perplexes and retards,” (34) referring to his frustration in the attempt to reach immortality through his words. But Keats wrote, in a letter to John Taylor, “If Poetry comes not as naturally as Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all” (Keats, Letter to John Taylor, 27 February 1818). This notion of poetry coming “naturally” and effortlessly seems to conflict with the speaker’s claim that the “dull brain,” confused and hindered, sometimes struggles when it comes to writing poetry. An analysis of the rest of the stanza, however, reveals that the speaker does continue to adhere to Keats’s views by alluding to the reverence he expresses toward nature; the lines proceed with “tender is the night,/ And haply the Queen Moon is on her throne,/ Cluster’d around by all her starry Fays;” (35-37). He describes the night as “tender,” gentle and concerned, as a mother would be, with the moon reigning over the skies as a “queen.” This could easily be a reference to Demeter, goddess of the harvest, who presides over the fertility of the earth. She is also thought to have presided over the cycle of life and death (Gradman, 56), just as the moon cycles daily. She remains a maternal figure linked even closer to nature, as her daughter Persephone is associated with spring. Furthermore, the idea of “Nature” as caretaker adheres to Keats’s notion of the healing powers of poetry, as to him, nature and poetry were inextricably interlinked. Keats evokes this image of “Mother Earth” in this stanza, with particular regard to his own inferiority. This image of Nature enthroned remains consistent with his view on the earth’s inherent beauty, and evokes a sense of humility, respect, and a desperate yearning; the speaker looks up at the moon surrounded
by her many stars, so far above as to be out of reach so that the light they provide does not even permeate where he stands “here,” in his limited, mortal world.

The speaker’s sense of his own inferiority does nothing, however, to impinge upon his appreciation of the raw power of the nature around him; indeed, the greater his sense of Nature’s beauty, the greater his feeling of distance from her. He says, “…here there is no light,/ Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown/ Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways” (38-40). The speaker’s humility is reflected in the strikingly tentative verb he uses for the imagination’s perception of nature: he manages to “guess” at poetic beauty in the dark; he describes the gloom as “verdurous,” or lush and flourishing, despite gloom’s negative connotations. This determination to see allure in infirmity and darkness is reflected in his letters as well; he wrote, “Though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest Man shows grace in his quarrel” (Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 19 March 1819). This “grace” in something so commonplace and even detrimental as a street fight remains indicative of Keats’s character, infusing his poetry with the “fine energies” he finds in everyday occurrences.

With its acknowledgement of a darkness too great for sight, Stanza 5 alludes back to the creeping numbness in opening of the poem, evoking a sense of visual separation from the physical world, and suggests that this conjectured ecstasy he “guesses” at in nature is not enough to satisfy him. He says, “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,/ Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,/ But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet…” (41-43). Even surrounded by nature and vivid sensory stimulation with the “flowers” at his feet and “incense” hanging around him, he remains separated from it.
Without sight and smell, the speaker is left senseless. He experiences a disconnection from the physical world while listening to the nightingale’s song, and so resides in limbo, not having yet earned his place within the poetical immortal realm the nightingale represents, nor finding satisfaction with merely inhabiting his mortal life. Stuck on the ground, he remains separate from the world the nightingale inhabits, who flies high above him and out of reach. The use of “embalmed” creates a particularly fascinating image; the act of embalming is and was commonly used to preserve a corpse from decay, just as Keats desires to preserve his literary agency through time. Yet in order to become “embalmed” one must be dead, and as such, this line acts as a further indication of his awareness of and close connection to his own mortality. Just as the “seasonable months” (44) inevitably change from growth in the summer to decay in the fall and eventual death in winter, so does life inevitably lead to death—and away from the healthier cluster of connotations within “embalmed,” such as nature’s “balm.”

Further evidence of Keats’s desire to achieve immortality through his words lies in his literary allusions; the subsequent reference to flowers and trees (lines 46-50) brings to mind Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream, where Oberon, King of the Fairies, declares,

“I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,  
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,  
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,  
With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine…” (2.1.249-52).

Oberon generates a sense of escape, a beautiful fantasy place where flowers bloom and the air is filled with their fragrances. Along the same vein, Keats, in his state of limbo, describes a place existing in spring and summer simultaneously, which represents an escape from the world of strict reality and natural laws. He envisions a place where
flowers thrive regardless of the changing of the seasons; both “eglantine” and the “musk-rose,” deciduous shrubs native to Europe, are valued for their ability to persist well into the winter (Kappel, 161). “Hawthorn,” a type of enduring evergreen that shows a distain for the changing of the seasons in its immutability, is a further reference to healing, as the plant has been used in traditional medicine, a result of archaic beliefs and practices, well before the medicinal era of Keats’s time. Therefore Keats’s immortal fantasy realm includes an abundance of vibrant flora, a place of lasting beauty and perpetual health.

Just as the aforementioned escape from the mortal world is glamorized, death is presented as alluring, seductive, and desirable; in an uninterrupted progression, stanza 6 begins with another reference to the senses. Where before were references to sight and smell, here the focus returns to hearing, the nightingale’s sweet song made ever more enticing in the lack of the speaker’s other senses. The speaker murmurs, “Darkling I listen” (51); with all of his other senses gone, he can still hear the nightingale’s song in the darkness—it pierces through his veil of gloom and obscurity with a sharp, seductive intensity. For seduction is appropriate to describe the speaker’s undeniable attraction to death. He says,

“...for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take to the air my quiet breath;” (51-54).

“Death” is capitalized, personified and made substantial. Keats refers to him tenderly, admitting to being “half in love” with Death, calling him “soft names” as a lover would in affection. He has written “many a mused rhyme,” as a poet would write love poetry to his mistress serving as his “muse,” or inspiration. The use of “ecstasy” in line 58 refers to a joyful triumph, quite the opposite of the misery and torments he has described in the
previous stanzas, and “easeful” suggests an easy escape from them. Keats’s very
“breath” takes flight, and he is left breathless in the wake of Death’s power. At the same
time, the image of Death stealing the very air from the poet’s lungs, allowing him to slip
into oblivion, is one of quiet potency.

In comparing himself to the nightingale in Stanza 6, Keats compares movement
with stasis. Again, Keats discards his poetic allusions and metaphors to address the idea
of Death directly. Continuing with, “Now more than ever seems it rich to die./ To cease
upon the midnight with no pain,” (55-56), Keats admits to yearning for death and the
“painless” existence it promises him. For the first time, he refers directly to his physical,
mortal body; the lines, “Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—/ To thy high
requiem become a sod.” (59-60), refer to the body after death, with useless ears “in vain,”
no longer able to process the bird’s song. Interestingly, while the stanza begins
uninterrupted, it is not without a seam; “Darkling” strongly breaks meter, establishing a
trochee, and at the end with “to thy high requiem become a sod.” This is a deliberately
sorrowful moment within the poem, emphasized by the shift in meter. Being from the
ordinary, mortal realm, the speaker shows how—at this moment in the poem—he
identifies more with the “sod.” The body’s fate is to be buried and become a “sod,” part
of the soil and grasses of the earth. The nightingale’s song becomes a funeral
remembrance to Keats himself, as a “requiem” is a token for the soul of the deceased.

Thus a dynamic contrast forms between physical decomposition and the notion of
achieving immortality. He has realized the essential difference between him and the
nightingale—the bird is immortal in that it does not change: subsequent nightingales will
continue to sing in the same way because they lack individuality, whereas there is only
one John Keats. Nature can be immortal in a way humans cannot be. There is a play on the word “still,” as the nightingale’s voice is uniform across the generations. This notion, however, fails to console him anymore; he will eventually “become a sod,” since human beings are not static in the same way as the nightingale. The nightingale’s immortality represents hope at first; but humans are subject to a different set of parameters (such as “palsy” and illness). Therefore nature offers a type of immortality, but not one that satisfies the young poet; he must accept what the mortal life can offer him, and must therefore rely on poetry as a means to leave his own immortal song.

Despite his dissatisfaction with the nightingale’s immortality, the speaker nevertheless can praise it once more. The nightingale’s song is inspiring in its ability to affect generations of people, just as Keats thought Shakespeare’s poetry was, and what he hoped his poetry would become. It is this power to inspire people that Keats admired; he writes, “No hungry generations tread thee down;/ the voice I hear this passing night was heard/ in ancient days by emperor and clown:” (62-64). He feels connected in this moment to people who came before him; the reference to both emperor and clown showing how every person, no matter how high or low in status, is subject to the nightingale’s beautiful, haunting sound. Keats introduces biblical allusion in the form of Ruth, a corn gleaner trapped in a distant land with a mother who is not her relation by nature but by law, heightening Ruth’s sense of isolation (Bible, Book of Ruth, 2.1-3). The nightingale’s song affected even Ruth, thousands of years before; the comforting sound “found a path through the sad heart of Ruth,” lifting her homesickness in a foreign land and mitigating her misery. Thus, the speaker contemplates how the timelessness of the nightingale’s song bridges the gap of time to bring him closer to those who lived
before him. In the same way the plant allegory of the previous stanza alluded to
Shakespeare, the mention of “faery lands forlorn,” “magic casements,” and “perilous
seas” (69-70) evokes a distant land, reminiscent of Edmund Spenser’s, The Faery Queen,
another epic work by an English master poet whose company Keats aspires to join. The
nightingale’s song, shrouded in a fantastical mystery not of this world, continues to entice
the imagination of both readers and poets.

In the final stanza, the speaker meets with a sense of confusion and disorientation
in the sudden disappearance of the nightingale. His musings on faraway lands have
reminded him of the wretchedness of his mortal existence, and he surfaces from the
depths of his trance to return to himself. He says, “Forlorn! the very word is like a bell/
to toll me back from thee to my sole self!” (71-72). The repetition of the words “forlorn”
and “Adieu!” act like a literary bell on the page, like a church bell that rings to indicate
the end of mass—for indeed the flight of the nightingale heralds the end of the speaker’s
trance and ethereal experience; he sadly admits that “the fancy cannot cheat so well,”
(73) indicating how his imagination and yearnings alone cannot will him into the
nightingale’s immortal realm. Since “man must always seek to ease the burden of the
mystery, and since an act of will can seize only the outward nature of things…he is
struggling against his mortal bonds” (Sharp, p. 182). Keats alludes here to the limitations
of willpower, striving to break free of his “mortal bonds” but finding himself unable to.
Like Mother Nature’s stars that he so respected, the nightingale is now out of reach and
out of earshot, leaving the speaker alone in the wake of his contemplative trance. The
bird’s “plaintive anthem” dissipates, “plaintive” indicative of the speaker’s own sense of
suffering and grief at the loss of the song that once so comforted and inspired him.
Ultimately he mourns the loss of his own capacity to find consolation in the kind of “immortality” offered by the song, as he now realizes that he (as a human being) cannot achieve the same type of immortality the nightingale has. Confusion remains; the speaker asks, “Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/ Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?” (79-80). Unable to tell dream from reality, the speaker is left to his own sorrow and disorientation.

The tension within the poem stems from the inherent conflict within Keats’s yearning to embrace mortality and immortality simultaneously. Indeed, Wasserman agrees that “the conflict out of which the ode is born is a recurrent one in Keats’s poetry and is the inevitable result of the oxymoronic ontology within which he thinks” (Wasserman, 180). Keats’s “oxymoronic ontology” is his attempt to reconcile his mortal self with his quest to achieve poetic immortality. Therefore the condition towards which Keats strives within the poem can be interpreted as his ideal, one in which seeming opposites—stasis and movement, beauty and truth, mortality and immortality—coalesce into one essence. This ideal has been expressed in his other poems such as “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” both of which chronicle man’s temporary ascension to and inevitable decline from an embrace of that which is both mortal and immortal. In Nightingale, the speaker remains trapped between these extremes, unable to fully embrace one or remain content with the other. The poem “oscillates between heaven and earth and is never able to reconcile them” (Slote, 183.) The poem lacks any “standard law” (Keats, To John Hamilton Reynolds, 81) to which to refer.

In his epistle “To John Hamilton Reynolds,” Keats wrote:
“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,-
It forces us in summer skies to mourn,
It spoils the singing of the Nightingale.” (80-85)

This “Purgatory blind” to which Keats refers is the result of being unable to adhere completely to either the rules of mortality (earth) or immortality (Heaven). Human beings mar their happiness by the inevitable attempt to venture past their “bourn,” their limit to existence. Striving to supersede their life’s course ruins the Nightingale’s song, which is something pure, beautiful, and pristine, an article that can “spoil.” As Wasserman argues, Keats believed that “if man could confine his aspirations to this physical world...he might find a degree of content. But it is his very nature that he can not renounce his quest for the ideal” (Wasserman, 181). The entire epistle begins, “My dear Reynolds,” demonstrating how interwoven Keats’s life was with his own poetry. Keats saw it as an inevitable flaw to attempt to see beyond the boundaries of human experience, as no mortal man can understand or achieve immortality while mortal; thus the struggle in Nightingale is born.

Keats describes an insurmountable distance between the two worlds of heaven and earth in other poems as well, creating a web of interconnected, overarching themes across his work. In his poem, God of the Meridian, included in a letter to Reynolds in 1818, Keats wrote,

“To thee my soul is flown,
And my body is earthward press’d.—
It is an awful mission,
A terrible division;
And leaves a gulf austere
To be filled with worldly fear” (3-9).
The division that results when the body and soul are split and reaching in opposite
directions leaves a gaping hole, a “gulf” that leaves something to be feared; Keats
describes it as “terrible,” and “awful,” and this precise predicament, of being forced in
two opposite directions, leaves him senseless in the beginning of *Nightingale*. In order to
achieve happiness, the spirit must be free to soar above that to which it is bound, while
the body is tied to the earth, and humankind is trapped within the ensuing quandary of
having to deal with two conflicting notions.

A similar account of a “visionary moment resulting in a diminishment of earthly
experience” (Cox, 120) can be seen in Keats’s “Sleep and Poetry,” in which he says,
“The visions all are fled…Into the light of heaven, and in their stead/ A sense of real
things comes doubly strong,/ And, like a muddy stream, would bear along/ My soul to
nothingness…” (155-162). Keats offers a description of the imagination’s connection
with nature, in which he ventures beyond what nature provides, yet once this experience
is over, the mortal world—“real things”—overwhelm the poet, seemingly with less
meaning than the vision of heaven’s light and its accompanying promise. In the wake of
the extreme ecstasy of seeing a glimpse of immortality, his soul is ferried away to the
“nothingness” of mundane, human experience. *Sleep and Poetry*, written a full two years
before *Nightingale*, nevertheless has echoes of the very same language, as “The visions
all are fled” from the former reverberates in “Fled is that music” from the latter,
fortifying the theme that thus far has pervaded Keats’s work.

Keats negotiates the essential divisions that define our human nature. His poems
such as *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Sleep and Poetry*, *God of the Meridian*, and epistle *To John
Hamilton Reynolds*, are but examples of how he navigated the alternating states of pain
and joy, numbness and sensation—all in the context of reconciling mortality of the body while striving towards a poetical immortality in his works. Life and death, held in suspension, allow Keats to remain in uneasy limbo between both while not fully embracing either one. This capacity for divided sight is what breathes life into Keats poetry, and infuses it with such powerful vitality.
Chapter II

*A World of Pains: Illness and the Physical Body*

Keats’s poems have been regarded as the extraordinary product of a short life, but what often remains overlooked is the narrative of the physical body and its deterioration that infuses their stanzas. The narrative is not complete, however, until the themes of his poems are coupled with the wealth of information contained within his letters. The collection of letters documents the body’s symptoms, as well as the progression of disease. The letters differ from the poems in that they are purported to be private texts not meant for public consumption, and thus contain a vulnerability and first-hand interpretation of illness from the poet himself. Jennifer Michaels claims that, “By virtue of its proximity to the body, the letter is also more transparent than the lyric, allowing both the writer and his body to become more visible” (Michaels, 41). During the year between his first hemorrhage on February 3rd, 1820 and his death on February 23rd, 1821, Keats barely wrote any new poems, and thus the letters become his only outlet for new writing. It is during this year that the tone and theme of the letters shift from his celebrated, philosophical musings, becoming instead a chronicle of his disease. Furthermore, his tendency to attribute symptoms of the physical body to intellectual or emotional states becomes especially apparent in his letters, where both the body and the sentiments he refers to are usually his own.

Keats was unusual in that he was not only taken ill, but he possessed extensive medical knowledge due to his previous years of physician’s training. In 1810 he was
apprenticed to Dr. Thomas Hammond, a surgeon and apothecary in Edmonton, and in 1816 he entered Guy’s hospital as a dresser to the surgeons. In July of that year he passed his examinations at Apothecaries’ Hall, licensing him to practice as an apothecary, physician, or surgeon (Norton, 653-4). In these six years of schooling and apprenticeship Keats learned about disease, illness, and the human body, but realized that his true calling lay elsewhere. “I mean to rely on my abilities as a poet,” Keats told his guardian Richard Abbey, shortly after his 21st birthday, when he was asked about his career plans (Smith, 991). He certainly possessed the skills and intelligence to be a highly qualified physician, but it was impossible for him to ignore his calling to poetry. Indeed, Druin Burch claims that “Keats did not lack the stomach for surgery…there was nothing lacking for him in the world of early nineteenth-century surgery, nothing save the fact that it intruded on the single-minded immersion in poetry that he felt called to” (Burch, 205). But medicine, its facts, vocabulary, and “sense of mortal consequence” (Townsend, 167), remained with Keats. When he decided to pursue poetry he carried that medical language with him, and, whether it was unintended or intentional, the scientific vernacular appears in his works, along with the themes of illness, suffering, and disease he had long since become accustomed to.

Keats’s knowledge of the physical body, coupled with his illness, wove its way into his poems, and none so openly as in Ode on Melancholy. Written in May of 1819, it may have been influenced by past poems on Melancholy, namely Thomas Warton’s Pleasures of Melancholy in 1747 and Charles Dallas’ The Cavern of Melancholy: An Ode from 1813. In a letter to George and Georgiana Keats from September of 1819, Keats also admitted to reading Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy, so it is worth considering
whether his own *Ode on Melancholy* was influenced by Burton’s encyclopedic book.

Written in 1621, *Anatomy of Melancholy* appears to be a medical textbook that, as was characteristic of the time, utilized philosophy, literature and psychology in addition to science to explain what is now known as “clinical depression.” Burton uses melancholy as a window into the range of human emotion and thought.

In *Anatomy*, Burton defines “melancholy” as

> “a disposition…of sorrow, need, sickness, grief, passion, or perturbation of the mind…and from these melancholy dispositions no man living is free. Melancholy in this sense is the character of Mortality...This Melancholy of which we are to treat, is a habit, a serious ailment, a settled humor…not errant, but fixed” (Burton, 62).

Burton equates the sensation of sorrow and grief with passion, an association that reoccurs in both Keats’s poems and letters. Melancholy, in Burton’s sense, is an “ailment,” an illness that imprisons the spirit and is inherent in humankind. Interestingly, he claims it is “fixed,” as it were, within the body itself. Indeed, the word “melancholy” derives from the Greek word “melaina kholé,” meaning “black bile.” His reference to melancholy as a “settled humor” stems from the what was then widespread belief in “humorism,” or the system of medicine detailing the balance of fluids within the human body. Originally attributed to ancient Greek physicians and philosophers, Hippocrates’ *On the Nature of Man* outlines the theory of humorism:

> "The Human body contains blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. These are the things that make up its constitution and cause its pains and health. Health is primarily that state in which these constituent substances are in the correct proportion to each other…Pain occurs when one of the substances presents either a deficiency or an excess” (Polybus, IV).

In the absence of the stethoscope and other medical instruments with the ability to listen to the body’s internal sound, nineteenth century medicine was based largely on this
definition. It was thought that illness thus stemmed from an imbalance of the body’s “humors,” which is why the procedure of bloodletting by means of leeches was used to treat tuberculosis, as it was believed that the coughing of blood meant that the body contained an excess of blood, which it coughed in order to expel the surfeit. Melancholy, on the other hand, was believed to be caused by an excess of black bile.

This thinking influenced Keats’s treatment while he was dying in Rome, which modern critics think was outdated even then. Keats’s physician, Dr. James Clark, reported an unusual cause for Keats’s illness. He noted, “the chief part of his disease so far as I can see seems to be seated in his stomach…if I can put his mind at rest I think he’ll do well” (Smith, 993). Keats was bled and put on a near-starvation diet of a single anchovy and a piece of toast a day in an attempt to reduce the flow of blood to the stomach (Epstein, 63). Lord Brock, a distinguished physician, said in his Sydenham lecture of 1971, “Even for 1820 this was a very poor assessment of Keats’s illness…even in the absence of a stethoscope it is difficult to condone such a rubbishy assessment” (Smith, 993). Physician and biographer Hale-White goes so far as to liken the diagnosis and treatment of tuberculosis in beginning of the nineteenth century to “extremely near-sighted people trying to grope around without glasses” (Hale-White, 34). Therefore Dr. Clark’s atypical diagnosis was unusual not only by modern standards, but by early nineteenth century standards as well.

The belief in the mind-body connection was so strong that throughout Keats’s entire period of illness, his friends and even his doctors told him the nature of his affliction was psychological. Shortly after Keats’s initial hemorrhage, Brown wrote that “we are now assured there is no pulmonary affection, no organic defect whatever,—the
disease is on his mind, and there I hope he will soon be cured” (Letters, 274-5). At the worst of his illness in Rome, Keats’s doctor claimed, “If I can put his mind at rest I think he’ll do well” (Smith, 993). Even Keats himself seemed to believe this to a certain degree, going as far as to attribute the source of his illness to poetry. He wrote to his sister Fanny, “though my health is tolerably well I am too nervous to enter into any discussion in which my heart is concerned” (Letter to Fanny Keats, 12 April, 1820).

Keats refers to the “heart,” believed to be the center and source of all emotions, so that what he means is that he should not become too emotionally invested in any one thing since emotions pose a great risk to his health. A few days later, he wrote again, this time with specific reference to poetry; “there is nothing the matter with me except nervous irritability 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” (Letter to Fanny Keats, April 21, 1820).

Through these letters, it appears as though he harbored a hope of recovering his health, at least outwardly. It becomes difficult to believe his conviction in this, given his family’s history with the disease, and the fact of his medical training. In those dreadful last weeks in Rome, Severn wrote to Taylor a list of Keats’s symptoms, stating that “Keats sees all this—his knowledge of anatomy makes it tenfold worse at every change” (Letter to William Haslam, 15 January, 1821). It was Keats’s very knowledge of anatomy that allowed him to diagnose himself with a fatal disease. Indeed, after his first hemorrhage, he said to Brown, “I know the color of that blood; it is arterial blood. I cannot be deceived in that colour. That drop of blood is my death warrant. I must die” (Michael, 45). Thus, a contradiction comes to light between Keats’s reaction to Brown
and his reaction in his letters such as that to his sister on April 21, 1820. His apparent contradiction most likely stems from the notion that he feigned hope in his own recovery to reassure the people he loved, in light of his own certain self-diagnosis.

This notion of the inseparable connection between mind and body is implicit in the belief of humorism. Recalling Burton’s definition and asserting that emotions such as sorrow, grief, and that which “perturbs the mind” stem from bodily causes implies that the mind’s emotions are indivisible from the body. When, in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats describes the consequences of earthly love as “a burning forehead, and a parching tongue” (30), he blends the emotional and physical aspects of love into one entity. *Ode on Melancholy* similarly becomes as much an analysis of the workings of the physical body as it is of the emotions that plague the mind.

Much like *Ode to a Nightingale*, the form of *Ode on Melancholy* subtly augments the overall themes contained within the poem, namely reference to the physical body. The regular, repeating rhyme scheme and consistent structure of the stanzas matches the logical and declarative thematic structure. The meter serves as an allusion to the human body: for instance, the iambic pentameter—also Shakespeare’s preferred meter—with its repeating pulses of stressed and unstressed syllables, evokes the rhythm of a heartbeat.

The poem begins with reference to the body by means of sensation. The speaker says,

“No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine; Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine” (1-4).
As in Nightingale, the poem contains mention of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in the underworld, whose waters were thought to make you forget all your earthly troubles. This time, however, rather than reveling in the numb, dream-like oblivion promised by its waters, the speaker urges the reader to resist the temptation to forget. “Wolf’s-bane” and “nightshade,” both poisons, are also numbing agents that would serve to alleviate the sorrow of the world through death. The “forehead,” a direct reference to the physical body, is “pale;” as in Nightingale (“where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies” (26), “pale” refers in particular to a wasting illness leading to death. The language in these lines is that of affection, as “pale forehead to be kiss’d” is as a lover’s gesture, something desirable for its comfort like a gentle caress. The speaker lures the reader in perceiving the sensation of touch through a “kiss.” Yet the reader would “suffer,” or endure the gesture; by creating the dual image of pain and pleasure, the speaker immediately introduces the theme of the inseparability of pleasure in pain. He explores this theme throughout the rest of the poem.

The speaker’s subsequent references to objects of death serve to emphasize frail mortality and its relevance to life. “Proserpine” (4), “Yew” (5), the “beetle” and the “death-moth” (6) are allusions to death and resurrection. Proserpine, or Persephone, is the Greek goddess of spring and new life, as well as Queen of the Underworld. This reference, therefore, serves to emphasize the connection between life and death. “Death-moth” or death-head moth similarly refers to the traditional image of the human soul (the Psyche) as represented by a butterfly (Norton, 474), thus inverting the positive image of a butterfly into something dark and less elegant, as it was thought to be an omen of death due to the pattern of its body that looks like a human skull. Yew trees, often associated
with graveyards, further this allusion to death, while the beetle was regarded in Egyptian mythology as a sacred symbol of resurrection. Psyche adverts to love, as according to Greek mythology she was the human lover to Cupid, the god of love. Yet the “love” is “mournful” (7). Thus, the images of death and mortality go hand in hand with the images of life and resurrection, asserting that there is life in the concept of death.

The speaker builds these allusions to contend that, rather than anesthetize sorrow, it should be embraced. Sadness and death should remain separate from one another, while pain should be accepted for what it is. He says,

“…nor [let] the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow’s mysteries;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul” (7-10).

The speaker cautions the reader not to allow death (the “owl) become the “partner” of sorrow, finally explaining why human beings should not look for relief from misfortune by forgetfulness, drugs, or suicide, all objects that target the physical body. These numbing agents would make one “drowsy,” and “drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.” The goal, therefore, is to leave the “anguish” to sensation and feel it fully, with body and mind. The speaker urges the reader to remain “awake” and acknowledge the depths of his or her suffering. The soul seems to carry an inherent “anguish” that should not be ignored, but rather embraced. Keats considered sensation essential to life, and valued it above most other things. As the Poet of Beauty, he believed that in order to appreciate nature one must be able to sense it, too. He wrote, “O for a life of sensations rather than thoughts!” (Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November, 1817). By valuing “sensation” over “thoughts,” he shifts the focus from the mind to the body. The poem’s speaker thus
grounds sorrow and spiritual anguish within the body. It is not until the following stanzas that he reveals why.

The idea of melancholy, introduced in the second stanza, remains tied with the body. Keats writes, “But when the melancholy fit shall fall/ Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud…” (11-12). The sudden onset of melancholy arrives like an unpredictable storm, the “weeping cloud” that falls without warning. Already, Keats has linked the emotions of sadness and grief to nature, the domain which he invariably considers beautiful in its transient essence. Melancholy is described as a “fit,” or attack on the body, as one might experience a fit of coughing or a bout of flu, further anchoring it within the physical form. Melancholy, however, is also said to originate in “heaven”—this implies that it is not necessarily a bad thing, and even might be inherently good. The speaker continues, “That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,/ And hides the green hill in an April shroud;” (13-14). The allusion to the melancholy’s “shroud” represents blindness towards the “green hill” and natural beauty that surrounds the reader. Blindness is a loss of sensation, and Keats implies that there are other ways to handle the melancholy so as to not become blinded.

The solution is to associate sorrow with the beauty of the inherent impermanence of nature. The speaker suggests “glutting” sorrow on flowers such as the “morning rose” (15) and the “rainbow of the salt sand-wave” (16). These objects of nature are transient: the sea wave which crests then disappears within seconds, the morning rose which blooms only in the morning, and the rainbow which arches in the sky then vanishes without a trace. The passage’s metaphor of “glutting” or feeding melancholy shows that the speaker’s wish is to nourish the sentiment to keep it alive. The allusion to eating also
implies that melancholy becomes incorporated into and nourishes the individual. Therefore melancholy both nourishes and is nourished by the individual. True to the Keatsian way, nature’s beauty is the key to understanding melancholy as a part of life, instead of something that subtracts from it. Beauty and sorrow therefore are linked, since all beauty fades with time. Thus, the emblems of resurrection and transformation such as the “beetle” and “Proserpine” from stanza one are given new meaning with regards to their relationship to sorrow. Indeed, Keats wrote, “I have made up my Mind never to take anything for granted,” (Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 18 December, 1818), and this encompasses the not always pleasant emotions such as melancholy.

Stanza three celebrates the notion that in order to experience pleasure, the sorrow that accompanies it must be experienced as well. Melancholy therefore is inevitable. The speaker says, “Beauty…must die;/ And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips/ Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh/ turning to poison…” (21-24). By stating that Beauty, personified, “must” die, the speaker leaves no room for debate, sealing in the inevitability of melancholy being present. Joy disappears, and Pleasure “turns to poison,” further linking pleasure with pain. Indeed it is “in the very temple of Delight [that] Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine” (25-26). Delight and Melancholy are personified as deities, their dedicated places for worship overlapping in space. Melancholy’s shrine sits at the center of Delight’s temple; the metaphor states with no uncertainty that sorrow resides at the core of happiness. Not only that, but melancholy acts as “sovran,” the ruler and monarch that governs all other emotions.

In his letters too, Keats depicts melancholy as an inevitable part of life. He wrote, “Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting--while we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land
of events--while we are laughing it sprouts it grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck.” (Keats, letter George and Georgiana Keats, 19 March, 1819)

Here again the poison becomes inevitable, something we, as humanity, “must” encounter eventually. It also becomes impossible to ignore the echoes of this statement within the ending of Ode on Melancholy, where the speaker says, “[Melancholy is seen] of none save him whose strenuous tongue/ Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;/ His soul shalt taste the sadness of her might,/ And be among her cloudy trophies hung” (27-30). The imagery of “bursting,” “clouds,” and “poison” infuse both the poem and Keats’s letter, suggesting once again that Keats and the speaker are one and the same, despite critic Andrew Bennett’s notion that “Keats himself fails to appear in the poem, [creating] a separation between the author, the poet, and the reader” (Bennett, 133). At the same time, there is a shift back to sensory imagery, this time of tasting; the man’s soul will “taste the sadness,” linking emotion—again melancholy—to the physical body and all its senses.

The end of the poem leaves the reader with a sense of unease: the image of Melancholy’s collection of trophies depicts her victory over pleasure, and her having touched the souls of so many men. Yet the overall message is remarkably clear; by writing this ode, Keats counters what was the contemporary belief at the time that melancholy was an ailment, something that needed to be cured by ridding the body of excess secretions. Keats instead asserts that melancholy should be embraced and recognized as an essential part of being human.
Similar to *Melancholy*, Keats’s *Ode to Psyche*, the first of his spring Odes, centers on the connection between the body and the mind. The fourth stanza in particular explores this connection, as the speaker describes building a temple to the newly immortal goddess Psyche, whose name signifies “soul.” He says,

“Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:

...With the wreath’d trellis of a working brain...” (50-54, 60).

Here again, evidence of Keats’s years of medical training emerges into his poetry. Keats looks inward to find a place of worship for Psyche in his mind, describing a landscape that reflects the physical structure of the brain. His language such as “region,” “branched,” and “trellis” reflects the ridged, segmented and divided structure of the brain. By referring to the physical aspects of the body with regards to the mind, Keats once again stresses the mind-body connection. His thoughts, freshly made with “pleasant pain,” also refer to the interconnectedness of pleasure and pain he maintains in *Melancholy*. The speaker revels in the pain contained within his thoughts to the extent that pain becomes pleasurable. In using language of the physical body in an ode to the soul, Keats tries to forge an indivisible bond between them.

*Ode to Psyche*, though being about the soul, is not exempt from Keats’s compulsory reference to nature. In fact, he compares the structures of the brain to a wide and arable landscape, with “wild-ridged mountains,” “streams, and birds, and bees” (55-56). The brain’s “trellis” is “wreathed,” dressed with “buds, and bells, and stars without a name” (61). Thus the physical body becomes one with nature (as previously seen in

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2 For a contemporary anatomical diagram akin to what Keats would have seen in his medical textbooks, see Figures 1 and 2 in the *Figures* section.
Nightingale, when the speaker becomes a “sod,” setting the scene, as it were, for the mind to take residence. The body, nature’s beauty and the mind thus become merged into one essence. Comparably, Nightingale is complicated, as it reminisces about a personal history of “Romantic” temptations to lose oneself by forging a “union” with nature—to surrender one’s human anxieties and mortal preoccupations to expire into nature. Yet the speaker’s meditations have brought him to a state of skepticism towards those same “Romantic temptations.” Hence, the oblivion he thinks he seeks would paradoxically prevent him from feeling its freedom.

Of course, it was not only the melancholy humor that concerned Keats; he was considerably more affected by the influence of the blood. One of the four humors, blood was often associated with passion and enthusiasm (Vendler, 23). Tuberculosis, or at least the symptom of spitting blood, was considered at the time to be an excess of blood in the body, which is why bloodletting by means of cuts or leeches was often implemented in an attempt to cleanse the body (Wootton, 45). This certainly was used on Keats when he was dying in Rome—his good friend Severn, who was his traveling companion and his nurse for those last months of the poet’s life, wrote to Keats’s friends in England that Keats “vomited near two Cupfuls of blood,” and that in response, Dr. Clark “immediately took away about 8 ounces of blood from the Arm; it was black and thick in the extreme” (Letter to Charles Brown, 17 December, 1820).

Blood, to Keats, was more than just an affliction; he associated it with fever, and with his enthusiasm for poetry itself. Keats explicitly refers to blood no fewer than forty-seven times in his poems (Johnson, 3), suggesting its personal significance to him. Just as blood runs through the veins and infuses us with life, Keats felt that poetry infused him
with life. As his health deteriorates, the psychological connection between poetry and fever reveals itself in his letters. He writes,

“Some think I have lost that poetic ardour and fire ‘t is said I once had—the fact is perhaps I have…Quieter in my pulse, improved in my digestion; exerting myself against vexing speculations—scarcely content to write the best verses for the fever they leave behind. I want to compose without this fever. I hope I one day shall” (Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, September 1819).

He admits to perhaps having lost the “poetic ardour,” his passion and enthusiasm for composition, now that his pulse is “quieter” and his digestion “improved.” His physical condition thus depends on his emotional state. He reveals that it is the act of speculation that “vexes,” or exacerbates his illness. Most striking, however, is the fever he associates with writing poetry. The language of illness used to describe the process of composition implies that to Keats, emotional and physical fever is an inherent aspect of poetry.

Jennifer Michaels agrees that “Keats took his bodily metaphors more literally than we healthy critics do” (Michaels, 41). The use of the closing phrase “one day” suggests that he currently cannot write without inducing a fever within himself: just as his illness consumes his lungs, the act of writing poetry consumes his body as well. It is no wonder that his friends and doctors were convinced that his declining health was due to an excess of emotion, when Keats believed it so wholeheartedly himself.

Keats’s sense of poetic embodiment becomes clear in his frequent depictions of his creative process. Keats solidifies this in yet another letter, this time to his friend Reynolds. He claims that “…axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses: we read fine things but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the Author” (Letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3 May, 1818). In adhering with his preference for “sensation rather than thoughts,” he emphasizes the necessity of
experience in order to gain a true understanding of what someone else has written. There lies a focus on sensation; in order to “feel” something “to the full,” it must be physically experienced first. In *The Everyman History of English Literature*, Peter Conrad declares, “Keats envisages poetic development corporeally” (Conrad, 434). Another reference to the physical body, the statement shows how the poet must prove something as intangible as a principle upon his “pulse,” once again linking the body with mental abstraction.

In his last letter, Keats speaks of exacerbating his illness by reading and writing:

“‘Tis the most difficult thing in the world to me to write a letter. My stomach continues so bad, that I feel it worse on opening any book…I am so weak (in mind) that I cannot bear the sight of any hand writing of a friend I love so much as I do you…all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem are great enemies to the recovery of the stomach” (Letter to Charles Brown, 30 November, 1820).

The symbol of consumption has come full circle; not only is Keats afflicted by consumption, but he cannot tolerate or consume the writings of others. The elements needed to write poetry are “great enemies” to his heath, which may help explain why, in the last year of his life when his health was in such dramatic decline, he was unable to write any new poems at all. The letters he did receive in Rome from his fiancé and his sister he refused to read, and it is said he was buried with them unopened (Plumly, 63). Jennifer Michael argues this letter shows how Keats harbors “the fear—which becomes more pronounced as his poetic ‘fever’ is supplanted by literal illness—that ‘to write the best verses’ is inevitably to incur disease” (Michael, 43). The passion of writing heightens Keats’s perception of disease, rendering the notion of poetic embodiment even more palpable.

The notion of powerful emotions affecting his health becomes even more fascinating when analyzed with respect to the love of his life and fiancé, Fanny Brawne.
Fanny becomes a consolation for him when he is with her, and a toxin for him when they are separated. Shortly after his first hemorrhage on February 3rd, 1820, Keats wrote to her, saying, “On the night I was taken ill when so violent a rush of blood came to my Lungs that I felt nearly suffocated—I assure you I felt it possible I might not survive and at that moment thought of nothing but you—” (Letter to Fanny Brawne, 10 February 1820). In a moment of fear and hardship, Keats turns to thoughts of Fanny for comfort. He told her that “the consciousness that you love me will make a pleasant prison of the house next to yours” (Letter to Fanny Brawne, 4 February, 1820). He can bear being ill and confined to his “prison” with the knowledge that she is close by and her love accessible.

As soon as he sails to Rome, however, his passion for her transforms from a positive healing influence to an all-consuming negative that drains him of life. He writes to Brown, “I should have had her when I was in health, and I should have remained well. I can bear to die—I cannot bear to leave her” (Letter to Brown, 1 November, 1820). Keats equates her presence with health; being separated from her is thus a punishment worse than death. The emotion he feels for her, in light of their separation, however, is no longer a positive thing; he continues, “to see her name written would be more than I can bear… Where can I look for consolation or ease? If I had any chance of recovery, this passion would kill me.” Without the “consolation” of her presence, he is so overcome by passion that his emotion returns to augmenting his affliction. His two great loves, poetry and Fanny, only serve to make him sicker.

He solidifies this notion in his poem, To Fanny, written in her honor. Attributed to sometime in February 1820 during the time when Keats’s illness separated him from
Fanny, the poem was not published until 1848 (Norton, 376), suggesting that he never meant for this for public eyes. It begins, “Physician nature! let my spirit blood! O ease my heart of verse and let me rest;” (1-2). The poem’s remarkably personal title, as well as the reference to his own physician’s training, implies beyond a reasonable doubt that Keats writes from his own heart. The exclamation right at the start reads like a malediction, as if Keats is cursing his own knowledge of the physical body. Indeed, he called his first hemorrhage a “death warrant,” since he knew from experience that the spitting of blood was a sign of severe, impending illness. “Let my spirit blood!,” another exclamation, serves to emphasize the passion he feels, blood being one of the humor of passion, and Keats claims he has too much. He wishes to be rid of it so he can be at peace. In order to find peace, however, he also needs to “ease [his] heart of verse,” as he equates poetry with fever and disease. Therefore love and poetry, in this case inextricably intertwined as Fanny is the source of his poetic inspiration, are what afflict him. His passion for Fanny thus is likened to a disease that causes him anguish, especially with respect to jealousy, another theme that infuses the poem.

Keats was known to be beset by jealousy wherever Fanny was concerned—his letters reflect this best in his correspondence with her during the spring of 1820. He writes, “…with all this devotion to you I cannot persuade myself into any confidence of you…who have you smil’d with? Do not write to me if you have done anything this month it would have pained me to have seen” (Letter to Fanny Brawne, 5 July, 1820). Despite his “devotion” he cannot convince himself of the mutuality of her affections, and this “pains” him. Again there is evidence of the emotional pain being linked to his physical body when he declares that when she socializes with others he “feel[s] the effect
of every one of those hours in [his] side” (Letter to Fanny Brawne, 5 July, 1820). This jealousy is echoed in lines from To Fanny such as “who now, with greedy looks, eats up my feast?,” (17), “keep me free,/ from torturing jealousy,” (47-48), and “if you prize my subdued soul above the poor, the fading, brief, pride of an hour…let none else touch the just new-budded flower;” (49-50, 54). He likens her smile to a “feast;” interestingly, this is the same term Michael uses to describe Keats’s process of composition (Michaels, 42), as if, like Keats indulges in poetry writing to give him life, Fanny is something that nourishes him to keep him alive.

The notion of life and an awareness of encroaching death remains the very theme of what is thought to be one of Keats’s last poems, left untitled but with the opening line, “This living hand, how warm and capable.” Written sometime at the end of 1819, the poem is said to have been scribbled in the margins of his satirical poem, The Cap and Bells, meant to amuse and entertain (Norton, 378). Completely opposite in theme from Cap and Bells, “This living hand” eerily juxtaposes images of life and death as depicted within the physical body—specifically, the poet’s own hand. It reads,

“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 would wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calmmed—see here it is—
I hold it towards you” (1-8).

The deliberate embodiment of the text draws on Keats’s tendency to charge verse with physicality. The “hand” refers simultaneously to the physical hand that grasps and writes, to the speaker’s already cold and lifeless hand, and finally to the handwriting that forms the text. Language of life and death suffuses the lines, Keats contrasting “warm”
with “cold,” “day” with “night,” the image of a lifeless hand with one still alive.

Lawrence Lipking claims that the poem manifests “a most un-Keatsian agitation” (Lipking, 98). Indeed, Keats includes none of his usual references to nature, no reference to death as anything other than “icy,” “silent,” and foreboding. The very form contains reference to the mortal body; the iambic pentameter once again mimics a heartbeat, but the last line abruptly ends after only five syllables, alluding to the frail mortality of life, and the possibility of extinction at any moment. The reader is left with a lack of fulfillment as the five remaining ghost syllables never come.

It becomes impossible to ignore the apparent foreshadowing of death the poem contains. Already beginning to show signs of tuberculosis, Keats was said to be in the habit of looking at his hand; according to his friend Leigh Hunt, Keats’s hand “was faded, and swollen in the veins, and [Keats would] say it was the hand of a man of fifty” (Plumly, 123). This image of the body already wasting away, aging before its time, shares the tonal immediacy of the poem’s lines. Perhaps the sinister foreshadowing of death in “This living hand” suggests that Keats was beginning to enter into what he called his “posthumous existence” (Letter to Brown, 30 November, 1820), no longer a “citizen of this world” (Letter to Frances Ricketts Brawne, 24 October, 1820) as if he felt he had already departed from it.

In “This living hand,” the references to regret and to a matter of the conscience imply that the speaker believes the reader to be “haunted” by guilt. For this reason, many scholars believe the poem was written to Fanny Brawne, alluding to the strong jealousy Keats felt over her flirtatious socializing. As it is, there remains in the lines a remarkable lack of humility uncharacteristic of Keats. In literature, it is common to find instances
where the speaker consents to die so that another might live, but with “This living hand” there exists a remarkable opposite: in “That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood,/ So in my veins red life might steam again,” the speaker calmly assures the reader that, once he is dead, she would prefer to die so that he might live again.

In the last two lines (7-8), the poem moves from the conditional future to the present tense, grounding the reader within the moment, as if suddenly thrusting the reader into the future foretold within the first part of the poem. Impossible to escape the inevitability of the speaker’s death, the ambiguity as to which hand the speaker extends—the alive one or the dead one—leaves the reader dismayed and unsettled. Brower states that “Keats has managed, in this short poem, to make that extended hand a figure for both warm life and cold death, but above all for the understanding that the two are inextricable” (Brower, 14). Just as Ode on Melancholy finds an inherent pleasure in pain, “This living hand” proposes the image of a hand simultaneously alive and dead. The powerful image of the lone hand extended in the final line seems both confident and desperate, urging the reader to “grasp” it and thereby accept the chilling elements of mortality within the poem.

*   *   *

During the early nineteenth century, London had become a center for disease and fever; with a population of almost a million people, epidemics such as yellow fever, typhus, influenza, smallpox, and of course tuberculosis were becoming more and more common. Between the years of 1816 and 1817, the number of hospital admissions because of reported fever spiked from 124 to 781 (Johnson, 4), this peak occurring during the midst of Keats’s medical training. Not only did he attend to these patients at Guy’s
hospital, but he was haunted by the remembrance of his mother’s course of this illness, as well as that of his brother Tom throughout 1818. Even before his own battle with tuberculosis, Keats was “intimately familiar with feverish suffering” (Ellison, 32). Because of this, he became accustomed to trying to find a purpose in illness, pain, and suffering where there was no moral cause or explanation.

One attempt at justification came in the form of one of his letters, written in May of 1818. Keats wrote

“I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many apartments…[in which occurs the] sharpening one’s vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing one’s nerves that the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness, and oppression—” (Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 May, 1818).

These words reflect the notion of infirmity as an inherent aspect of humanity. The very “nature” of humankind is to be surrounded by the world’s misfortunes, including “pain” and “sickness,” two aspects with which Keats was more than familiar. The repeated capitalization of the items in this list emphasizes their presence, in a way giving the inanimate objects their own onerous jurisdiction. Contained within the same letter, however, is an account of Tom Keats’s illness; Keats reports that his brother “has spit a leetle blood this afternoon, and that is rather a damper,” but insists that he “is better than he has been for a long time” (Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 May, 1818). This attempt at positivity despite the ominous physical signs shows Keats’s attempt at self-reassurance so that he would not have to face the glaring truth that his brother was dying.

Keats turned to his philosophy of the “vale of Soul-making” in an attempt to justify illness. As Jeffrey Johnson argues, “[Keats] rejected the idea of an afterlife or religions salvation—those, in his view, devalue the act of suffering, because they serve
no creative purpose and teach nothing to the human individual” (Johnson, 7). With no belief in religious redemption, Keats was left with the unbearable impression that all the world holds is “Misery,” “Heartbreak,” “Pain,” “Sickness,” and “oppression.” To combat this, he concluded that all the world’s suffering must serve a greater purpose. His notion of the world as the “vale of Soul-making,” he said, is “a grander system of salvation than the Christian religion—” and is based off the idea of “the Intelligence—the human heart (as distinguished from intelligence or Mind) and the World…for the purpose of forming the Soul or Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity” (Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, April 28, 1819). In rejecting a belief in traditional Christianity, Keats retains the conviction in a higher power; the use of the word “salvation” implies that suffering becomes not only necessary, but a form of redemption. The idea of the world as a “school” for shaping one’s soul through iniquity transforms the notion of pain and sickness from debilitating impediments into means of strengthening one’s spirit. He continues, “Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways” (Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, April 28, 1819). Keats thus likens the process to an education, the world as a “school” in which human souls become educated, and sickness and pain are the educators. Sickness strikes suddenly, and, especially in the beginning of the nineteenth century, was something that more often than not remained elusive, mysterious, and not easily combated. Armed with the notion of suffering as a means of gaining strength and wisdom, then, Keats actively takes control of illness, rather than let it take control of him. All this comes from the man who rejected Byron’s notion of “Knowledge is sorrow,” and went on to say that “Sorrow is wisdom”
(Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 May, 1818). Keats and his notion of Soul-making therefore celebrate sorrow and illness as constructive and “necessary” powers.

An analysis of Keats’s philosophy with regards to his views on illness and suffering would be severely lacking without the inclusion of what is perhaps one of Keats’s most widely recognized axioms, that of negative capability. Defined as, “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Letter to George and Thomas Keats, 22 December, 1817). This ability to remain “content with half-knowledge” becomes highly relevant when examining Keats’s medical training with regards to his lyrically philosophical mind, which some have attempted to argue was too fragile to handle the violence and ferocity of the medical profession. Epstein argues that negative capability “is an idea not only temperamentally unsuited to the scientific mind—which is problem-solving and question answering—but extremely useful to the artistic mind, which must take into account, without necessarily being fully able to explain, the mysteries of life” (Epstein, 60).

This argument would be appropriate in a mere consideration of Keats’s skills as a poet, as negative capability allows for the flexibility needed to philosophize and propose axioms of thought. But this definition monumentally fails to address the other, essential dimension of John Keats; his undeniable physician’s nature. Townsend offers the counter argument that “When he defines negative capability, what Keats describes is a process that sounds very much like that of the clinically objective gaze a surgeon must cultivate in order to see, to diagnose, and to heal. One must remain “open to uncertainty,”…so must the doctor begin by observing illness, dissection, and the workings of the body” (Townsend, 70).

Townsend’s interpretation acknowledges Keats’s “scientific mind” without negating his “artistic mind,” allowing for the co-existence of the two. As we will see in my Chapter
III, while Keats’s medical training may have served to provide him with necessary skills such as the ability to diagnose and recognize disease, his desire to pursue medicine was born from that inherent and undeniable facet of his character that needed to heal and care for others. He may have abandoned his pursuit of the medical profession, but he retained the dedication, inquiry and compassion needed of a caretaker. In abandoning the practice of medicine he became even more dedicated to administering to others health, only this time it was through a reliance on poetry, rather than pills and ointments, to combat the world’s evils.
Chapter III

Physician Nature:
Keats as Poet-Physician

In *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats wrote, “a poet is a sage; a humanist, physician to all men” (I, 189-90). This seemingly simple statement illustrates one of Keats’s most fundamental beliefs—that it is the poet’s duty to administer to society and alleviate some of the world’s suffering. Through his medical training and family history with disease, Keats faced a world full of pain and tribulation, and as a result developed the need to address suffering and make it bearable by finding meaning in it. Images from his hospital experiences such as those associated with fever, illness, the physical body, and the balms, hopes, and despairs that came with them, wove their way into his poems and other writings as Keats strove to equate poetry with medicine. Keats’s nature seemed inherently turned towards healing; at the same time, he felt himself drawn to poetry. What resulted was his tendency to equate the two. He never lost the sense that these two entities—poetry and medicine—were one and the same.

Douglas Bush, in his essay, “The Romantic Revolt Against Rationalism,” wrote that “[Romantic poetry] does not call imagination to the help of reason, but conceives of imagination above reason…one main impulse in romanticism is the conscious and subconscious revolt against the Newtonian universe and the spirit of science” (Bush, 80). Bush implies that reason and science have no place in Romantic poetry. Yet Keats, as the only romantic poet with scientific training, serves as an abiding contradiction to this notion, as his poetry is infused with medical and scientific thought. His physician’s
training provided him with a valuable knowledge of science and the tools of diagnosis, and he utilized every facet he had when conceiving his poetry. Like Bush, most critics fail to take into account how influential Keats’s medical training was on his works, and how fundamental is his notion of poetry as medicine. Upon a closer analysis, it becomes not only apparent but also impossible to ignore. In his conception of analogies and descriptions, Keats drew heavily from concepts first acquired in his study of medicine, and many of his passages are fully comprehensible only within the context of his specialized scientific knowledge.

With regards to becoming a physician, Keats did more than go through the motions; for the rest of his life, he remained dedicated to the notion of healing. Not only that, but he was adept at it. Goellnicht writes that, “for Keats, even more important than specific scientific knowledge was the grander, altruistic motive behind the medical profession of healing the sick and relieving the suffering” (Goellnicht, 163). William Saunders, who taught at Guy’s in the late eighteenth century, called medicine “certainly one of the most Liberall proffessions” (Saunders, 334). It was most likely this high conception that appealed most of all to Keats, and it was the transplantation of this from medicine to poetry that allowed him to abandon his future as a physician and become a poet.

The fact that Keats possessed an aptitude and dedication for medicine directly contradicts the more popular portrayal of Keats as an overly sensitive, even effeminate philosopher, more content to think rather than to do. A few months after learning of Keats’s death in 1821, Percy B. Shelley wrote his elegiac requiem *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats*. In it, he writes,
“Oh gentle child, beautiful as thou wert,
   Why didst thou leave the trodden paths of men
Too soon, and with weak hands though mighty heart
Dare the unpastured dragon in his den?” (235-238)

This is the description of a delicate, vulnerable youth, and has since served to
immortalize the image of Keats as a being too fragile for life. Language such as “gentle,”
“weak,” and “beautiful,” describes a poet who is faint of heart and too sensitive for the
harsh literary criticism he received during his career. It was well known that critics such
as John Gibson Lockhart and John Wilson Croker violently criticized Keats in the
Quarterly Review and Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine. This criticism was part of a
series of attacks on the “Cockney School” of poets with which Keats’s associated
(Norton, 272). Because physical illness was often associated with mental state in the
early nineteenth century, many believed it was the criticism, and not consumption, that
killed Keats. Susan Sontag points out that consumption was the physical illness most
associated with mental state, so criticism would have been considered a direct cause of
death by means of its effect on consumption (Sontag, 237). Shelley’s portrayal of Keats
as sensitive and easily wounded is paralleled by Brown’s biography of Keats from 1830,
in which he states that Keats was resolved against pursuing the medical profession due
“to an overwrought apprehension of every possible chance of doing evil in the wrong
direction of the instrument,” and purported that Keats said, “My last operation was the
opening of a man’s temporal artery…reflecting on what passed through my mind at the
time, my dexterity seemed a miracle, and I never took up the lancet again” (Brown, 14).
Keats is here portrayed as too conscientious and feeble-stomached to handle the brutality
of surgery. This depiction, however, was written decades after the poet’s death, and has
been condemned for its inaccuracy due to the emotional bias Brown displayed toward his friendship with Keats (Doggett, 46).

The reality tells a much different story, and through an examination of the poet’s own account of his medical aptitude, a different image of Keats comes to light. A close examination of his poems and letters yields a young man that was robust, willful, fiercely intelligent, and dedicated to the healing profession, be it by means of practicing as a medical professional or through his poetry. In response to the numerous literary attacks on his poem, *Endymion*, Keats wrote,

> “Praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic on his own Works. My own domestic criticism has given me pain without comparison beyond what Blackwood or the Quarterly could possibly inflict—and also when I feel I am right, no external praise can give me such a glow as my own solitary reperception and ratification of what is fine” (Letter to Hessey, 8 October, 1818).

This statement, contrary to Shelley’s image of one too sensitive to handle literary criticism, reveals a man with insight, wisdom, self-assurance, and a strength and dedication to poetry sufficient to withstand any attempt to break his spirit. With regards to medicine, too, Brown was mistaken, as not only did Keats repeatedly consider returning to practicing as a physician, but he also valued the intellectual strengthening of mind associated with medical practice. Burch goes so far as to say that “Keats did not lack the stomach for surgery, nor, with his double-god Apollo, was he unable to perceive the aesthetic value of tending to a sick man or woman” (Burch, 205), while Goellnicht writes, “the Shelleyan and Pre-Raphaelite myth of Keats as a delicate, romantic spirit…is incongruous with the portrait of Keats as a doctor” (Goellnicht, 8).
Referring to his deep-rooted belief that the world contains inevitable trials and inherent suffering, Keats dedicated himself to alleviating some of that certain pain through his poetry. A few months after his brother’s death, he wrote to a friend, “Now I find I must buffet [the world]—I must take my stand upon some vantage ground and begin to fight—I must choose between despair and Energy—I choose the latter” (Letter to Miss Jeffrey, May 31st, 1819). Keats here admits to making the active decision to “fight” the world’s misfortunes, almost as if he believes his purpose is to battle against “despair.” In choosing “Energy” over “despair,” Keats resolves not to let the world break his spirit, and rushes toward initiating a positive impact on the lives of the people around him. He wrote in a letter from October 27th, 1818 to Richard Woodhouse, “I am ambitious of doing the world some good,” and he found a means to accomplish this through his poetry.

This is not to say, however, that he was always certain in his commitment to being a poet. Throughout his life, Keats remained committed and open to the idea of eventually pursuing medicine in addition to poetry. Indeed, financial struggles and his own self-doubt led Keats to seriously question his literary calling. He took a continuous comfort in the notion that he could fall back on medicine should he fail monumentally as a poet. Medicine, like poetry, was a means for Keats to still participate in his noble fight against despair. Even years after he abandoned the physician’s profession, he remained grateful for his medical training. He wrote,

“Were I to study physic or rather Medicine again, I feel it would not make the least difference in my Poetry… Every department of Knowledge we see excellent and calculated towards a great whole—I am so convinced of this that I am glad at not having given away my medical Books, which I shall again look over to keep alive the little I know thitherwards; and
moreover intend through you and Rice to become a sort of pip-civilian” (Letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3 May, 1818). He expresses in no uncertain terms his gratitude towards his physician’s training, as he remains “convinced” there is a greater purpose to all the knowledge he has acquired. He wishes to “keep alive” what he learned for the future, in order to fulfill his duty to society. His use of the word “pip-civilian” is unusual, but it clearly expresses his desire to benefit society as a whole; according to the Oxford English Dictionary, “pip” can mean “something remarkably good; an excellent or very attractive person or thing.” This term illustrates that although he abandoned the medical profession, Keats did not abandon the desire to do “the world some good.” The study of medicine “would not make the least difference in [his] poetry,” because the pursuit of both medicine and poetry stemmed from the same foundation within Keats himself.

He continuously considered returning to the practice of medicine: after the publication of his first book of poems he wrote, “I have been at different times turning it in my head whether I should go to Edinburgh and study for a physician; I am afraid I should not take kindly to it, I am sure I could not take fees—” (Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 24 February, 1819), and later, he considered becoming a ship’s surgeon, stating “I have the choice as it were of two Poisons…one is voyaging to and from India for a few years; the other is leading a fevrous life alone with Poetry—” (Letter to Jeffrey, 31 May, 1819). Keats describes his aptitudes for medicine and poetry as “two Poisons,” equally challenging and equally appealing. Furthermore, the notion of charging people to assuage their suffering morally revolted Keats, to the extent that it made him question his potential as a physician. But these repeated references serve to emphasize his ongoing dedication to healing.
Indeed, the allure of medicine and the charm of poetry stemmed from the same satisfaction of healing the sick, as well as from a fierce dedication to strengthening his mind. Through both his chosen disciplines, Keats remained committed to professions that were “not merely practical but intellectually creative, socially responsible, and altruistic” (De Almeida, 22). Miss Mary-Ann Jefferies, friend to Keats, offered him the advice not to pursue a career as a ship’s surgeon for fear of letting the distress interfere with his poetic dexterity. His answer emphasizes the value he placed on intellectual pursuits, regardless of their origin. He says, “Your advice about the Indiaman is a very wise advice, because it just suits me, though you are a little in the wrong concerning its destroying the energies of Mind; on the contrary it would be the finest thing in the world to strengthen them…” (Letter to Miss Jeffrey, June 9, 1819). To Keats, Medicine serves to “strengthen” the mind, and he expresses positive opinion towards the idea of practicing as a physician; just as he finds strength in poetry, medicine is a noble profession that involves the processes of thinking and healing. He goes as far as to say that the intellectual development “would be the finest thing in the world,” suggesting its compatibility with both his pursuit of learning and his dedication to healing. The importance he placed on intellectual pursuits had become evident in an earlier letter, in which he wrote, “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” (Letter to Reynolds, 3 May, 1818). Reiterating that Keats believed that “knowledge is power,” the letter only supports his notion that he was attracted to medicine as an intellectual pursuit. The same fundamental philosophy, therefore, drew Keats to medicine and to poetry, since in both areas was the potential to do good. De
Physician Nature

Sarah L. Garvey

Almeida agrees that “the energies of the mind displayed in the best practice of each discipline were not only fully related but, assuredly, equally fine manifestations of Apollo’s patronage and power” (De Almeida, 24). Either through the practice of medicine or the writing of poetry, Keats saw a path through which he could administer to the world’s sufferers.

Healing was in Keats’s nature; throughout his short life, Keats showed a constant empathy for suffering and concern for the health of people around him. His letters fervently express how he associated poetry with health, making regular references to the well-being of his friends and family, often including poems as means to soothe their cares. He prefaced his poetic epistle to his friend J. H. Reynolds with the hope that it would “cheer him through a Minute or two,” since he had been bed-ridden with illness. His letters to Tom, when the younger Keats was dying of tuberculosis, are filled with nonsense rhymes to comfort him, while his letters to his sister contain playful stanzas meant to distract her from her “imprisonment” with her guardian, Richard Abbey (Scott, 558). His compassion shines through his writing, for instance when he postulates that “Very few men have ever arrived at a complete disinterestedness of Mind: very few have been influenced by a pure desire of the benefit of others…[but] from the manner in which I feel Haslam’s misfortune I perceive how far I am from any humble standard of disinterestedness” (Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 19 March, 1819). Keats acutely felt the pain and distress of others, and retained the tendency for diagnosing and treating long after his decision not to practice as a physician. What is more, Keats continued to diagnose to the end of his life; while sailing to Rome, his cabin companion and fellow consumptive Miss Cotterell was badly affected by seasickness, and Keats
prescribed a treatment for her even while he himself was dying, as was reported through Severn’s letters. Thus, Keats displayed an ongoing desire—one might venture as far to say a need—to alleviate the suffering of those around him.

Not only did Keats’s infuse his poems with healing subject matter, he chose scientific language to transform the poems into the manifestation of medicine itself. In his *Endymion Book I*, Keats describes the separation of love and friendship as follows,

“All its more ponderous and bulky worth
Is friendship, whence there ever issues forth
A steady splendor; but at the tip-top,
There hangs by unseen film, an orbed drop
Of light, and that is love” (I, 803-807)

This separation of friendship and love becomes analogous to the strictly scientific chemical processes of distillation and chromatography. The nineteenth century process of distillation involved the separation of essential oils from a course resin (Goellnicht, 79). Thus, friendship’s “more ponderous and bulky worth” alludes to the resin, while love’s “orbed drop” is what results at the tip of the distillation apparatus after the oils have been evaporated and re-condensed. Keats draws upon scientific technology to weave a metaphor of love as the purest of essences, pristine and free from impurities after the distillation process. Keats wrote *Endymion* soon after leaving medical school between 1817 and 1818, so undoubtedly medical terminology was fresh in his mind.

The scientific references, however, remain abundant throughout his writings. In *Isabella*, Keats describes the liquids with which Isabella anoints Lorenzo’s severed head:

“…divine liquids come with odorous ooze/ Through the cold serpent-pipe refreshfully,—” (412-13). The portrayal again coincides with the description of an early nineteenth

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3 For an image of early nineteenth century distilling apparatus components, see Figure 3 in the *Figures* section at the end of this chapter.
century distilling apparatus; the “serpent-pipe” is the condensing coil, which must be kept “cool” in order to work properly. Hagelman asserts that “Keats undoubtedly saw and probably operated one in his chemistry courses at Guy’s Hospital” (Hagelman, 255). In addition to the poems, Keats’s letters contain countless references to scientific terminology, particularly with regards to Fanny Brawne. He writes, “…it seems to be that a few more moments thought of you would uncrystalize and dissolve me—I must not give way to it—but turn to my writing again,” (Letter to Fanny Brawne, 16 August, 1819), and “You have absorb’d me. I have a sensation at the present moment as though I was dissolving” (Letter to Fanny Brawne, 13 October, 1819). The process of crystallization is the formation of solids precipitating from a solution of liquids or a gas, whereas uncrystalizing and “dissolving” therefore, are to return to the liquid state, to melt or break down into basic, elemental components. To prevent this, Keats turns to the comfort and stability of writing—writing prevents him from dissolving or coming undone. Through writing, therefore, Keats finds unity and solidification. This notion of a poem as a “crystallization of thought” (Goellnicht, 82), remains appropriate for Keats, as if he implies that each poem is composed of unique elements that must forge together, or “crystalize” to form the final work of art.

Scientific influence helped to shape Keats’s philosophies on art and creativity as well. In a letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey, Keats discusses the essence of poetry and imagination. He states, “another favorite speculation of mine, [is] that we shall enjoy ourselves hereafter by having what we called happiness on earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated. And yet a fate can only befall those who delight in sensation, rather than hunger…after truth” (Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November, 1817). This “finer tone”
refers to the caliber he wishes to achieve in his poetry, and is yet another reference to a chemical process, this time to the refinement of metals and liquids. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘fine’ as “Free from foreign or extraneous matter; a) Of metals, free from alloy, b) Of liquids, free from turbidity or impurity, clear. Also occasionally of air: Pure” (OED). The “finer” tone therefore is one that has been cleansed of impurities and refined to its purest essence, while remaining fundamentally of the earth. This scientific influence thus becomes essential to understanding Keats’s belief that the construction of poetry involves a process of refining, purifying, and distilling the world’s sensations down to their core essences. Keats associated poetry with material existence and the “delight in sensation,” the grounded experiences of a mortal life. These scientific references serve as mere examples of the extent of Keats’s medical school influence and the breadth of medicinal references that imbue the entirety of his poetical works. By imbuing his poetry and philosophy with medical terminology, Keats bridges the gap between literature and medicine, merging the two into one powerful entity. Thus, Keats intended his poems to serve as curative and therapeutic, administering to the spirit just as soundly and securely as pills and ointments would administer to the physical body. As a doctor might conventionally use a stethoscope, Keats’s poetry becomes his instrument of trade in medical administration.

Due to this dual investment in medicine and poetry, it remains entirely appropriate for Keats to choose Apollo as his residing deity. The son of Zeus in Greek and Roman mythology, Apollo is recognized as the god of the sun, of music, truth, and poetry. What remains to be said, however, and is an aspect that is often overlooked by critics and scholars alike, is that Apollo is also the god of medicine, plague, and healing
(Bush, 48). It is clear that Apollo, as the god of poetry, features prominently in Keats’s work, but few have remarked upon Apollo’s duality and his influence on Keats’s “declared resolve to become a physician of the soul of suffering humanity” (De Almeida, 18). Despite the poet’s disbelief in god or other deities, Keats identified with the legend of Apollo, for Apollo represents both medicine and poetry embodied into one immortal being.

Apollo’s influence on the young Keats was early and profound; as De Almeida states, “…knowledge of the mythic connections of medicine and poetry came to Keats early. Certainly, it preceded his conscious decision to become, first, a physician, and then, a poet” (De Almeida, 18). This intrinsic connection between poetry and healing therefore may be one of the reasons Keats, with his healing nature, felt content to abandon his career as a physician for the pursuit of poetry. In fact it was as early as February of 1815, while Keats was still under the apprenticeship of Dr. Hammond, that he wrote his “Ode to Apollo,” the first of many homages to the Greek god. Just as scientific language commonly imbues his poetry, reference to Apollo is recurrent in both Keats’s poems and letters, and he wrote no less than three odes directly to the Greek deity throughout his short poetic career.

His poem, *God of the Meridian*, written in January of 1818, expresses the poet’s desire to channel the metaphorical power of Apollo. In it, the speaker says, “God of the meridian!/ And of the east and west!/ To thee my soul is flown,/ and my body is earthward press’d” (1-4). Alluding back to the themes expressed in *Ode to a Nightingale*, the speaker describes an impossible division of soul and body, one reaching above earthly concerns to transcend worldly cares, and the other trapped as a mortal being, destined to
experience the world’s sufferings and turmoil. The poet’s desire to use poetry to salve
the misfortunes that plague mankind is described as an “awful mission,/ a terrible
division” (5-6), and reflects the difficulty Keats feels towards achieving his goal, and his
trepidation towards failing to do so. He continues,

“God of Song,
Thou bearest me along
Through sights I scarce can bear;
O let me, let me share
With the hot lyre and thee
The staid philosophy.
Temper my lonely hours
And let me see thy bowers
More unalarmed!” (17-25).

Taking into account Keats’s lack of traditional religious views, it is clear he does not
believe in Apollo as a literal manifestation. Nevertheless, he finds strength in what the
god represents, invoking a literary image of himself being ferried through the world’s
evils on Apollo’s metaphorical wings. These “sights [he] scarce can bear” refer of course
to the suffering he has witnessed during the course of his medical training, the belief he
harbors in the world’s inherent maladies, and the heartbreaking sentiments associated
with the pressing matter of his brother’s illness. He wishes to “share” in Apollo’s craft
(using the “lyre,” or making lyric poetry), joining in the quest of using his gifts of poetry
to create peace. The speaker yearns to bring about an “unalarmed” tranquility to the
earth’s “bowers,” or shade. Thus, poetry, like the sun god himself, is depicted as a light
that shines, illuminating the world’s intrinsic gloom.

Apollo shines his poetic influence on Keats’s other poems, such as “I stood tip-
toe,” which remains a resounding testament of the healing power of nature, and its
beauty. Apollo as the sun shines down upon the flora described within the poem, and
nature becomes a metaphor for creativity and the representation of utmost beauty. Thus, Apollo—the ultimate poet—nurtures beauty and growth. There is a passage towards the end, however, that seems conspicuously incongruous with the rest of the poem, as it describes sickness in the midst of a lengthy description of joy and beauty:

“The breezes were ethereal, and pure,
And crept through half-closed lattices to cure
The languid sick; it cool’d their fever’d sleep,
And soothed them into slumbers full and deep.
Soon they awoke clear eyed: nor burnt with thirsting,
Nor with hot fingers, nor with temples bursting” (221-226).

Only nature’s pure breeze—with its soothing and restorative quality—is able to “cure the languid sick.” The poem, “written shortly after Keats left Guy’s…suggests that he was describing what he must often have seen in fevered patients” (Hale-White, 92). The accuracy of fevered sufferers and their symptoms such as “languid” lethargy, “fevered” temperatures, “thirst,” and “temple bursting” headaches raises “Keats’s description to a level of vividness and muscularity” (Goellnicht, 169). Nature puts a balm on the “burnt” and “thirsting” sufferers until their tongues are “loos’d in poesy” (235). Poetry therefore is what frees them from illness. It also clears the “fever,” which contains a portion of irony since Keats often equated poetry as a cause of fever. In this passage, the affect of the weather on health becomes apparent; Keats knew that “intermittent fevers in temperate and cold climates are most common in Spring and Autumn” (Babington, 58), so naturally follows that summer breezes would be curative. The breeze also represents “the inspirational breeze of poetry, so that this whole passage becomes a celebration of the healing power of poetry” (Goellnicht, 170). Keats revisits this notion of the interconnectivity of poetry, nature, and healing in The Fall of Hyperion, in which he writes, “When in mid-May the sickening east wind/ Shifts sudden to the south, the small
warm rain…fills the air with so much pleasant health/ That even the dying man forgets
his shroud” (I, 97-101). Again nature is depicted as healing, since the warmth of the rain
saturates the air and makes a suffering man forget all his “shroud[ing]” troubles. These
powerfully vivid images tell us “that for Keats, poetry was both a cure for disease—those
breezes bear the burden of Apollo’s song—and a vital sign of a person’s health” (Scott,
557). The seeming contradiction of poetry both causing fever and healing it makes sense
when considered in light of the poet’s health: he stopped writing poetry after his first
hemorrhage of February 3rd, 1820, which he was able to self-diagnose as a sign of
consumption. It follows that when in ill health, poetry was too taxing on the poet for the
fever it induced, but when strong and in good health, the poet can channel poetry’s
healing essence to heal others.

In “On receiving a Curious Shell,” he depicts a young and valiant knight, who is
then juxtaposed with the speaker himself, who relays his own very different set of
attributes. He says,

“I will tell thee my blisses, which richly abound
In magical powers to bless, and to sooth…
On this scroll thou seest written in characters fair
A sun-beamy tale of a wreath, and a chain;
And, warrior, it nurtures the property rare
Of charming my mind from the trammels of pain” (19-24).

Healing is depicted as using “charms” to escape “trammels.” The speaker is portrayed as
his own type of hero, using the power of verse and the written word to “bless,” “sooth,”
“nurture,” and “charm” away pain. Unlike the knight, who has the virtues of strength,
bravery, and agility, the speaker is a poet-hero, able to heal with the balm of his words.
Goellnicht argues that “what has often been viewed as effeminacy in Keats’s heroes is
really compassion; they are healers rather than warriors” (Goellnicht, 164). Keats
therefore rejects the traditional image of the knight as a heroic warrior in favor of the more heroic, compassionate healer.

In addition to healing, Keats defines poetry as the fusion of power and sympathy. In his poem, *Sleep and Poetry*, he claims, “…A drainless shower of light is poesy;…But strength alone though of the Muses born/ Is like a fallen angel:/…it feeds upon the burrs, And thorns of life;” (235-45). The power alone of poetry is destructive and degenerate “like a fallen angel,” taken out of commission and without purpose. The “drainless shower of light” and endless poetic potential is wasted when not put to the right effect. This claim is perhaps “an attack on the Graveyard School and on Byron” (Goellnicht, 168); the Graveyard School poets were often Christian clergymen, and as such their writings centered on the contemplation of human mortality and humankind’s relation to the divine, hence the “fallen angels” to which Keats refers. Instead, the speaker urges his readers not to “forget…the great end of poesy, that it should be a friend/ To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man” (246-47). Emphasis on poetry’s healing essence contrasts the “strength alone” ideal of poetic power. The ultimate purpose of poetry is to comfort as a “friend” might, serve as a balm and, as Keats displays on numerous occasions in his letters, should “lift the thoughts of man.” Therefore the speakers of both *Sleep and Poetry* and “Curious Shell” are depicted as poet-heroes, with the necessary attributes of sympathy, understanding, power, and the appreciation of beauty necessary for healing.

This notion of the poet-hero extends to Keats’s longer epics, *Endymion* and *Fall of Hyperion*. Keats’s preface to *Endymion* includes a statement about the imagination in which he says that “the imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a
man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a
ferment…and all the thousand bitters which those men I speak of must necessarily taste
in going over the following pages.” Keats’s use of the word “bitters” is remarkable in
that it can mean “a liquor that is flavored and used as a medicinal substance: [treated as
singular]” (OED). The passage thus becomes a message about medicine, as Keats insists
that in reading Endymion, the coming-of-age readers will “necessarily taste” its healing
and medicinal properties and cure their unhealthy imaginations. In Endymion, Keats
directly states that both his intention and the poem itself are medicinal in nature.

The character of Endymion—a poet himself—strives throughout the poem to rise
above his earthly existence by courting Diana, the goddess of the moon, but only is able
to reconcile his mortal existence by falling in love with an Indian maiden (who is in fact
his ideal Diana in disguise) he meets during his quest. Endymion ultimately learns that
he can only supersed his mortal nature and achieve an idealized existence if he learns to
accept his “natural sphere” (IV, 647). The moral is characteristic of some of Keats’s
other poems in that in order to achieve an abstract ideal, one must first accept concrete
and earthly human experiences. Once Endymion accepts his place on earth and in
society, he tells his sister, “Through me the shepherd realm shall prosper well;/ For to thy
tongue will I all health confide” (IV, 863-64). In marrying his earthly maiden, Endymion
ministers to the health of the world, rather than continuing in his attempt to escape it. As
Goellnicht argues, “[Endymion] is the culmination of the knight-poet-physician
construct—now modulated to the more placid shepherd-poet-physician—Keats has been
developing from his earliest poetry” (Goellnicht, 187).
By rejecting the real world for the ideal, Endymion upsets the natural balance and becomes diseased. Throughout the poem as a result of his distressed mind and resulting physical imbalance, he faints, and sleeps, and exists in a restless state, always in extremes. The concept of health as a state of balance once again becomes integral to understanding Keats’s perception of well-being; his chemistry teacher at Guy’s hospital was quoted to say that “Certain degree and order...[is] productive of HEALTH;—and any excess, defect, or irregularity of them, beyond a certain degree, causes DISEASE” (Babington, 36). Endymion can only achieve a state of health if he can learn to accept the real world for all “the agonies, the strife/ Of human hearts” (Sleep and Poetry, 124-125). Keats writes,

“But this is human life: the war, the deeds,
   The disappointment, the anxiety,
   Imagination’s struggles, far and nigh,
All human; bearing in themselves this good,
   That they are still the air, the subtle food,
   To make us feel existence, and to shew
   How quiet death is” (II, 153-59).

In order to heal himself, Endymion must learn to sympathize with the plight of others, focusing on earthly concerns rather than ethereal ones. Human life, with its “disappointment,” “anxiety,” and “struggles” is what “make[s] us feel existence,” and allows us to truly live. These seeming infirmities are “food” and “air” to a mortal human, therefore essential to life. Once Endymion can dwell within this world, he is given the power to cure the pains of others, as he does in the rest of the poem when he sees people in pain and strives to assist them. It is this capacity for empathy that ultimately allows Cynthia to resuscitate him; therefore empathy has properties of revival as it results in actual life. In analyzing Endymion’s actions, “it becomes increasingly difficult to
separate many of the problems of the heroes in his narrative poems from those of Keats himself, since these heroes usually symbolize the poet and are thus related to Keats’s view of himself” (Goellnicht, 187). Therefore empathy becomes an essential lesson in Keats’s approach to living; in Endymion at least, it breathes life into those who walk this earth.

The themes in Endymion of healing and embracing worldly concerns are applicable to Ode to a Nightingale. The nightingale, “itself a symbol of the poet by virtue of its mellifluous voice, has also gained an immortal status through its ability to appreciate both human joy and suffering” (Goellnicht, 225). Goellnicht continues to argue that due to this appreciation, the bird is able to comfort Ruth, and entertain the emperor and clown (61-67). What Goellnicht fails to realize, however, is that Keats’s bird simply sings and does not consciously choose to administer as healer and soother to the human sufferers. As a result, the bird is, as the speaker claims, fully removed from the world’s pain and sorrow. This is another element that sets the nightingale apart from the speaker: the speaker remains grounded in the real world, unable to transcend worldly “disappointment,” “anxiety,” and “struggles,” failing in his attempt to achieve a similar escape to the nightingale through intoxicants in his attempt to identify with the bird. The irony is that the speaker already adheres to the Keatsian ideal of being grounded in a world of “sensations rather than thoughts.” Being thus embedded in worldly concerns, the speaker is already en route to achieving his ideal as Keats defines it. For it is only through an appreciation for and conscious recognition of suffering that the process of becoming “a humanist, physician to all men” can truly begin.
The letters and poems of John Keats chronicle the life of a passionate young man, whose messages, shrouded in charming allusion and illustrious phrases, persist today, almost 200 years after their inception. Keats strove to leave an immortal impact on this world with his poetry, and contented himself by endeavoring to do just that. In attempting to reconcile mortality with immortality, Keats stresses the importance of remaining grounded in earthly cares in order to truly come to terms with the transience of human life. Constantly surrounded by suffering and disease, Keats ventured to find meaning in the trials and torments that he believed were inherent to the human condition. Rather than condemn his lifetime as a litany of miseries, he celebrated his belief that suffering harbors a constructive force. Often depicted as delicate and weak, Keats was in fact strong, passionate, fiercely dedicated to the axioms he believed in. Arguably the most striking of all these was his notion of poetry as a healing and transcendent power, a means for him to improve upon the world before leaving it, “influenced,” as he said, “by a pure desire of the benefit of others.” As Goellnicht affirms, “Perhaps the greatest legacy he took from his first career to his second was that sympathy for human suffering and the desire to heal it, which was transformed into his ideal of the Apollo-like poet-physician, and which contributed in a major way to his greatness as a poet” (Goellnicht, 32). Like Apollo, Keats gains his immortality, the status of a true poet, not by transcending the real world but by healing it, by being supremely concerned with human suffering, an idea that Keats had been taught at Guy’s hospital and retained throughout his life.
While Keats was dying of tuberculosis in Rome, he repeatedly rejected Severn’s notion of an afterlife, demonstrating right to the very end an utmost dedication to his philosophy of the world as a “vale-of-Soulmaking,” choosing to embrace his own suffering rather than trying to transcend it. With regard to his other principles too, he was devoted; the same altruism that he displayed in training to become a doctor was ingrained in his desire to be a poet. While he wished his poetry to be ever-lasting, he was not interested in personal fame; such is his notion of the “camelion Poet.” He believed that “[a Poet] has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body,” and claimed, “when I am in a room with People… the identity of every one in the room begins so to press upon me that I am in a very little time annihilated” (Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October, 1818). His perception of a poet thus involves the act of continuous empathy, a perpetual concern for the well-being of others to the extent that his own sense of self disappears. His altruism was such that he imagined sacrificing his own identity in order to become a poet-physician. Indeed, he chose to travel to Italy, a gesture that would separate him from his friends and family and the English countryside and all that which gave him life—a gesture he made, according to his first great biographer Amy Lowell, in order to spare those around him the pain of watching him die.⁴

Considering this conviction in his lack of identity, the meaning behind Keats’s chosen epitaph, “Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water,” becomes exceedingly clear. To this day, his grave is not marked with his name. While he had the slightest impression that his poetry could be eternal, he died believing he had failed in achieving

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⁴ Lowell via Plumly
this goal, lamenting that he had “left no immortal work behind.” Little did he know that his lasting impact had already begun.
Figure 1) Example of a nineteenth century anatomy textbook illustration, akin to what Keats would have seen during his medical training. Illustration dates to roughly 1872, attributed to Santiago Ramón y Cajal, a Spanish pathologist, histologist, neuroscientist, and Nobel laureate.

Source: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/lauereates
Figure 2) Second example of a nineteenth century anatomy textbook illustration, akin to what Keats would have seen during his medical training. Illustration dates to roughly 1872, attributed to Santiago Ramón y Cajal, a Spanish pathologist, histologist, neuroscientist, and Nobel laureate.

Source: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/medicine/laureates
Figure 3) **Glass alembics and reports for distillation.** Example of the type of distilling apparatus Keats would have been exposed to during his medical training at Guy’s hospital. 18th century.

Source: Cracow Museum of Pharmacy, Muzeum Farmacji website.
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