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Indifference and Epistolarity
in *The Eve of St. Agnes*

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There is a self-contradictory quality about Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes* that has struck readers from the very first. Richard Woodhouse, who recorded his thoughts about the poem while it was still in manuscript, admired it in general, but was shocked, even repulsed, by a few of the stanzas.¹ Above all he objected to Porphyro's stratagem for seducing Madeline in her sleep. Yet as Woodhouse admits, there are 'no improper expressions' used, and it seems surprisingly prudish of Woodhouse to disapprove of Keats's account of the seduction. Betrayal, rape, murder, and other horrors are stock elements of romance; Woodhouse particularly liked and approved of Keats's *Isabella*, which involves a gruesome decapitation and gothic suggestions of necrophilia. Porphyro's actions are sinister, perhaps, but as elements of a romance plot they are not unusual or unexpected. I believe that Woodhouse misplaced his feelings of shock, which were in fact caused by another, far more anomalous circumstance.

What is most surprising about *The Eve of St. Agnes* is not the rape² itself, but the fact that Madeline does not die. This may seem a strangely negative distinction, but Madeline's survival is truly remarkable: characters in romance who are crossed or betrayed in love, as well as those, more obviously, whose lovers die, almost invariably pine to death before the poem is over. This is equally true of men as of women: *Isabella* dies at the loss of Lorenzo, Lycius dies

immediately upon the unmasking of Lamia, and Ludolph in *Otho the Great*, flagging from the moment he learns of Auranthe's treachery, perishes definitively when he learns of her death. Or to take a larger sampling, Byron's *Eastern Tales*: the Giaour, hardiest of the heroes, survives his Leila by just a few years; Zuleika in *The Bride of Abydos* dies for grief over Selim even before he is killed; Medora dies of misery over the Corsair – whether in despair of his return or in grief that he has betrayed her with Gulnare is unclear; and *Lara* and *The Siege of Corinth* show the same pattern. Examples abound in other authors.³

Thus the traditions of romance lead us to expect a passionate response from Madeline – if not death by pining, then suicide (like Lucretia) or violence (like Philomela). Instead, Keats provides a strange passivity, bordering on indifference – which explains why Woodhouse was offended by the story, as he presumably was not by 'The Rape of Lucrece'. Madeline's reaction when confronted with the terrible reality of her own rape is not to feel the betrayal deeply, but quite the opposite – to submit to the inevitable and to turn her attention away from her grief to more practical matters. Porphyro and the narrator, I shall argue, react in a similar fashion at the other crucial moments of the poem. This is perhaps the most distinctive feature of *The Eve of St. Agnes*: after each build-up the reader encounters a peculiar dissipation of tension, a seeming indifference on the part of the characters or the narrator that disappoints our expectations of a climax. All these occasions are characterized by the same tactics of submission and evasion that Madeline displays.

The claim that *The Eve of St. Agnes* refuses to conform to the standards of romance will hardly come as a surprise. The old view (put forward by Wasserman and others in the 1950's) that both Madeline and Keats cope with the

difficulties of their world by entering a realm of imaginative transcendence has long been contested by a 'skeptical' school of criticism.⁴ But my reading differs from the usual skeptical or ironic view of the poem (first advanced by Jack Stillinger) in that I consider the anti-romantic strain to be highly localized. There is nothing extraordinary about a crafty hero or a flawed heroine. The true anomalies come at the points that Woodhouse singled out for comment: first the '3 stanzas' or so describing Porphyro's almost passive betrayal of Madeline and her subdued reaction, and then the final stanza, where the narrator 'attempt[s] to play with his reader, & fling him off at last' (II, p. 163). These anti-climactic moments of submission and evasion contrast with the tenor of the rest of the poem, which may be ironic, but is at least deeply, passionately ironic. How are we to reconcile such discordant elements?

My feeling is that the answer is to be found in Keats's letters, which provide a model of a mixed genre, at once romantic and anti-romantic. Although they continue to be read much as the poems used to be read – as triumphs of the imaginative spirit confronting life's challenges – Keats's letters show a capacity for the same seeming indifference or insensitivity as is shown by the characters and narrator of his poem. The personal letter is often seen as one of the most intimate forms of writing, and Keats's letters in particular are appreciated for their sensitivity. But the epistolary mode offers special ways not only of addressing but also of *avoiding* issues of deep human concern, and I believe that Keats was adept at taking advantage of these possibilities. This duality is familiar to every letter-writer: letters allow one to transcend the limits of the self, but also to retreat into the self and to 'fling off' the world; Keats's letters are not unique in this respect. But Keats's distinction is, first, to have combined both

aspects of letter-writing with such brilliant ease in individual letters; and second, to have applied epistolary methods to his verse.

For I believe that *The Eve of St. Agnes* is, in its hybrid nature, the most epistolary poem of the Romantic period. I therefore begin my discussion with an exploration of the dark or 'indifferent' side of letter-writing. I then examine Keats's letters and their willingness to submit to their own limitations as a form of consolation or self-defense. Finally I turn to *The Eve of St. Agnes* and other poems which are all, by Keats's own account, 'unpoetical' because of their incorporation of epistolary methods. By writing poems the way he wrote letters – that is, by having recourse to submission and evasion just when one would expect an imaginative or 'metaphysical' climax – Keats opened up poetry to a realm of experience it had previously excluded.

Letters of Resignation

Jane Fairfax in *Emma* rarely says anything beyond the common courtesies: she is in a delicate position, and tries to reveal as little as possible about herself. It is all the more surprising, therefore, when she suddenly bursts forth with a long speech about the post office. Her panegyric comes just when she is engaged in an unpleasant disagreement with Mrs. Elton:

'The post-office is a wonderful establishment!' said she. – 'The regularity and dispatch of it! If one thinks of all that it has to do, and all that it does so well, it is really astonishing! . . . So seldom that any negligence or blunder appears! So seldom that a letter, among the thousands that are constantly passing about the kingdom, is even carried wrong – and not one in a million, I suppose, actually lost! And when one considers the

variety of hands, and of bad hands too, that are to be deciphered, it increases the wonder!’

The speech is extraordinary partly, as I have said, on account of its speaker, and partly on account of its subject-matter. If Jane wishes to end an argument by changing the subject, then we expect her to do what any well-bred English person would do – talk about the weather. That is what Mr. Knightley does: Austen speaks at one point of ‘the quiet transition which Mr. Knightley soon afterwards made to “What does Weston think of the weather; shall we have rain?”’⁵ For this ‘quiet transition’ – or rather, evasion – Jane, inexplicably it would seem, substitutes her thoughts on postage. Such a substitution at this moment, when Jane wishes to avoid confrontation, seems both unusual and unnecessary. Discussion of the weather provides the perfect deflection from any inflammatory subject, because weather is the ultimate marker of conversational indifference. Nobody can do anything about it, nobody feels passionately about it, but everyone has at least a minimal interest in it; people can therefore agree to resign themselves to the subject of the weather just the way they must resign themselves to the weather itself.⁶

Letter-writing, both as a practice and hence, potentially, as a topic of conversation, would appear to be very different – active and confrontational, rather than evasive. By their very nature letters are a means of conquering distance and division; they do not submit to limitations but seek to overcome them, both physically and imaginatively. Letter-writing manuals in the nineteenth century claimed that composing a letter was ‘related to prayer in its effort to transcend absence and in the determination to think one’s way into the other person’s presence’.⁷ Letters find a transcendent model, moreover, not only

in prayer but in Scripture: Paul's epistles, which 'summoned into being ... the early Christian communities', were a feature of every church service (at least after the fourth Lateran council of 1215) and consequently made a 'major contribution ... to subsequent epistolary tradition'.⁸ By the nineteenth century the Pauline epistles no longer served as a direct model for private correspondence; yet the ideal of creating community by means of letters had by no means been lost. 'Romantic correspondence', one critic suggests, aimed at 'intense mutual intimacy and identification'; it thus resembled Romantic poetry in its attempt to establish community based on sympathy: 'Indeed, Romantic definitions of poetry, especially lyric, are strikingly accurate descriptions of [Romantic] letters'.⁹ A poignant example of the continuing link between poetic and epistolary inspiration comes in Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, where the spiritual reunion with Hallam for which the poet has been longing is at last achieved only when Tennyson reads 'those fallen leaves that keep their green, / The noble letters of the dead'.

Another view of letters would see them as an important discourse not only for the Establishment (such as the Church) but also, and perhaps pre-eminently, for marginalized groups, especially women. A letter is the refuge of the powerless, the means by which those who have no means of directly addressing someone who is at a remove (physical, social, or emotional) can nevertheless communicate. Mary Favret has argued that in the period just before Jane Austen was writing, 'women writers used the familiar letter for entry to the world of politics', as a subversive tool of revolution.¹⁰ Jane Fairfax is a good example of a woman who uses letters, if not for subversion, at least for empowerment. It is only by her secret correspondence with Frank Churchill that

she is able to maintain the contact that eventually allows her to overcome her disadvantages and to maintain her social position.

Thus letters tend to be viewed as constituting, in various ways, an active, transcendent genre, with powers akin to those of poetry or prayer. Yet the letter not only can be but often is a mode of submission and evasion. People will frequently write a letter not as a means of establishing contact, but as a way of avoiding direct contact, because the subject to be considered – a piece of bad news, for instance – is too painful to discuss in person. And the letter-writer in such situations will often seize upon the conventions of the letter, which allow for and even encourage evasions. A letter is understood to be a motley and extemporaneous assortment of observations¹¹; hence the topic may be changed in a moment without any lack of decorum. It is perfectly acceptable, for example, for a letter that begins ‘I am sorry to report that uncle died yesterday’ to conclude ‘The weather continues cold, but sunny’: the turn away from care, which would be tasteless in a poem called ‘On the Death of my Uncle’, is made possible by epistolary protocol, which is in this sense *unpoetic*. Another solacing convention is that of submitting to the circumstances of writing – claiming that one must write in haste or cut oneself short. Jane Austen parodies such manoeuvres in an early epistolary story, ‘Amelia Webster’:

Dear Maud

I write now to inform you that I did not stop at your house in my way to Bath last Monday. – I have many things to inform you of besides; but my Paper reminds me of concluding; & beleive me yrs ever &c.

Amelia Webster¹²

'My paper reminds me of concluding' would not be a sufficient explanation for a poem or an essay that said nothing at all. But cutting oneself short is not only allowed, but expected from letter-writers; there is a reason why condolence cards are so tiny as to leave almost no room for a message.

When one writes a letter, therefore, one is submitting, but often gladly submitting, to the inevitable and all-powerful conventions of a letter. In this sense Jane Fairfax's invocation of the post office is not essentially different from an invocation of the weather: both involve submission to an indisputable force. For the whole postal system has often been viewed as a sort of deity or juggernaut. For Thomas De Quincey, the postal system in the form of the English Mail Coach was a near-omnipotent power, at once thrilling and deadly.¹³ (In our own time we have the example of *Miracle on 34th Street*, the old Christmas favorite, at the end of which the post office, rather than the court system, is allowed to determine identity – specifically, the identity of Santa Claus.) Such a perception of the power of the postal system lends a sense of resignation to the very act of letter-writing. Consider, for instance, this post-script from a letter of Keats to Fanny Brawne: 'I know before night I shall curse myself for having sent you so cold a Letter; yet it is better to do it as much as in my senses as possible' (II, p. 124). Keats's confused haste ('as much as in my senses as possible') conveys beautifully the excitement of the moment of submission – the moment when one drops the valentine into the mailbox and thinks, 'It is out of my hand; the letter legally belongs to the post office now; there is nothing I can do.' Every letter is thus, in a sense, a letter of resignation.

Yet even once we have recognized that letters and letter-writing may often impose restrictions on the self rather than enabling the writer to transcend

limitations, it may still seem strange to turn our attention to Keats's letters. Keats, the possessor of an 'unmisgiving' imagination, the man of Negative Capability, willing to work on in spite of doubts and uncertainties, is the last person one would suspect of practicing submission, with its implications of lack of effort or ambition.¹⁴ Moreover, since Keats's letters are almost the only prose of his we have, and since they have at times received as much or even more critical attention than the verse, it is fair to say that the image of Keats as the champion of imaginative transcendence derives in great part from his letters. The image has of course been deconstructed, historicized, and qualified often¹⁵, but I wish to do something rather different: to show from the letters that side by side with the transcendent Keats there coexisted a being who was eager to take advantage of the letter's limitations, of the 'Weather continues cold, but sunny' option. This same Keats, who seems indifferent only in comparison to the mythologized hyper-sensitive Keats, is also evident in the mature poetry, notably *The Eve of St. Agnes*.

Consider for instance the long journal letter to George and Georgiana Keats of December 1818 – January 1819, which exemplifies what De Quincey calls 'the graces which belong to the epistolary form'¹⁶ – spontaneity, freedom, familiarity. It contains familiar Keatsian reflections on the sublime and invigorating force of imagination, in the form of the poems 'Fancy' and 'Bards of Passion and of Mirth', the latter of which 'is on the double immortality of Poets' (II, p. 25). But it also contains, at the beginning, the very worst news that Keats ever heard, or had to impart: the death of his brother Tom. It is extraordinary, given this beginning, that the great majority of the letter reads just like any other letter of Keats: it jumps from subject to subject with fine carelessness, and never

refers again to any subject it has left. One might expect that Keats, who was writing poems about immortality at the time of the letter, would have some consolation to give to his brother George; and indeed he does manage one vague sentence: 'I have scarce a doubt of immortality of some nature o[r] other'.¹⁷ But most of the comfort he gives and takes comes from moving on to other subjects. He dwells as briefly as possible – a few sentences – on the circumstances of Tom's death before hurriedly passing to his own circumstances and asking news of George's: 'I will tell you as nearly as possible how all go on How are you going on now? The going[s] on of the world make me dizzy –'.¹⁸ The dizziness inspired by "going on" was Keats's best medicine; he moves within a page from family news to Shakespeare to the hygienic habits of Eskimos, and never looks back.

Even in actually breaking the news of the death, Keats takes advantage of one of the limitations of written correspondence in order to ease the shock, especially for himself. George and Georgiana were in America when Keats wrote, and his letter would not reach them for weeks or months – a circumstance, as Charles Lamb points out in his essay on 'Distant Correspondents', that a letter-writer must consider:

[W]hat security can I have that what I now send you for truth shall not before you get it unaccountably turn into a lie? . . . [N]ews from me must become history to you No person, under a diviner, can with any prospect of veracity conduct a correspondence at such an arm's length. Two prophets, indeed, might thus interchange intelligence with effect; the epoch of the writer (Habakkuk) falling in with the true present time of the receiver (Daniel); but then we are no prophets.¹⁹

Lamb's invocation of the prophets calls to mind the transcendent biblical model of epistolarity (though his jocular reference is to the Old Testament, not to Paul) and reminds us how far modern letters fall short of the ideal. But what for Lamb is an annoyance – the double time-frame involved in epistolary communication – is for Keats a relief. He could not, unfortunately, hope that his news would 'unaccountably turn into a lie' as it crossed the Atlantic; but he could hope that the effect would be mitigated by the time-lapse: 'My dear Brother and Sister, You will have been prepared, before this reaches you for the worst news you could have, nay if Haslam's letter arrives in proper time, I have a consolation in thinking the first shock will be past before you receive this'. For once Keats actively wishes to have been pre-empted. In these circumstances, to be belated is a source not of anxiety but of comfort; and it is the letter that makes such comfort a possibility.

Keats's use of the letter-writer's prerogatives (changing the subject, cutting oneself short) in order to avoid unpleasant news is by no means unconscious. A few months earlier, when Tom's illness had taken a turn for the worse, Keats deployed these same tactics, self-consciously using a digression about letter-writing to postpone the sad message:

I have a few things to say to you and would fain begin upon them in this fo[u]rth line: but I have a Mind too well regulated to proceed upon any thing without due preliminary remarks So how can I with any face begin without a dissertation on letter writing – Yet when I consider that a sheet of paper contains room only for three pages, and a half how can I do justice to such a pregnant subject? (I, p. 367)

He manages to stretch out his 'dissertation on letter writing' by drawing up a table showing the different types of letters, thus filling as much space as possible. At last he comes out with 'I wish I could say Tom was any better', resigning himself more easily to the communication when he has only a page and a half left on which to write.

Even in Keats's most celebrated letters, those which have established the terms by which we discuss not just Keats's imagination but the Romantic imagination, we find the same evasive tactics. The famous 'Adam's dream' passage, in which Keats asserts that 'What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not', is used, surprisingly enough, as a means of avoiding the issue. The letter begins with advice to Bailey on how to deal with a painful slight he has received, but cuts itself off to discuss imagination instead:

But I am running my head into a Subject which I am certain I could not do justice to under five years s[t]udy and 3 vols octavo – and moreover long to be talking about the Imagination – so my dear Bailey do not think of this unpleasant affair if possible – do not – . . . it will all go on well. (I, p. 184)

We might expect Keats's thoughts on Imagination to provide a response to Bailey's difficulties – advising him either to re-imagine the world until his fancy becomes truth, or at least to escape and lose himself in the glories of a fantasy world. But the above passage reveals a surprising willingness to rely not on the powers of imagination, but on the less ambitious expedient of sheer evasion. Keats's explicit response to the unpleasant situation makes use of the same epistolary devices we have already noticed: a change of subject for lack of space;

'going on'; and the advice simply not to think about it. Keats's letters are as much about running away from the world as about re-imagining it; the passage about the 'Mansion of Many Apartments', for instance, is preceded by this:

So you see how I have run away from Wordsworth, and Milton; and shall still run away from what was in my head, to observe, that some kind of letters are good squares others handsome ovals, and others some orbicular, others spheroid If I scribble long letters I must play my vagaries. (I, p. 278)

One does not usually picture Keats 'running away' from the challenge of Milton and Wordsworth, or from his own thoughts; but that is exactly what letters, as a genre and as a subject, allow him on occasion to do.

I do not mean to imply that there is utter disagreement between the passages about the redemptive power of poetic imagination and the ones I have been quoting. But it is only by looking at the moments in his letters when Keats uses epistolary conventions to help him shirk his subject that we can fully appreciate the more familiar passages. It does no real discredit to Keats to say that he sometimes longed to avoid confronting unpleasant truths (although it might tarnish the image of him as a 'hero' to which his letters gave rise²⁰); far from sullyng him, Keats's claim to be allowed to 'play [his] vagaries' humanizes him. Keats's picture of the poet as a being possessed of so strong an imaginative sympathy with others that 'he has no Identity . . . he has no self' (I, p. 387) is too extreme to be taken literally. But if we incorporate the note of submission into these claims – recognize, that is, that Keats's 'camelion poet' not only transcends self but at the same time relievedly resigns accountability for himself – then we are suddenly able to take Keats's figure, if not literally, yet seriously. In the letter

to Bailey containing the passage on 'Adam's dream' – a passage which, as we have already noted, is intended to distract Bailey from his worries, not to confront or resolve them – appears the following claim about selflessness:

The setting sun will always set me to rights – or if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existance and pick about the Gravel. The first thing that strikes me on hea[r]ing a Misfortune having befallen another is this. 'Well it cannot be helped.' (I, p. 186)

The first sentence is often quoted, the second almost never; but they are in fact inseparable. Not only does self-transcendent identification with the sparrow coexist with submission and evasion, it depends upon them. The imaginative going out of self takes place only when the self can then be sheltered in a safely delimited form: a sparrow, a chameleon, or – a letter. 'If I scribble long letters I must play my vagaries': 'must', because the letter's 'direct communication of spirit' (as Keats calls it) would otherwise be too strong, leave the writer too vulnerable; it needs to be balanced with a measure of helpless indifference.

These moments when Keats uses letters to resign full agency indicate his humanity, in that they reveal a man who was at times 'most unpoetical', not composing or dreaming or even blushing, but merely trying to avoid or postpone a painful admission.²¹ They also indicate what might be called his humanism. Keats willingly accepts the non-transcendent, non-Pauline aspects of correspondence, just as he willingly engages in a very secular form of resignation – resignation in this case to the demands of letter-writing.²² A Keats who runs away seems somehow less extraordinary, less mythical, and that may explain in part why criticism has not paid attention to this aspect of his letters; but it cannot be the full explanation. The reason for this neglect is rather that Keats's

submission makes him seem less ambitious, and therefore a less important object of criticism; to admit that evasive tactics are sometimes necessary is to reduce the claims made for the ability of the poetic imagination to conquer any difficulty. But we should take Keats at his word when he says that 'the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is famed to do'; his letters show that when fancy was insufficient, Keats was ready to turn to more mundane remedies – cutting himself short, changing the subject, hoping to be pre-empted. And the same tactics are to be found in his verse.

The Feel of Not to Feel It

The submission and evasion of the letters is *not* echoed, for the most part, in Keats's versified letters and epistolary poems; but this should not surprise us. When I burst into song, I do not (if I can help it) burst into atonal song, even though atonal music is an important sub-genre of twentieth-century music. Nor should we expect Keats's letters when they leap into verse, or Keats's poems when they adopt epistolary form, to display indifference, which is after all a secondary characteristic of letters. Thus although a significant proportion of Keats's earliest poems (such as 'To my Brother George') are 'like letters' in that they have 'explicit and singular addressees'²³, they do not take advantage of epistolary deflections; indeed, these are the poems that seem to maintain the most untroubled faith in the sufficiency of imagination for all situations. The earliest verse in which these epistolary tactics do become apparent are the lines 'To J. H. Reynolds, Esq.', which form part of an actual letter to Reynolds and which Keats did not intend for publication. The poem resembles the earlier

poems in its initial exaltation of the power of fancy, but at the end can not prevent the encroachment of unpleasant realities:

Still do I that most fierce destruction see,
 The shark at savage prey – the hawk at pounce,
 The gentle Robin, like a pard or ounce,
 Ravening a worm – Away, ye horrid moods [. . .]
 Do you get health – and Tom the same – I'll dance,
 And from detested moods in new Romance
 Take refuge – Of bad lines a Centaine dose

Is sure enough – and so “here follows prose.” – (I, pp. 262-3)

The shifts resemble those of the earlier letter to Bailey: Keats's sympathetic participation with the robin, as with the sparrow, quickly grows too intense – its 'identity' presses upon him – and he shifts subject. Once again his sympathy leads him to think first of those to whom 'a Misfortune [has] befallen', in this case Reynolds and Tom, and again he turns to 'refuge' from the thought.

Although he suggests soothing himself with poetry ('new Romance' refers to *Isabella*, which he was writing at the time), his actual refuge is 'prose': he uses two epistolary devices (cutting himself short and changing the topic), and finishes his letter with a discussion of the weather: 'The Rain is Come on again' (I, p. 263). This self-solacing abandonment of the ambitions of poetry – the final lines, in contrast to the rhapsodic ekphrasis earlier in the poem, are merely a versified 'my paper reminds me of concluding' – represents the first integration of epistolary devices into the verse.

A different form of submission appears at the beginning of *The Eve of St. Agnes* as the basis for the ritual that Madeline performs: young virgins are meant

to turn away from the world 'And couch supine their beauties, lily white; / Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require / Of Heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire' (52-4).²⁴ This is a rather exalted form of submission, the self-abnegation that traditionally precedes a trance or vision; but it does not remain exalted for long. When the reality of the world, in the shape of Porphyro, encroaches upon this mystery, Madeline abandons her transcendent hopes, but not her methods. Her reaction to the revelation of Porphyro's treachery is unsettling, even uncanny, because it is a repetition in a coarser tone of the Christian resignation with which she began, now forcibly secularized into something close to insensitivity:

No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!

Porphyro will leave me here to fade and pine. –

Cruel! what traitor could thee hither bring?

I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine. (328-331)

What begins as a betrayed woman's rant or refrain (the first line has an incantatory rhythm reminiscent of Martha Ray) is suddenly cut off by the wholly unexpected 'I curse not'. The moment is astounding: none of Madeline's actions can have prepared the reader for her self-censorship, nor for her explanation. The reason she gives for falling silent rather than continuing to pour forth Ovidian reproaches ('Cruel!' 'traitor') is not, as some readers have thought, that she has achieved the lover of her dreams, but rather that she has 'lost heart' for such a passionate reaction. Critics who looked for a parallel to Madeline's awaking in the letter to Bailey were looking in the right letter, but at the wrong place²⁵; Madeline seems to have read not the passage on Adam's dream, but rather Keats's advice that precedes it: 'do not think of this unpleasant affair if

possible – do not – I defy any harm to come of it – I defy – ... it will all go on well'. 'Going on', which distracted and so solaced Keats after Tom's death, is exactly the tactic Madeline employs.

Madeline's sudden acceptance of her situation, her conscious decision to curse not (and die not), and her willingness to forget the past constitute the crucial act of submission in the poem. It recalls similar moments of more or less conscious resignation of agency earlier in the poem ('she heeded not . . . she saw not' [59, 62]), but taken to such an extreme as to be qualitatively different. Earlier she had submitted to privation in the hopes of making dreams come true; now she submits to the inevitable disappointment of such hopes. Her act is not, however, unique in the poem, though it is the most surprising and has caused the greatest amount of critical disagreement. The second major crux, the much-revised and much-discussed stanza 36 (the sexual consummation), immediately precedes Madeline's awakening and contains a similar act of disappointed submission on the part of Porphyro. This may sound strange, since he seems to get exactly what he wants in this stanza; but as Leon Waldoff argues, sex with Madeline is not exactly what Porphyro wanted.²⁶ Porphyro's original plan, on learning of the St. Agnes ritual, is to achieve transfiguration, to become part of Madeline's dream. His hope is disingenuous, of course, since he plans to orchestrate his own sublimation, but it still represents an imaginative, even artistic means of persuasion. When he is unable to wake Madeline from her sleep and is on the point of failing utterly, he next aspires to the drowsy numbness or swoon to which Keats also turns when fancy fails him: 'Open thine eyes, for meek St Agnes' sake, / Or I shall drowse beside thee, so my soul doth

ache' (278-9). What he achieves, however, is neither an imaginative resolution nor a sublime dissolution, but a much messier 'solution', as stanza 36 suggests:

Into her dream he melted, as the rose
 Blendeth its odour with the violet, –
 Solution sweet: meantime the frost-wind blows
 Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet
 Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set. (320-4)

What is the valence of 'solution' in these lines? Following 'melted' and 'blendeth' it at first suggests an ethereal and fluid intermingling, but this connotation does not last long – only the length of a caesura. A post-lapsarian Miltonic rainstorm immediately intrudes, and the icy 'sleet', which fails to rhyme with 'violet' and 'set', picks up instead the sounds of 'solution sweet', a mocking echo that is then repeated when 'sleet' becomes the initial rhyme-word of the next stanza. The sweet solution is thus quickly revealed to be a false potion, whose effects soon wear off and reveal the other, more mundane or even tawdry meanings of 'solution': a compromise, a fallback, a trick.

Porphyro's 'Solution' occupies the same position in the stanza as Madeline's 'I curse not', and performs, if viewed correctly, the same function. To see this moment as signifying the resignation of high aspirations involves giving Porphyro credit for psychological complexity and sensitivity – an interpretation for which the poem gives ample warrant. Porphyro resembles Keats at this moment: not only does he sing 'La belle dame sans mercy', but his 'drows[y] . . . soul doth ache' like that of the speaker of 'Ode on Melancholy'. Meanwhile, his 'warm, unnervèd arm' (280) on Madeline's pillow resembles the 'nerveless' arm of Saturn, another would-be poet-figure who wishes to 'fashion forth' a world

out of his imagination but fails, thwarted by physical limitations (*Hyperion* I, 18, 142). If we consider Porphyro as a poet, even as Keats's alter ego, who hoped either to enchant his love or else swoon to death, then his failure to do either and his forced reliance on a debasing stratagem look less like a salacious triumph than a concession to necessity and a recognition of his loss of agency. Agency, indeed, has been slipping away from Porphyro until he, like Madeline before him, has come to resemble a statue ('smooth-sculptured stone' [297]). But the culmination comes when Porphyro, like a desperate letter-writer, abandons himself to whatever solution is at his disposal.

Keats's usual recourse when the imagination somehow fails, as I have mentioned, is death or numb oblivion, in poems from 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' to 'Ode to a Nightingale' to 'Bright Star'. Both options (imagination and oblivion) have a sublime or transcendental or, in a general sense, poetic quality to them. This is not true of the third option and final resort, mere 'solution' or indifference. Keats himself draws this distinction in his other great 'winter' poem, 'In drear-nighted December':

But were there ever any
 Writh'd not of passed joy?
 The feel of not to feel it,
 When there is none to heal it,
 Nor numbed sense to steel it,
 Was never said in rhyme. (19-24)

Never *yet* said in rhyme, perhaps. But not long afterwards Keats would create Madeline and Porphyro, and express in rhyme the feel of not to feel it. Both characters, faced with disappointments (though of very different magnitudes²⁷),

find themselves unable either to 'heal' them or to numb themselves through death or swooning, and so cope in a more unpoetic fashion. Their approach is epistolary: when they fail to transcend the limits of subjectivity, they change the subject. But what in Keats's letters is inconspicuous ('I will speak of something else or my Spleen will get higher' [I, p. 179]) becomes in his poetry an anomaly, a source of scandal and debate.

I mentioned at the beginning that the characters' seeming insensitivity at the climax of the plot is echoed in the poem's final stanza. This parallel was pointed out by Michael Ragussis:

The unsettling effect of the poem's conclusion begins to look like an integral part of the poem when we realize that it parallels the poem's central action. By this I mean that the reader's surprised awakening in the last stanza from a simple romance of happy love (that is all the poem has pretended to be) resembles Madeline's own awakening to a cold winter storm and the prospect that she has been deceived.²⁸

Ragussis goes on to equate Madeline's reaction not only with that of the reader but with the final gesture of the poet, and this latter I believe is the crucial similarity. The poet's abrupt dismissal of the characters whom he has followed and scrutinized in such detail (down to the color of their eyelids) gives the reader one last shock. Up until the final stanza the present tense has alternated with the past almost indiscriminately; hence 'And they are gone' looks at first like an historical present, referring to the time of the story. The jolt that follows – 'ay, ages long ago / These lovers fled away' – reveals that the preceding phrase refers to the present time (they are now gone, vanished), and sets the fictional time and characters all at once at an immense distance. This sudden withdrawal by the

poet, or narrator²⁹, may strike the reader as an unfeeling act: the abrupt replacement of Madeline and Porphyro by Angela and the Beadsman (who are then grotesquely killed off) offended Woodhouse. But the main characters' parallel acts provide not only a model but an impetus for this one. Porphyro's messy compromise rules out any purely happy ending, and Madeline's refusal to die in traditional poetic fashion precludes the usual tragic ending to a romance of betrayed love. If Keats's abandonment of his own characters seems unpoetic in its evasiveness, that is because rhyme has no established way of dealing with the feel of not to feel it.³⁰ So Keats deploys instead the more prosaic tactics of the letter-writer: he wraps up his characters, directs them to a certain address ('o'er the southern moors'), and sends them posting. His final gesture is to drop them in a poetic mailbox like a nervous valentine – 'There – they are out of my hands now – there is no more I can do.'

'The most unpoetical of any thing in existence'

In the first half of this essay I argued that submission and evasion were forms of indifference associated with the post. My reading of *The Eve of St. Agnes* associates these categories also with the 'post-': the post-coital and post-humous, that is, and the disappointment that comes with what Keats calls 'passed joy'. Keats's poem joins these modes together upon the hinge of anti-climax. Anti-climax had already figured in Romantic poetry in the Simplon Pass episode of Wordsworth's (yet unpublished) *Prelude*. But where Wordsworth recuperates the moment of disappointment by invoking the Imagination to convert failure itself into an instance of the sublime, Keats treats such moments indifferently. Anti-climax is neither deplored nor celebrated but merely accepted. *The Eve of St.*

Agnes is a poem for and about people whose lives – and letters – creep on alike after moments of great disappointment or great happiness.

The poem thus militates, however unobtrusively, against its own status as a romance. Like Porphyro, the reader enters the poem expecting to find either love or death; like Madeline, the reader awakes from the climax to find neither – only bitter anti-climax to which she must submit. Keats then repeats his characters' acts of submission in a final stanza that cuts short the story and changes the subject by shifting attention to the minor characters. It is possible to sublimate even these anomalous moments: Wasserman's reading is so seductive because it performs for *The Eve of St. Agnes* what Wordsworth did for himself in the Simplon Pass episode. But Keats provides no retrospective imaginative justification for the disappointment of his poem. In the midst of his gorgeous verse he admits the elements of an *unpoetic* world, the world of letter-writers who change the subject, of lovers for whom consummation is neither heaven nor hell, but a vague disappointment to be dealt with and left behind.

The tempting retort would be that if there is a definition of poetry that excludes Keats and *The Eve of St. Agnes* then that definition must be changed; and indeed I believe that Keats, together with his contemporaries³¹, *did* change notions of poetry to include modes of indifference. But we should also remember that at the time that he was writing his most important letters and poems, Keats considered *himself* to be unpoetic. His claim that 'A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence' (I, p. 387) is not usually taken to reflect his opinion of his verse, but only of his life; Keats seems to maintain the traditional distinction between the nature of a poet and the nature of his work: a poet can logically be unpoetical, though a poem can not. This distinction would

be satisfactory were it not that Keats so often represents poets, and notably himself, in his verse; and this fact requires us, I believe, to scrutinize Keats's claim a little more closely. The assertion that poets are characterless and unpoetical is part of an argument intended to convince Woodhouse that Keats can not be held responsible for what he has said. This shrinking from accountability qualifies Keats in his epistolary mode for the title of 'unpoetical', at least according to his own definition. Indeed, the whole passage is self-fulfilling: a poet who, far from claiming that his words are immortal, wishes his words to be ignored, and therefore invents an argument about unpoetical or 'camelion' poets, has already shown himself to be no poet in any traditional sense.³²

Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion* is therefore only echoing the sentiments of Keats the letter-writer when she tells the narrator that he is no true poet. In fact, Keats's introduction of himself as a major character in a narrative poem has very much the same effect as the introduction of that other unpoetical character, Madeline. According to 'In drear-nighted December' the traditional realms of poetry include 'healing' misery and giving way before it ('numbed sense'). But although the narrator of *The Fall of Hyperion* is at first threatened by numbness and almost dies, he stubbornly refuses to give way, and (like Madeline) survives. 'Thou hast felt / What 'tis to die and live again', Moneta tells him (I, 141-2). We may believe that he has thus survived the threat posed by the 'miseries of the world' because he is a poet, and can 'heal' them so far as to reach what Keats and Wasserman call the 'bourne of heaven'. But he falls short of this ideal: the true poet 'pours out a balm upon the world', Moneta says; Keats (the character) merely 'vexes it' (I, 201-2). Like Madeline, he falls between the two extremes: too

energetic to expire but unable to be cured through imagination, not a poet but 'a dreamer'. Thus Moneta's accusation, which otherwise seems so strange (how can Keats be other than a poet?), makes sense in the light of the parallel with Madeline and with the letter to Woodhouse: Keats is not a poet but a letter-writer; when he can neither 'heal' nor 'steel', he chooses 'not to feel', to submit to the necessity of pain rather than to overcome it.

Thus Moneta, Jack Stillinger, Richard Woodhouse, and Keats all seem to agree that there is an element in Keats's poetry, and most especially perhaps in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, that is unpoetic. One could react to this element negatively, as Woodhouse did, asserting that it ruins an otherwise good poem. Or one could go the opposite way, as modern critics are likely to do, and assert that the anti-romantic elements in Keats are deeply subversive of generic norms, and so constitute admirable poetic innovations. I believe the latter position to be closer to the truth, though not quite accurate. All through this essay I have used the term 'unpoetic' rather than the critical workhorse 'subversive', not only because it is Keats's own term for himself but because it reflects more exactly the nature of his distinction. The tactics deployed in *The Eve of St. Agnes* do not undermine or redefine the reader's expectations so much as disappoint them. Keats does indeed expand our notions of what poetry can include, but he extends them downward rather than upward.

Whether or not the duality of *The Eve of St. Agnes* is directly modelled after Keats's letters is impossible to prove or disprove and is, strictly speaking, irrelevant. Whether or not they provide the model, letters provide a parallel to the poem much closer than any 'higher' or more poetic genre. In the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth had claimed that poetry is to be found

among humble people and in common language, both (he asserted) heretofore excluded from poetic consideration. But Wordsworth's democratizing manifesto did not set poetry open to all aspects of human experience, but only to those in which the passions are particularly excited. Keats, though without fanfare, went one step further, and found romance even in submission and evasion, in dispassion and anti-climax – in short, in indifference, that most unpoetic of moods.

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¹ See Woodhouse's letter to John Taylor, in *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), II, pp. 161-5. This edition of the letters is hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text.

² Woodhouse certainly believed Porphyro's action to constitute a rape. Keats leaves the issue more uncertain; nevertheless, I have throughout this essay used words such as 'rape' and 'betrayal' to describe Madeline's unquestionably unhappy ordeal, rather than trying to equivocate in each instance.

³ Madeline is not, however, unique. Major parallels in Romantic poetry include the Solitary in *The Excursion*, who should have died of grief as the Wanderer believes he has in Book II, and Byron's Don Juan.

⁴ The critical debate over the poem is so familiar and so extensive that instead of running through the usual litany of names (Wasserman, Stillinger, Sperry, etc.), I refer the reader to Jack Stillinger, 'Multiple Readers, Multiple Texts, Multiple Keats', *JEGP*, 96 (1997). pp. 545-566, and his forthcoming book on the poem's

critical heritage, *Reading "The Eve of St. Agnes": The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction*.

⁵ Jane Austen, *Works*, ed. by R. W. Chapman, vol. IV: *Emma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 296, 41.

⁶ Herbert F. Tucker, Jr., writes brilliantly about the contradictions of weather in Tennyson's 'St. Simeon Stylites'. Simeon strives to achieve sanctity, yet his bid for canonization is dependent upon meteorology: 'Every recapitulation of his weather-beaten agon confirms a defeated dependence upon the external contexts that his flagging sense of self obliges him perennially to withstand'; resignation to this dependence is one of the 'furious denials, on Simeon's part, that he bears responsibility for anything'; 'From Monomania to Monologue', *Victorian Poetry*, 22 (1984), pp. 131, 127). Simeon's denial of responsibility is just a hysterical version of Knightley's 'Shall we have rain?' – an invocation of a higher power as a justification of irresponsibility, or irresponsiveness.

⁷ Cécile Dauphin, "Letter-Writing Manuals in the Nineteenth Century," in Roger Chartier, et al., *Correspondence: Models of Letter-Writing from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century*, tr. by Christopher Woodall (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), p. 132.

⁸ William C. Dowling, *The Epistolary Moment: The Poetics of the Eighteenth-Century Verse Epistle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 38.

⁹ Thomas J. McCarthy, *Relationships of Sympathy: The Writer and the Reader in British Romanticism* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997), pp. 87, 94.

¹⁰ Mary Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics, and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 7.

¹¹ See Susan J. Wolfson, 'Keats the Letter-Writer: Epistolary Poetics', *Romanticism Past and Present*, 6 (1982), pp. 43-61, especially pages 44-6 on what the article calls (in a felicitous misprint) 'the flexibility of letter-writing'. Wolfson provides an excellent discussion of the poetic nature of Keats's letters, with which my own account of the epistolary nature of the poetry coincides at many points.

¹² Austen, *Works*, ed. by Chapman, vol. VI: *Minor Works* (1954), p. 48.

¹³ The deadly power of the mail, in the form of a mail-coach, reappears in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, chapter 4. Tess later reveals another aspect of the submission involved in sending off a letter: the possibility that the dangerous letter will never arrive. Tess did not *intend* her letter to Angel in chapter 33 to miscarry, nor did she probably even reflect upon the possibility; but when it does fail to reach its destination, she 'jump[s]' to accept the fact as fated.

¹⁴ The statement about Negative Capability 'has often been taken to express the prevailing principle of Keats's thought', Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 62, and has just as often been queried and complicated. Still, this perception of the importance of Negative Capability for Keats rightly persists, supported by many other passages in the letters, such as the assertion that what is best in human nature is the impulse 'by which a Man is propell'd to act and strive and buffet with circumstance' (I, p. 210).

¹⁵ Marjorie Levinson notably undertakes all three operations at once, curbing and questioning most earlier criticism, heterogeneous as that criticism was. 'The poetic I describe, following the lead of Keats's contemporaries, is the opposite of "unmisgiving"'. Yet her Keats remains transcendent: 'The triumph of the great

poetry is . . . its subversion of those authoritarian values'; see *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (London: Blackwell, 1988), p. 5.

¹⁶ Thomas De Quincey, *Literary Reminiscences* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1851), I, p. 240.

¹⁷ II, p. 4. 'Scarce a doubt' and 'of some nature' are hardly wholehearted; and as Rollins points out, Keats expresses serious doubts when he himself falls sick a year and a half later.

¹⁸ II, pp. 4, 5. Immediately after this last phrase Keats admits, 'sometimes I fancy an immense separation, and sometimes, as at present, a direct communication of spirit with you'. This seems to me to put two aspects of letter-writing into a single sentence: the letter at once brings two people into communication, and also reminds them of their distance, which (as I argue below) can be a comfort. The ambiguity of the word 'fancy' is notable: not only does Keats sometimes *imagine* an immense distance, he sometimes *desires* it.

¹⁹ Charles Lamb, *Selected Prose*, ed. by Adam Phillips (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 137-9.

²⁰ Lionel Trilling wrote in 1951 that 'because of the letters it is impossible to think of Keats only as a poet – inevitably we think of him as something even more interesting than a poet, we think of him as a man, and as a certain kind of man, a hero'; see 'The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters', *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking, 1955), pp. 3-4.

²¹ Christopher Ricks's brilliant study, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), also sets out to 'humanize' Keats, but its method is the opposite of mine. Two of Ricks's basic premises are, first, that art deals with

difficult or 'embarrassing' situations 'not by abolishing or ignoring' them, but just the reverse; and second, that Keats was 'especially sensitive' to such situations and displayed 'insight and human concern' (p. 1). Ricks sought to correct the image of Keats the dreamer by showing his sensitive involvement with mundane minutiae; I wish to temper this image of the sensitive Keats by pointing to his moments of evasion.

²² It is always a surprise when one reads through Keats's letters to encounter the one to Fanny Keats in which he instructs her in her catechism (II, pp. 49-51). Keats's letters may not always be resigned, but they are so consistently secular that this letter stands out as an anomaly.

²³ Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 65.

²⁴ All quotations refer to *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978).

²⁵ The critical reading of the Adam's dream passage as an allegory for Keats's poetry is associated above all with Wasserman, but has survived into more recent decades: 'Keats's use of Adam's dream as a paradigm for the imagination is really paradigmatic for the way his own imagination works'; see Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 57-8.

²⁶ See Waldoff, pp. 64-71.

²⁷ I do not mean to play down the difference: Porphyro means to win Madeline imaginatively, and when he is disappointed in this quest he seduces her physically, whereas Madeline, who had put her trust in heaven, is 'disappointed'

of her hope in a far more painful sense. If I do not make more of this important distinction, it is because I think we are in no danger of forgetting it. Stillinger's skepticism about Porphyro's actions has been expanded by subsequent critics; see, for instance, Beverly Fields, 'Keats and the Tongueless Nightingale: Some Unheard Melodies in *The Eve of St. Agnes*', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 14 (1983), pp. 246-250.

²⁸ Michael Ragussis, 'Narrative Structure and the Problem of the Divided Reader in *The Eve of St. Agnes*', *English Literary History*, 42 (1975) pp. 378-394, quoting p. 380. This article deserves to be listed together with Stillinger and Sperry as one of the chief contributions to the ongoing critical debate.

²⁹ Although it is of course inadvisable to equate the narrator with the poet, at this moment it seems to me that their interests are the same – to shock the reader by what Woodhouse calls a sudden 'Change of Sentiment'. This change is in the narrator's interests as a means of incorporating (though not resolving) the conflicting strands of the narrative into a single conclusion, and in Keats's interest as a way of expressing what Bennett calls his 'anxiety of audience'. See Bennett, pp. 23-4, and also Margaret Homans, 'Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats', *Studies in Romanticism*, 29 (1990), pp. 341-70.

³⁰ In fact, there are very close precedents for this unsettling messiness and seeming disregard for characters in Shakespeare's so-called 'problem plays'. The 'problem' with *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well that Ends Well* lies in the audience's discomfort with the tawdriness of the bed-trick (a solution similar to Porphyro's) and with fact that the heroine ends up with a man who is unworthy of her. But the disregard belongs first to the heroine. Mariana's 'I crave no other,

nor no better man' (*Measure for Measure* V, 1, 419) is ambiguous: it could mean that she is so transported as to believe Angelo the best of husbands; but it more likely means that she realizes she has no choice, and is resigned to getting nothing better. The parallel to Madeline, who may be read as achieving a much-desired union at the end, but who more likely (I think) merely makes the best of it, is supported by the famous echo of *Measure for Measure* IV, i, 31-2 ('upon the heavy / Middle of the night') in line 49 ('Upon the honeyed middle of the night').

³¹ The most notable contemporary example of poetic indifference is Byron's *Don Juan*, whose hero is, like Madeline, a survivor of heartbreak that would usually kill a romance hero.

³² See David Luke, 'Keats's Letters: Fragments of an Aesthetic of Fragments', *Genre*, 11 (1978), pp. 209-26, especially pages 217-19, for a discussion of Keats's paradox and its significance for modern theories of the relationship between writer and writing.