

## *Keats at Sonnets*

by *Edward Hirsch*

Between 1814 and 1819, John Keats wrote sixty-four sonnets. He was eighteen years old when he composed his first sonnet; he was turning twenty-four when he completed his last one. He restlessly experimented with the fourteen-line form and used it to plunge into (and explore) his emotional depths. You can sit down and read these poems in a single night and have a complete Keatsian experience—he breathes close and offers himself to us; his presence is near. You can also read them throughout your adulthood and never really get to the bottom of them. These short, durable poems are filled with the mysteries of poetry.

In the sonnets, Keats conveys the range of his interests, his concerns, his attachments, his obsessions. Some are light and improvisatory, tossed off in fifteen minutes, a moment's thought. Some are polemics, or romantic period pieces; others are brooding testaments or compulsive outpourings, which seem to expand on the page. These sonnets are replete with a sensuous feeling for nature—"The poetry of earth is never dead"—that looks back to Wordsworth and forward to Frost. They also luxuriate in the spaces of imagination—"Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold"—and trigger the daydreaming capacities of the mind.

Keats came of age in the midst of a full-scale revival of the sonnet form, which had fallen into disfavor and dis-

use in the latter half of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries. By the time he sat down to write his second known poem, “On Peace” (1814), an irregular or hybrid sonnet celebrating the peace between England and France (“With England’s happiness proclaim Europa’s liberty”), the sonnet had become a widely used poetic form of the Romantic era. For example, Wordsworth, who looked back to Milton, composed more than five hundred sonnets in his long life. “In sundry moods, ’twas pastime to be bound,” he confessed in a sonnet about the sonnet form, “Within the Sonnet’s scanty plot of ground.”

Keats’s first book, *Poems* (1817), comprises a substantial number of sonnets—twenty-one in all. This work shows how vigorously he applied himself to the Petrarchan sonnet, which consists of an octave (*abbaabba*) and a sestet (*cdecde*). The Petrarchan structure invites an asymmetrical division of an argument. It tends to create an obsessive feeling in the first section and then to respond to that feeling—to let it loose—in the second part. It builds the pressure in the first eight lines, turns, and then releases that pressure in the final six lines. Keats was temperamentally drawn to one of the key emotional archetypes of the Petrarchan love sonnet, which creates, as Paul Fussell suggests, “the pattern of sexual pressure and release.” He also determined to master the binary structure as a form for meditation, a vessel for internal dialogue and debate.

Keats's self-directed apprenticeship was at least partly conducted under the stimulus of Leigh Hunt, who cultivated the Petrarchan or Italian form. At Enfield School, Keats eagerly absorbed and embraced the liberal principles developed in Hunt's weekly reform-minded newspaper, the *Examiner*, some of which he commemorated in his early sonnet on Hunt's release from prison in 1815. Both Keats and Hunt "sympathized with the lowest commonplace." After they met, in October 1816, Keats wrote three extemporaneous poems in sonnet contests instigated by Hunt: "On the Grasshopper and Cricket," "On Receiving a Laurel Crown from Leigh Hunt," and "To the Nile." In fact, Keats composed a couple of early sonnets—"On Leaving Some Friends at an Early Hour" and "Keen, fitful gusts are whip'ring here and there"—at Hunt's cottage in the Vale of Health, Hampstead. Hunt's influence on Keats's poetry is evident until 1817.

Charles Cowden Clarke, the son of Keats's schoolmaster and one of his closest friends, tells how Keats wrote out the dedicatory sonnet "To Leigh Hunt, Esq." in one sitting, without a single alteration. "He was surrounded by several of his friends when the last proof-sheet of his little book was brought in; and he was requested to send the dedication, if he intended one. He went to a side-table, and in a few minutes, while all had been talking, he returned and read the Dedicatory Sonnett. . . . The subject of this Sonnett may have lain in the bud of his mind, and had blossomed at his then bidding."

Keats loved the intoxication of creating in a fine frenzy. He believed, as he told his brothers, that “the excellence of every Art is its intensity” (*Letters*, I, no. 45), and the sonnet offered him a form of powerful compactness. He was highly responsive to others—he had a gift for friendship—and his sonnets are filled with addresses and dedications, acknowledgments, literary debts repaid. Friendship was one of his triggering subjects. Love was another. He was also befriended by books, by the great dead who preceded him. He schooled his fluencies. As he concluded in “Keen fitful gusts are whisp’ring here and there”:

For I am brimfull of the friendliness  
That in a little cottage I have found;  
Of fair-hair’d Milton’s eloquent distress,  
And all his love for gentle Lycid drown’d;  
Of lovely Laura in her light green dress,  
And faithful Petrarch gloriously crown’d.

Keats was always deeply impressed by imaginative things. He loved to be carried away and overwhelmed, to wander in fictive spaces, secondary worlds. He was a voracious reader with an insatiable appetite for poetry, for Latin authors and mythological keys to classical culture, such as Lemprière’s *Classical Dictionary*, Tooke’s *Pantheon*, and Spence’s *Polymetis*. He felt that his success as a writer, a calling not his by birthright, depended on acquiring material. This unappeasable hunger for books, for ancient stories and myths, for beautiful works of art

only increased after he left school at sixteen. He was speaking from personal experience when he called the Grecian urn “a friend to man.”

Keats experienced poetry on his pulse. The poems of key predecessors often stimulated his inner life and incited his response. This was certainly the case with his breakthrough sonnet “On first looking into Chapman’s Homer,” which he wrote at a fever pitch in a couple of enthralling early morning hours in October 1816. This was an emblematic or allegorical moment in Keats’s writing life—in the life of any young poet—because his reading vitally seized him and spurred him into his own extravagant making. It fostered his imagination and gave him to himself.

Keats and Cowden Clarke, who was eight years his senior and deeply encouraged his interests, had spent the entire night excitedly poring over a borrowed 1616 folio edition of George Chapman’s translation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. They searched out the magnificent passages, the heart-stopping scenes, and compared Pope’s well-tempered eighteenth-century couplets with Chapman’s more propulsive, free-striding Elizabethan verse. Keats tore himself away at six in the morning. He departed “at day-spring,” as Clarke later recalled, “yet he contrived that I should receive the poem, from a distance of nearly two miles, before 10 a.m.” A fair copy of the poem was sitting on Clarke’s table when he came down to breakfast. (In the right-hand margin of the manuscript, Keats drew lines to mark the rhyme scheme for the octave of the Pe-

trarchan sonnet, a form he knew well, which suggests that he was composing rapidly and also plainly tired after such a memorable night.)

Keats's sonnet enacts a feeling of rapturous discovery; it breathes its own wonderment. It creates the sensation of tremendous vastness within the prescribed space of the Petrarchan form. The twenty-year-old poet builds his case so convincingly that readers ever after have been powerfully affected by the swelling turn in the sonnet, the reverberations of the final sestet. Only when he heard Chapman's bold rendition of "deep-brow'd Homer," the speaker reveals:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
    When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
    He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
    Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Keats's sonnet "completely announced the new poet taking possession," as Hunt put it. It is his first major work. Yet there is also a touching way that Keats reveals himself to be a newcomer to high culture. He implicitly acknowledges that he doesn't read Homer in the original Greek, that he is just now coming upon Chapman's translation: "On *first* looking . . ." (In a later sonnet entitled "To Homer," he refers to his own "giant ignorance.") So, too, he mistakes Balboa for Cortez, as Tennyson first

pointed out to Palgrave. But what matters more deeply is the rising excitement and sense of limitless possibility created in him by reading Homer, so that he feels poised on the brink of a great discovery, like Herschel finding the planet Uranus or Balboa suddenly sighting the Pacific Ocean. Reading Homer, even in translation, Keats enters a fabulous new world. He, too, ascends into a space of silent awe, and he instills that same feeling in us.

Some critics have worried that Keats's aspirations to high culture are somehow suspect, but I believe they have an almost Blakean political dignity. They speak to what we all might gain access to, what we would joyously create within ourselves. Chapman's Homer becomes Keats's method of transport, his way of joining with "the mighty dead" (*Endymion*), attaining the sublime. He had found a means for declaring, possessing, and authoring himself.

Keats was actively taken—almost physically seized—by art and often pulled into the visual realm of paintings, engravings, and sculptures. The character of high art—what had previously been made great—could be both energizing and daunting to him. It could have forbidding power. One thinks, for example, of that day in the winter of 1817 when Keats's older friend, the historical painter Benjamin Haydon, took him to see the Parthenon sculptures being exhibited for the first time at the British Museum. Keats's visceral response must have surprised Haydon, for instead of being intoxicated by the splendor, as the painter fully expected, the poet was dazed and si-

lenced by what he saw. Keats had received the first copy of his *Poems* just a day or two earlier, and it seems to me that the excitement—and the shock—must have heightened his museum experience and contributed to his overpowering encounter. The magnificence of the Elgin Marbles brought home to him that there was an enormous gap, a palpable abyss, between what he hoped to do and what he had actually accomplished. He took the greatness of the statues personally, almost competitively.

The sonnet “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” dramatizes Keats’s experience of speechless astonishment. The passage of time counterpoised against the immutable splendor of Grecian art induced in him a dizzying panic, a debilitating vertigo. He could but dimly apprehend the magnitude he was seeking. Yet he had already begun to apprentice himself to what he called “the religion of Joy,” the Greek spirit made flesh. I suspect he was steeling himself for a fresh start, for what the poem deems “god-like hardship,” for the great work to come. The threat of failure could overwhelm Keats, as in his dirge-like sonnet “When I have fears that I may cease to be,” but he ultimately responded by rededicating himself to the creative task with a deeper candor, a more furious resolve.

Keats wrote his sonnets in a wide variety of moods: with affection, with disgust, with outrage, with embarrassment, with passionate longing. They have a mortal stamp and increasingly take on a tragic grandeur. He

conceived his early sonnets under the spell of Spenserian romance, his later ones under the sign of Shakespearean tragedy. Keats wrote much of his long poem *Endymion* (1818), which can be seen as a dividing line, under the aspiring dream—the phantasm—of Shakespeare. (“Is it too daring to Fancy Shakspeare this Presider?” he queried Haydon, *Letters*, I, no. 26.) “I never quite despair and I read Shakspeare—indeed I shall I think never read any other Book much,” Keats declared in the same letter. “I am very near Agreeing with Hazlitt that Shakspeare is enough for us” (*Letters*, I, no. 26).

In his well-known *Lectures on the English Poets*, William Hazlitt argued that Shakespeare “was the least of an egotist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were, or that they could become.” Keats was galvanized by Hazlitt’s notion that Shakespeare “had only to think of any thing in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it.” Keats read Shakespeare’s sonnets with great avidity (“I neer found so many beauties in the sonnets—they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally,” he wrote to J. H. Reynolds in November 1817, *Letters*, I, no. 44) and adapted what he read. Largely from reading and imitating Shakespeare, Keats came to understand and theorize ductility as an essential feature of artistic imagination. He hypothesized that the human imagination at its most receptive is saturated with what, in a letter to his brothers, he famously called “Negative Capability.”

*Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason (*Letters*, I, no. 45).

For Keats, the displacement of the poet's protean self into another existence was the key feature of the highest poetic imagination. He believed that this heightened receptivity was part of the native genius of English poetry. He explained his ideal of the self-annulling poetic character more fully in a letter to Richard Woodhouse in October 1818:

As to the poetical Character itself . . . it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—it has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosop[h]er, delights the camelion Poet. . . . A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing 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 (*Letters*, I, no. 118).

Recently, Helen Vendler has written that after Keats dissociated himself from Hunt (“It is a great Pity that People should by associating themselves with the fine[st] things, spoil them—Hunt has damned Hampstead [and] Masks and Sonnets and italian tales,” he wrote to Haydon

in 1818, *Letters*, I, no. 70), he adopted “Shakespearean tragic values” and the Shakespearean sonnet as a “vehicle of choice.” Keats used the highly reasonable, toughly reasoning Shakespearean sonnet (three quatrains and a couplet: *abab, cdcd, efef, gg*) to powerful effect. He created wild disturbances within the well-balanced, predetermined form.

I agree with Vendler that the precise turning point in Keats’s changeover is “On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again,” which he wrote while he was preparing *Endymion* for press. “I think a little change has taken place in my intellect lately,” Keats announced to his brothers:

Nothing is finer for the purposes of great productions, than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers—As an instance of this—observe—I sat down yesterday to read *King Lear* once again the thing appeared to demand the prologue of a Sonnet, I wrote it & began to read (*Letters*, I, no. 56).

“On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again” employs a hybrid form. Keats uses the opening lines of a Petrarchan octave to bid farewell to the seductive female muse of the Romance mode:

O golden-tongued Romance, with serene lute!  
Fair plumed syren, queen of far-away!  
Leave melodizing on this wintry day,  
Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute.  
Adieu!

In the last six lines of the poem, he employs a Shakespearean pattern to address the male poet who had become his supreme model:

Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,  
    Begetters of our deep eternal theme!  
When through the old oak forest I am gone,  
    Let me not wander in a barren dream:  
But, when I am consumed in the fire,  
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.

Walter Jackson Bate suggests that the poems in which Keats goes on to use the Shakespearean or English pattern are “the most truly Shakespearean sonnets of the nineteenth (or, for that matter, twentieth) century, whether in metrical variation, pause, quatrain division, or even rhetorical devices.”

Throughout his late work, Keats invokes the redeeming powers of consciousness. He takes up “the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassion’d clay”; he tastes “the bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit” (“On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again”). His three greatest Shakespearean sonnets, “When I have fears that I may cease to be,” “Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell,” and “Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art,” bear the excruciating weight of mortality, of a nearly unbearable passion. They are filled with presentiments of death. In one of his last poetic acts Keats copied “Bright star” onto a blank page in Severn’s volume of Shakespeare during their final voyage to Italy. The end of

“Why did I laugh tonight?” shows how illness preyed on his feverishly active consciousness, how the thought of fast-approaching death could paralyze even his three deepest impulses and longings:

Why did I laugh? I know this being's lease—  
My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads:  
Yet could I on this very midnight cease,  
And the world's gaudy ensigns see in shreds.  
Verse, fame, and beauty are intense indeed,  
But death intenser—death is Life's high meed.

Keats returned to the Shakespearean form in his final two sonnets, written in “wretched thrall” to his fiancée Fanny Brawne, who was the object of his obsessive, nearly overwhelming passion. “Love is my religion—I could die for that,” he wrote to her. “My Creed is Love and you are its only tenet—You have ravish'd me away by a Power I cannot resist; and yet I could resist till I saw you; and even since I have seen you I have endeavoured often ‘to reason against the reasons of my Love’” (*Letters*, II, no. 203). Keats's emotional distress is palpable in his last sonnets where the closely reasoned form, the calculated incisiveness, works exceptionally well for his highly unreasonable, tormented subject.

Even as he was composing the major odes that are the high-water mark of his work, Keats continued experimenting with the sonnet form. In a short period, he wrote four sonnets that remarkably test and experiment with sonnet structure: “Sonnet to Sleep”; “On Fame” (I and II);

and “If by dull rhymes our English must be chain’d,” which is a formal directive, an *ars poetica*. “I have been endeavouring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have,” he wrote in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats in which he enclosed a copy of “If by dull rhymes.” “The legitimate [Petrarchan sonnet] does not suit the language over-well from the pouncing rhymes—the other kind [the Shakespearean sonnet] appears too elegaic [*sic*]” (*Letters*, II, no. 159). Thus he was determined to avoid these effects and to “find out, if we must be constrain’d, / Sandals more interwoven and complete / To fit the naked foot of Poesy.”

Keats’s quest for a more malleable sonnet form also led him to create the stately ten-line stanza of the great odes. He grafted a Shakespearean quatrain (*abab*) onto a Petrarchan sestet (*cdecde*), and thus established the fundamental pattern for four central poems: “Ode to a Nightingale,” “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “Ode on Melancholy,” and “Ode on Indolence.” Keats used the pattern to maintain the “interwoven and complete” character of the sonnet—each stanza is a fully integrated unit—while also weaving the sections into a whole. Thus the capaciousness of the odes was made possible by his persistent experimentation with the sonnet form.

Here, then, are sixty-four sonnets—at once a major accomplishment and an intimate and approachable body of work by one of the great poets of sympathetic absorption, a writer who believed in the “holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination” (*Letters*, I, no. 43).

These fourteen-line poems deliver us to ourselves more fully and more wholly, through the sensuous, rhythmic, musical language of attainment. Keats discovered that the sonnet is a small vessel capable of plunging tremendous depths. It is one of the enabling forms of human inwardness. We are befriended by these passionate, wayward, adventurous poems. Indeed, we are befriended by art itself, Keats teaches us, in our struggle with ourselves, in our urgent soul-making. We are made more human and noble by reading him, for he is a hero of our jubilant, flawed, tragic humanity.

## Notes to Introduction

Keats's letters are cited from *The Letters of John Keats: 1814–1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 volumes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958). They are abbreviated in the introduction as *Letters*, followed by volume and letter number.

- ix *sixty-four sonnets*: Helen Vendler presents a table of sixty-four sonnets written by Keats, with dates of composition and first publication, in *Coming of Age as a Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 71–79. We follow her numbering. (See Appendix, p. 135.)
- x *"In sundry moods . . ."*: Wordsworth's poem ("Nuns fret not at their Convent's narrow room") was called "Prefatory Sonnet" and headed a series of sonnets. See William Wordsworth, *Poems, In Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 133.
- x *"the pattern of sexual pressure . . ."*: Paul Fussell, Jr., *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (New York: Random House, 1965), 121.
- xi *who cultivated the Petrarchan . . .*: Leigh Hunt considered the Petrarchan form "the Sonnet Proper, or what is called the Legitimate Sonnet." He advocated for the Italian form, considered the freer Shakespearean pattern "unartistical," and especially disliked the interlacing Spenserian type (*abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee*). "The rhyme scheme seems at once less responsive and always interfering," he wrote, "and the music has no longer its major and minor divisions." Hunt's opinion may have had a decisive influence on Keats who, despite his great love for Spenser, seems never to have flirted with the Spenserian form. See Leigh Hunt, "An Essay on the Cultivation, History, and Variety of Poem Called the Sonnet" (1867). *Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*, volume 4, ed. Charles Mahoney (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), 291–320.
- xi *"sympathized with the lowest commonplace"*: Hunt's phrase is quoted in John Barnard, *John Keats* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 136.

- xi *Charles Cowden Clarke, the son . . . : The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers*, 1816–1878, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1948). Cited in Jack Stillinger, *Complete Poems*, p. 428. Clarke gives a detailed account in *Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, Recollections of Writers* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1878), 137–138.
- xii *addresses and dedications*: Lawrence John Zillman presents a table of the principle themes in Keats's sonnets in his 1939 work, *John Keats and the Sonnet Tradition: A Critical and Comparative Study* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 84. For example, Zillman notes that Keats addressed two poems to his brothers, four to Benjamin Haydon, three to John Hamilton Reynolds, one to Charles Wells, and one to Georgiana Augusta Wylie. He addressed poems to Burns, Byron, Chapman, Chatterton, Coleridge, Homer, Hunt, Milton, Petrarch, Sappho, Scott, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Wordsworth. Zillman counts two sonnets on cities, three on humanity, four on art, five on friendship, seven on fame, seven more on the pleasures of poetry, and so forth.
- xiii *He departed "at day-spring . . ."*: Charles Cowden Clarke describes the circumstances in *Recollections of Writers*, 128–130.
- xiv *"completely announced . . ."*: Leigh Hunt, *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* (London: H. Colburn, 1828), 248.
- xvi *"the religion of Joy"*: Andrew Motion, *Keats* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 151.
- xvii *In his well-known Lectures . . .*: William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*. Third edition, edited by his son. (1841; New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), 88, 89.
- xviii *Helen Vendler has written . . . : Coming of Age as a Poet*, 44–45
- xix *the precise turning point . . .*: Vendler, *ibid.*, 62–63.
- xx *"the most truly Shakespearean . . ."*: Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), 299.