

**SEEKER OF BEAUTY, VICTIM OF
PASSION
JOHN KEATS (1795-1821)**



Comparing himself with Byron, Keats writes, “There is this great difference between us: he describes what he sees – I describe what I imagine.” Byron sees a great deal of life and of nature; Keats, in contrast, has a narrowly circumscribed existence.

John Keats, who is born on 31 October 1795, has an unsettled childhood. In 1804, when he is eight years old, his father, who works in an inn, is killed in a riding accident. John’s brothers, George and Tom, are then seven and five respectively, and his sister, Fanny, is not yet one. Two months after the fatal accident, his mother remarries, and the children are soon transferred to the care of her parents, John and Alice Jennings. The bond between the four siblings remains extremely strong.

After being educated, like his brothers, at a school run by the humane and liberal John Clarke, Keats is apprenticed in 1810 to a surgeon. In 1816, in spite of the high failure rate, he passes the necessary examination and becomes a Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries. However, he is already writing poetry and does not take the expected next step to train as a surgeon. He publishes a book entitled *Poems* in 1817 and the long poem *Endymion* next year. By this time, he is part of a literary and artistic circle which includes Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt, and Benjamin Haydon. His desire is to study, travel and write, but most of his legacy from his maternal grandparents has gone to fund his medical education.

In June 1818, just after his brother George, accompanied by his new wife, Georgiana, leaves for America, Keats goes with his friend Charles Armitage Brown on a strenuous walking tour through the Lake District, Scotland, and north eastern Ireland. He falls ill and returns to London prematurely in August to find Tom stricken with tuberculosis. His attendance

on this dying brother seems to have resulted in his contracting the disease, but after Tom's death on 1 December and before he himself becomes dangerously ill on 3 February 1820, he falls frantically in love with a young woman named Fanny Brawne, to whom he becomes engaged. In 1820, his greatest work is published in the volume *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*, and in September, he sails to Italy in a vain attempt to avoid being killed by the approaching English winter. Death comes to him in Rome on 23 February 1821, leaving his fiancée and his sister to become close friends as they mourn him together.

Keats's surviving letters date from 1816, when he is about to enter the literary world. They are most remarkable for his theory of the poetic mind, his concern with the prevalence of suffering in the world, his account of his travels in 1818, and the self-portrait they create. They show him in four interconnected roles – as poet, moralist, brother, and lover.

As a poet, Keats shows surprising confidence in his own gift. Early in 1818, he informs his two brothers, "I sat down to write to you with a grateful heart, in that I had not a Brother who did not feel and credit me for a deeper feeling and devotion for his uprightness, than for any marks of genius however splendid." As a young man of twenty-two, he has already worked out his theory of poetry and the poet. Critical of much contemporary verse (though he reveres about half of Wordsworth's), he is opposed to an ostentatiously original style and holds 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." Seeming to echo Pope's "What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd," he writes, "I think poetry should surprise by a fine excess, and not by singularity; It should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance." He declares, too, "That if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all."

In letters to different correspondents, Keats expounds his theory that the true poet has no fixed identity. In November 1817, he maintains to Benjamin Bailey, a theological student, that "Men of Genius are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect – but they have not any individuality, any determined Character." Nearly a year later, alluding to the meditative, introspective verse of Wordsworth, he expounds his conception to Richard Woodhouse, a lawyer with literary interests:

As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort, of which, if I am anything, I am a member; that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian, or egotistical Sublime; which is a thing per se, and stands alone,) it is not itself – it has no self – It is everything

and nothing – It has no character.... A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence, because he has no Identity – he is continually in for and filling some other body. The Sun, – the Moon, – the Sea, and men and women, who are creatures of impulse, are poetical, and have about them an unchangeable attribute; the poet has none, no identity.... When I am in a room with people, if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then, not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me, so that I am in a very little time annihilated.

Elsewhere, in a famous sentence, Keats informs Bailey, “if a Sparrow come before my Window, I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel.” Mental experiences, of which this is an example, he calls “sensations,” and he exclaims, “O for a life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!” In typical Romantic fashion, he ranks “consecutive reasoning” far below imagination. The faculty he thus disparages is not apt to be content with the state he terms “*Negative Capability*”: “that is,” he tells his brothers, “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Shakespeare, he makes it clear, is an author blessed with this capability, while Coleridge is not.

As a poet, Keats is engaged in a quest for Beauty, and he is convinced that in perceiving it he perceives Truth. He asserts to Bailey, whose Christian faith he does not share:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart’s affections, and the truth of Imagination. What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not, – for I have the same idea of all our passions as of Love: they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty.

In Adam’s dream of Eve in *Paradise Lost*, before she is bestowed on him, Keats finds a representation of this exalted illumination, commenting, “he awoke and found it truth.” To George and Georgiana, he admits, “I can never feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its Beauty.”

Keats believes that the beauty of a fully achieved work of art suffuses itself through the entire production and takes the sting out of any ugly elements it may contain. “The excellence of every art,” he explains to his brothers, “is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth – Examine *King Lear*, and you will find this exemplified throughout.” This is not the case, he observes, in Benjamin West’s painting *Death on the Pale Horse*.

Keats celebrates beauty in nature so rapturously that it is surprising he should complain that the splendour of the Devonshire Hills is not satisfying since the Devonshire people are contemptible. "Scenery," he declares, "is fine – but human nature is finer – the sward is richer for the tread of a real nervous English foot." On a later occasion, he recognizes that the demand of the time is for marvels, and he protests, "Wonders are no wonders to me. I am more at home amongst men and women. I would rather read Chaucer than Ariosto."

In April 1818, on the threshold of *Endymion's* publication, its twenty-two-year-old author is not afraid to confide to his friend and fellow poet John Hamilton Reynolds, "I have not the slightest feel of humility towards the public – or to anything in existence, – but the eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty, and the Memory of great Men." He is, however, a rigorous judge of his own production and is well aware that his first long poem is prentice work from which he can expect to rise to higher things. During the next two years, his letters comment on his labour over maturer works. In August 1819, he enthuses, "Shakespeare and the *Paradise Lost* every day become greater wonders to me," but after writing three books of a second long poem, *Hyperion*, he abandons it as too Miltonic. He has decided, much in accordance with Dr. Johnson's opinion, that Milton's epic, "though so fine in itself, is a corruption of our language." He makes a number of references to his masterly shorter narrative poems – "Lamia," "Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil," and "The Eve of St. Agnes" – justly claiming that there is a wealth of life in the first. Sadly, he seems oblivious of his exceedingly high achievement in his "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "Ode on Melancholy."

Keats's confidence in his own genius is not accompanied by any adequate plan to earn a living. The reader of his letters becomes used to his complaints that Richard Abbey, the trustee of his maternal grandmother's estate, is most reluctant to release money from his legacy, partly because his mother's widowed sister threatens to bring a suit in Chancery; his sister's being below the age of majority is also a factor. In mid-1819 he considers taking a post as surgeon on a vessel making return voyages to India. When a young Devonshire woman he knows proposes that the occupation would destroy his "energies of Mind," he replies:

on the contrary it would be the finest thing in the world to strengthen them – To be thrown among people who care not for you, with whom you have no sympathies forces the Mind upon its own resources, and leaves it free to make its speculations of the differences of human character and to class them with the calmness of a Botanist. An Indiaman is a little world.

A few days later, he writes to his sister, "I was preparing to enquire for a situation with an apothecary, but Mr. Brown persuades me to try the press once more; so I will with all my industry and ability," and he soon talks of asking Hazlitt which periodicals he should aim at. It is regrettable that he does not follow this plan as a volume of his articles would make a valuable addition to his works. In the event, he continues to rely reluctantly on loans from friends, none of them rich.

Keats claims that he can endure poverty, and in September 1819 he writes to George and Georgiana, "I am becoming accustomed to the privations of the pleasures of sense. In the midst of the world I live like a hermit. I have forgot how to lay plans for the enjoyment of any pleasure." More reluctantly, he concedes to Reynolds, "however I should like to enjoy what the competencies of life procure, I am in no wise dashed at a different prospect." There is no question that Keats has a lively appreciation of the sensuous pleasures that "the competencies of life procure." His praise of claret is a poet's laudation:

For really 'tis so fine – if fills one's mouth with a gushing
freshness – then goes down cool and feverless – then you do not
feel it quarrelling with your liver – no, it is rather a Peacemaker,
and lies as quiet as it did in the grape; then it is as fragrant as
the Queen Bee, and the more ethereal Part of it mounts into the
brain, not assaulting the cerebral apartments like a bully in a
bad-house looking for his trull and hurrying from door to door
bouncing against the wainst-coat [wainscot], but rather walks
like Aladdin about his own enchanted palace so gently that you
do not feel his step.

Almost as seductive is his description of eating a nectarine:

Talking of Pleasure, this moment I was writing with one hand,
and with the other holding to my Mouth a Nectarine – good God
how fine. It went down soft, pulpy, slushy, oozy – all its delicious
embonpoint melted down my throat like a large beatified
Strawberry.

Pleasures like these are not characteristic of the northern tour which Keats takes with his friend Brown in 1818. He explains to Haydon why he is about to start on this spartan adventure:

I purpose within a month to put my knapsack at my back and
make a pedestrian tour through the north of England, and part
of Scotland – to make a sort of Prologue to the Life I intend to

pursue – that is to write, to study and to see all Europe at the lowest expence. I will clamber through the Clouds and exist. I will get such an accumulation of stupendous recollections that as I walk through the suburbs of London I may not see them.

Before and after this walking tour, Keats treats his correspondents to memorable accounts of places he stays in. To Bailey, he writes:

you may say what you will of Devonshire, the truth is it is a splashy, rainy, misty, snowy, foggy, haily, floody, muddy, slipshod county. The hills are very beautiful, when you get a sight of 'em – the primroses are out, but then you are in – the Cliffs are of a fine deep colour, but then the Clouds are continually vieing with them.

Having moved from the Isle of Wight to Winchester in a vain search for a library, he describes this ancient city to his sister:

it is the pleasantest Town I ever was in, and has the most recommendations of any. There is a fine Cathedral which to me is always a source of amusement, part of it built 1400 years ago.... The whole town is beautifully wooded. From the Hill at the eastern extremity you see a prospect of Streets, and old Buildings mixed up with Trees. Then there are the most beautiful streams about I ever saw – full of Trout.

However, it is in letters from the Lake District, Scotland, and the northeast corner of Ireland that Keats shows what enrichment he can find from travel. He writes to his brother Tom of Lake Winander or Windermere:

the two views we have had of it are of the most noble tenderness – they can never fade away – they make us forget the divisions of life; age, youth, poverty and riches; and refine one's sensual vision into a sort of north star which can never cease to be open lidded and stedfast over the wonders of the great Power.

He discovers, "I have an amazing partiality for mountains in the clouds. There is nothing in Devon like this, and Brown says there is nothing in Wales to be compared to it." After describing the diverse patterns in a waterfall, he alludes to his self-consciousness about his shortness when he concludes, "I cannot think with Hazlitt that these scenes make man appear little. I never forgot my stature so completely – I live in the eye; and my imagination, surpassed, is at rest." Only a few days later, in another letter

to Tom, he describes the energy of children at a country-dancing school and comments, "This is what I like better than scenery. I fear our continued moving from place to place will prevent our becoming learned in village affairs: we are mere creatures of Rivers, Lakes, and Mountains." On a brief foray into Ireland, he is appalled to discover the poverty:

we had too much opportunity to see the worse than nakedness, the rags, the dirt and misery, of the poor common Irish – A Scotch cottage, though in that sometimes the smoke has no exit but at the door, is a palace to an Irish one.... We had the pleasure of finding our way through a Peat-bog, three miles long at least – dreary, flat, dank, black, and spongy – here and there were poor dirty Creatures, and a few strong men cutting or carting Peat.

Back in Scotland, Keats is happily surprised by the beauty of the home district of his adored Robert Burns. The approach to Ayr, he confesses,

is extremely fine – quite outwent my expectations – richly meadowed, wooded, heathed and rivuleted – with a grand Sea view terminated by the black Mountains of the isle of Arran.... The bonny Doon is the sweetest river I ever saw – overhung with fine trees as far as we could see – We stood some time on the Brig across it, over which Tam o' Shanter fled.

Before he visits Burns's country and cottage, Keats has taken careful note of the differences between Scotch and Irish life. Writing to Tom from Ireland, he describes how,

The dialects on the neighbouring shores of Scotland and Ireland are much the same, yet I can perceive a great difference in the nations, from the chamber-maid at this *nate toone* kept by Mr. Kelly. She is fair, kind, and ready to laugh, because she is out of the horrible dominion of the Scotch Kirk. A Scotch girl stands in terrible awe of the Elders – poor little Susannahs, they will scarcely laugh, and their Kirk is greatly to be damned.

Keats goes on to remind Tom

of the fate of Burns – poor unfortunate fellow, his disposition was Southern – how sad it is when a luxurious imagination is obliged, in self-defence, to deaden its delicacy in vulgarity, and rot in things attainable, that it may not have leisure to go mad after things which are not. No man, in such matters, will be content with the experience of others.

In his horror of ecclesiastical tyranny, Keats claims, "I would sooner be a wild deer, than a girl under the dominion of the Kirk; and I would sooner be a wild hog, than be the occasion of a poor Creature's penance before those execrable elders."

For all his absorption in his quest for beauty, Keats does not lack strong moral feelings. When Bailey enquires after his health and spirits, he replies, "Health and spirits can only belong unalloyed to the selfish man—the man who thinks much of his fellows can never be in spirits." Half a year later, discussing Wordsworth's insight into the human condition, he writes:

I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many apartments....
The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber,
in which we remain as long as we do not think ... we no sooner
get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of
Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and
the atmosphere; we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think
of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects
this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening
one's vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing
one's nerves that the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak,
Pain, Sickness, and oppression

Declaring elsewhere that he is "ambitious of doing the world some good," Keats anxiously observes, "The faint conceptions I have of poems to come bring the blood frequently into my forehead—All I hope is, that I may not lose all interest in human affairs."

Keats is not a Christian, and he reminds Bailey, who is on the road to ordination, "You know my ideas about Religion. I do not think myself more in the right than other people, and that nothing in this world is proveable." On one occasion, he appeals to Fanny Brawne "by the blood of that Christ you believe in," and he confesses to her, "I long to believe in immortality." In the course of a long, meandering letter to George and Georgiana, he claims that he can think of only two human beings (though he acknowledges there must have been many others) whose hearts have been untainted by self-interest: Socrates and Jesus. He adds, "It is to be lamented that the history of the latter was written and revised by Men interested in the pious frauds of Religion."

Although he rejects Christian theology and wavers on the question of personal immortality, Keats is not an atheist or agnostic, and he searches for a meaning behind human suffering. In one of his journal-letters to George and his wife, he assumes, for the sake of argument, the truth of immortality and expounds a theory of "intelligences or sparks of the divin-

ity" embodied in human beings. These, he posits, "are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself." Describing intelligences as "atoms of perception," and asserting that "they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God," he asks how they are to be transmuted into Souls "so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each one's individual existence"; his answer is "by the medium of a world like this," where experience works on the human heart and makes it suffer, a world he terms "The vale of Soul-making." He considers he has put forward "a grander system of salvation than the Christian religion."

Keats lives in the England of post-Napoleonic repression, where any proposal of reform is all too apt to evoke memories of the French Reign of Terror and of the threat of invasion. His moral feelings are such that, insofar as he has an interest in politics, his sympathies are on the liberal side. He despises the reactionary Castlereagh and the anti-progressive Duke of Wellington, admires William Cobbett, and sides with the Richard Carlile who is prosecuted for republishing works by Thomas Paine. His most interesting political statement comes in another letter to his expatriate brother and sister-in-law. Writing of radicals, he rather unfairly claims:

There are many Madmen in the Country I have no doubt, who would like to be beheaded on tower Hill merely for the sake of éclat, there are many Men like [Leigh] Hunt who from a principle of taste would like to see things go on better, there are many like Sir F[rancis] Burdett who like to sit at the head of political dinners, — but there are none prepared to suffer in obscurity for their Country.

He has no good words for the Ministry:

All the departments of Government have strayed far from Simplicity which is the greatest of Strength[;] there is as much difference in this respect between the present Government and Oliver Cromwell's as there is between the 12 Tables of Rome and the volumes of Civil Law which were digested by Justinian.

One-sided as his view of Cromwell is, he displays good sense in his estimation of Bonaparte and of the sovereigns restored to power after that Emperor's fall:

Notwithstanding the part which the Liberals take in the Cause of Napoleon, I cannot but think he has done more harm to the life of Liberty than any one else could have done: not that the divine right Gentlemen have done or intend to do any good — no they

have taken a Lesson of him, and will do all the further harm he would have done without any of the good.

Fortunately for posterity, Keats records much of his life, as well as of his thought, in letters to his brothers. His intense devotion to them and his sister never falters. In October 1818, he has to disclose to George and Georgiana, who are still in the United States, that Tom is dying. Day after day, he has postponed writing:

I could not bring myself to say the truth, that he is no better but much worse – However, it must be told; and you must my dear Brother and Sister take example from me and bear up against any Calamity for my sake as I do for yours. Our's are ties which independent of their own Sentiment are sent us by providence to prevent the deleterious effects of one great solitary grief. I have Fanny and I have you – three people whose Happiness to me is sacred – and it does annul that selfish sorrow which I should otherwise fall into.

Keats's anxious affection for his sister Fanny, seven years younger than himself, is one of his most endearing traits. While she is a minor, she is in the power of her trustees, Richard and Eleanor Abbey, who are often deficient in kindness. Keats has to wring permission from Mr. Abbey for them to meet, and he once reports to his brothers how "Mrs. Abbey was saying that the Keatses were ever indolent, that they would ever be so, and that it is born in them" – an insult that draws from Fanny the whispered retort, "Well, if it is born with us, how can we help it?" This woman deprives Fanny of her spaniel and so berates her that Keats advises, "You must pay no attention to Mrs. Abbey's unfeeling and ignorant gabble.... Many people live opposite a Blacksmith's till they cannot hear the hammer."

Not many characters are as clearly delineated in Keats's letters as Mrs. Abbey, though there are lively glimpses of Leigh Hunt's courage, thriftlessness and vanity, and one passage seems to capture the tone of his speech. Asked when his *Pocket-Book* is to be published, Hunt replies, "Such a thing was very much wanting – people think of nothing but money-getting – now for me I am rather inclined to the liberal side of things. I am reckoned lax in my Christian principles." The most vivid portrait is probably that of Keats's friend Charles Wentworth Dilke, brother-in-law of the man who gives a home to Fanny's dog. This public servant, by avocation a literary scholar, is at one time absorbed in Horace Walpole's letters and at another in "Greek histories and antiquities," but in the spring of 1819 he becomes obsessed with the upbringing of his son and moves the family to be near the boy, whom he enrolls at Westminster School. "I cannot help thinking,"

Keats observes, "what a shame it is that poor Dilke should give up his comfortable house and garden for his Son, whom he will certainly ruin with too much care. The boy has nothing in his ears all day but himself and the importance of his education. Dilke has continually in his mouth 'My Boy.' This is what spoils princes."

Keats's friends are usually men. He confesses to Bailey:

I am certain I have not a right feeling towards women.... Is it because they fall so far beneath my boyish Imagination? When I was a schoolboy I thought a fair woman a pure Goddess ... when among men, I have no evil thoughts, no malice, no spleen—I feel free to speak or to be silent—I can listen, and from every one I can learn.... When I am among women, I have evil thoughts, malice, spleen—I cannot speak, or be silent—I am full of suspicions and therefore listen to nothing—I am in a hurry to be gone.

Occasionally he becomes acquainted with a woman before whom his usual discomfort melts away. Such a woman is Jane Cox, a cousin of Reynolds:

She has a rich Eastern look; she has fine eyes and fine manners. When she comes into a room she makes an impression the same as the Beauty of a Leopardess.... I always find myself more at ease with such a woman; the picture before me always gives me a life and animation which I cannot possibly feel with anything inferior. I am at such times too much occupied in admiring to be awkward or in a tremble. I forget myself entirely because I live in her.

He is indignant when Reynolds's sisters sneer at their cousin: "She walks across a room in such a manner that a Man is drawn towards her with a magnetic Power. This they call flirting!"

A woman does not require qualities additional to beauty to give Keats pleasure. After meeting at a rout (a large evening party) one of the most beautiful girls he has ever seen, he remarks, "She gave a remarkable prettiness to all those commonplaces which most women who talk must utter." However, to George and Georgiana (he admires the latter without reservation) he declares: "Notwithstanding your Happiness and your recommendation I hope I shall never marry. Though the most beautiful Creature were waiting for me at the end of a Journey or a Walk ... my Happiness would not be so fine, as my Solitude is sublime." In single life, he asserts, "there is a sublimity to welcome me home—The roaring of the wind is my wife and the Stars through the window pane are my Children. The mighty abstract

Idea I have of Beauty in all things stifles the more divided and minute domestic happiness." Like many a man who exults in bachelorhood, he suffers an unexpected blow.

In the first instalment of a journal-letter begun on 16 December 1818, Keats informs George and Georgiana that Tom's expected death has occurred. He also mentions Mrs. Brawne, who has rented Brown's house for the summer, observing, "She is a very nice woman, and her daughter senior is I think beautiful and elegant, graceful, silly, fashionable and strange. We have a little tiff now and then – and she behaves a little better, or I must have sheered off." On the 25th of the month, he writes of the young woman (she is, in fact, eighteen):

She is not seventeen – but she is ignorant – monstrous in her behaviour, flying out in all directions – calling people such names that I was forced lately to make use of the term *Minx* – this is I think not from any innate vice, but from a penchant she has for acting stylishly – I am however tired of such style and shall decline any more of it.

By the 1 July, Keats, who is now in the Isle of Wight, has decided, as he tells this "minx," "The morning is the only proper time for me to write to a beautiful Girl whom I love so much" and he requests, "Ask yourself my love whether you are not very cruel to have so entrammelled me, so destroyed my freedom."

The concluding phase of the poet's life has now begun. Keats has fallen victim to a consuming love, but he is without the means to support a wife. The couple become engaged, and it seems as though his passion and his tuberculosis work together to kill him.

Keats's letters give only a general impression of Fanny Brawne, and this has allowed commentators to conceive very different opinions of her. She appears to be a handsome (not phenomenally beautiful) young woman who enjoys parties and male admiration. She has a strong feeling for Keats and is a reader: he marks "the most beautiful passages in Spenser" for her, and in later life she makes some literary translations from German. The poet's friends, however, do not share his clearly inflated esteem of her, and Keats resents their criticism. In some ways, he seems to see her as the embodiment of the ideal beauty he has always sought: "All my thoughts," he discloses, "my unhappiest days and nights, have I find not at all cured me of my love of Beauty, but made it so intense that I am miserable that you are not with me." In the letters he writes from the summer of 1818 onwards, his twin passions are his craving for Fanny Brawne and his longing

for lasting poetic fame. We hear no more of Negative Capability or of the Vale of Soul-making.

Keats is a challenging lover. While he is glad Fanny does not love him just for his writings—he remarks, “I have met with women whom I really think would like to be married to a Poem and to be given away by a Novel” — he is continually praising her beauty. When she suggests that he loves her for that alone, he protests from his sickbed, “Have I nothing else to love in you but that? Do not I see a heart naturally furnish’d with wings imprison itself with me?” But the Keats who hoped never to marry has not undergone a complete metamorphosis. He warns Fanny, “I tremble at domestic cares” and exclaims:

God forbid we should what people call, *settle* — turn into a pond, a stagnant Lethe — a vile crescent, row or buildings. Better be imprudent moveables than prudent fixtures. Open my Mouth at the Street door like the Lion’s head at Venice to receive hateful cards, letters, messages. Go out and wither at tea parties; freeze at dinners; bake at dances; simmer at routs.

Reduced, at least intermittently, to an invalid, Keats is conscientious enough to alert Fanny to her limited prospects with him and rejoices when she does not falter in her constancy, though it would be “very reasonable” in her to do so. He is grateful that she has so long confined herself to her own neighbourhood for his sake, and is not displeased when she does make an excursion into Town — until the information that she has been taking pleasure at a party given by Mrs. Dilke kindles in him a furious jealousy:

I wish you to see how unhappy I am for love of you, and endeavour as much as I can to entice you to give up your whole heart to me whose whole existence hangs upon you.... I am greedy of you. Do not think of anything but me.... If you would really what is call’d enjoy yourself at a Party — if you can smile in people’s faces, and wish them to admire you *now* — you never have nor ever will love me.... If we love we must not live as other men and women do — I cannot brook the wolfsbane of fashion and foppery and tattle — you must be mine to die upon the rack if I want you.

In another letter, he charges, “You do not feel as I do — you do not know what it is to love — one day you may — your time is not come.”

The demands he makes on Fanny Brawne constitute one of a number of disturbing traits in the self-portrait that emerges from Keats’s letters. The man who can write, “I admire Human Nature but I do not like *Men*” is

not free from misanthropy, and many would not applaud his pronouncement, "Upon the whole I dislike mankind. Whatever people on the other side of the question may advance, they cannot deny that they are always surprised at hearing of a good action, and never of a bad one." A strain of misogyny also disfigures Keats's outlook: most women, he says, "appear to me as children to whom I would rather give a sugar Plum than my time."

Keats is all too ready to condemn whole classes of people. He comes to "look with hate and contempt upon the literary world" with its "common-place crowd of the little famous – who are each individually lost in a throng made up of themselves." "What a set of barren asses," he exclaims, "are actors!" Parsons kindle in him an irrational wrath:

The notions of Society will not permit a parson to give way to his temper in any shape – So he festers in himself – his features get a peculiar, diabolical, self-sufficient, iron stupid expression. He is continually acting – his mind is against every man, and every man's mind is against him, – He is a hypocrite to the Believer and a coward to the unbeliever.

Even tourists make him sneer: "It is astonishing how they raven down scenery like children do sweetmeats."

As his raging against parsons suggests, Keats is also capable of reacting to abuses with outbursts of extreme anger. When he investigates the malicious practical joke played on his late brother Tom by Charles Wells, who faked a set of letters from a non-existent woman who claimed to be in love with him, he concludes:

It was no thoughtless hoax – but a cruel deception on a sanguine Temperament, with every show of friendship. I do not think death too bad for the villain.... I will hang over his head like a sword by a hair. I will be opium to his vanity – if I cannot injure his interests – He is a rat and he shall have ratsbane to his vanity – I will harm him all I possibly can.

Referring to a member of Richard Abbey's firm whom he considers an enemy of his brother George, he exults to his sister, "No one can regret Mr. Hodgkinson's ill fortune: I must own illness has not made such a Saint of me as to prevent my rejoicing at his reverse." Less virulent but more surprising is Keats's reaction when Fanny Brawne and his friend Brown show some signs of mutual attraction:

When you were in the habit of flirting with Brown you would have left off, could your own heart have felt one half of one pang

mine did. Brown is a good sort of Man—he did not know he was doing me to death by inches. I feel the effect of every one of those hours in my side now; and for that cause, though he has done me many services, though I know his love and friendship for me, though at this moment I should be without pence were it not for his assistance, I will never see or speak to him until we are both old men, if we are to be.

Keats does not retain his anger against Brown: he wants his company when he sails to Italy, and it is to him that he writes his last two letters.

Against these shadows should be set the lighthearted passages — some containing bawdy allusions — with which Keats entertains his correspondents. A letter to two young women concludes:

P.S. has many significations — here it signifies Post Script — on the corner of a Handkerchief Polly Saunders — Upon a Garter Pretty Secret — Upon a Band Box Pink Sattin — At the Theatre Princes Side — on a Pulpit Parson's Snuffle — and at a Country Ale House Pail Sider.

Writing to George and Georgiana, he suggests what the wife can do for the husband:

While you are hovering with your dinner in prospect you may do a thousand things — put a hedgehog into George's hat — pour a little water into his rifle — soak his boots in a pail of water — cut his jacket round into shreds like a Roman kilt or the back of my grandmother's stays — Sew *off* his buttons.

In his short life, Keats has some fun, much pleasure, and spots of real happiness; nevertheless, that life is more tragedy than comedy. Early in his career, he argues that “a long poem is a test of invention, which I take to be the Polar star of Poetry,” and, on seeing that the mountains of the Isle of Arran are visible from Burns's native place, he asks himself, “How is it they did not beckon Burns to some grand attempt at Epic?” When he falls seriously ill in February 1820, he confides a great sorrow to Fanny Brawne: “‘If I should die,’ said I to myself, ‘I have left no immortal work behind me — nothing to make my friends proud of my memory — but I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remember'd.’” He does not know that for him the road to greatness lay through the ode, the sonnet, and the shorter narrative, that he has already travelled it, and that he has become a great poet by virtue of work that is already safely in print.