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Version: Published Version

Article:
Whitcombe, R. (2024) Keats, letters, grief, and delay, 1818-1820. Cultural and Social History, 21 (3). pp. 341-355. ISSN: 1478-0038

https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2023.2257339

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Cultural and Social History
The Journal of the Social History Society

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rfcs20

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To cite this article: Rosie Whitcombe (2024) Keats, Letters, Grief, and Delay, 1818-1820, Cultural and Social History, 21:3, 341-355, DOI: 10.1080/14780038.2023.2257339

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2023.2257339

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Published online: 16 Sep 2023.

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CULTURAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY
2024, VOL. 21, NO. 3, 341–355
https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2023.2257339

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Keats, Letters, Grief, and Delay, 1818-1820

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ABSTRACT

Digital technologies offer a quick and convenient method of communicating across distance, but there are unique benefits to engaging in forms of delayed communication. Long-distance letter writing in the early nineteenth century was often a slow business, and one that Romantic poet, John Keats, capitalised on. In particular, the letter provided Keats with a means of managing the reality of his circumstances when he was faced with inexorable loss and tragedy. In the period of time leading up to the death of his brother, Tom, in 1818, Keats exploited the specific cultures and forms of letter writing to generate a unique consolation for himself and his family members; as he confronted the reality of his own death two years later, the letter played a similarly crucial role in managing his feelings of loss and grief. Letter writing, during these difficult periods, presented Keats with a unique dichotomy: the letter kept him grounded in the cruel reality of his situation while often functioning as a singularly effective means of managing it. How the specific cultures of letter writing and disease intersect, and how Keats's imaginative epistolary narratives coalesce with the increasingly urgent facts of consumption and death, will be examined here.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 03 May 2023
Accepted 06 Sep 2023

KEYWORDS
Keats; letters; distance; disease; death; epistolary; consolation

When communicating, over vast geographical distance, the progression of a worsening disease or the news of a death, consolation can be found in the speed and immediacy of digital communication. Connection can be formed through a close network of contacts via social media, and comfort taken in the sending and receiving of consistent, to-the-minute information. But what might be the benefits of a slower means of connecting to distant loved ones? This article will consider the art of delayed communication, specifically in letter writing. Is there a unique form of consolation to be found in the delay between sending and receiving a letter, particularly one that documents the progression of an illness, or breaks the news of a death? More broadly, can the letter provide an opportunity for alternate forms of literary experimentation that makes communicating these especially challenging topics more manageable?

To begin answering these questions, this article will examine how Romantic poet John Keats (1795–1821) capitalises on the inherent slowness of long-distance epistolary exchange, the specific cultures and forms of letter writing, and the letter's experimental

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literary potential, to find a unique form of consolation in the face of disease and death. Romantic period letter writers were, according to Madeleine Callaghan and Anthony Howe, often implicitly aware of the letter's experimental capacity:

> Many writers of the [Romantic] period were voluminous correspondents and even those who were not fond of letter writing (notably Wordsworth) were immersed in the habits and tacit comprehensions of epistolary culture [. . .] They knew the various strands of epistolary tradition and were adept in deploying, as Janet Gurkin Altman puts it, the 'letter's formal properties to create meaning'.[1]

Keats was part of this epistolary culture, and though his letters span only two volumes, they demonstrate a keen and implicit awareness of the letter's formal intricacies and its capacity as 'a vital mode of experimentation'.[2] He experiments with the idea that letters can be, as Sarah Goldsmith, Sheryllynne Haggerty, and Karen Harvey put it, 'material extensions of the person' writing.[3] He writes across distance and uses the letter to reflect, manipulate, and accommodate shifting ideas of selfhood. This article will explore how Keats's highly self-conscious process as a letter writer allows him to experiment with the form to manage the impact of illness and death.

To emphasise Keats's genius as a letter writer, particularly when it comes to writing letters across distance that provide him with consolation, it is necessary to compare two letters that each deal in breaking the news of a death. In the winter of 1818, Keats wrote a letter to America to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana, informing them that Tom, the youngest of the Keats brothers, had died. Just over two years later, Joseph Severn, after nursing Keats in Rome for several months, wrote letters home to Keats's friends and family in Hampstead that broke the news of Keats's death. Both men make use of the letter's innate function as a means of communicating news across distance; both, in breaking the news, attempt to generate a sense of consolation for themselves and their recipients. How they each write about dying and death, and use the letter to achieve consolation, differs significantly, however. On 6 March 1821, Severn wrote to Keats's publisher, John Taylor:

> 23rd at 4 o'clock afternoon – The poor fellow bade me lift him up in bed – he breathed with great difficulty – and seemed to lose the power of coughing up the phlegm – an immense sweat came over him so that my breath felt cold to him – 'don't breath on me – it comes like Ice' – he clasped my hand very fast as I held him in my arms – the mucus was boiling within him – it gurgled in his throat – this increased – but yet he seem'd without pain – his eyes look'd upon me with extreme sensibility but without pain – at 11 he died in my arms.[4]

Severn's intimate portrayal of Keats's final moments draws attention to his extreme physical weakness, but equally prominent is the sense that, on his deathbed, Keats's mental capability, and particularly his strong emotional presence, is uncompromised. When Keats speaks, he is coherent and eloquent and when he looks at Severn he does so with 'extreme sensibility', a phrase which gives a clue about how plausible Severn's account is. The culture of sensibility, prominent in literature of the eighteenth century, popularised characters who reacted to situations with intense feeling; in the sentimental novel, this encouraged a particular way of writing about death, or depicting a deathbed scene, that Severn emanates in his letter. Although Severn captures the painful circumstances leading up to his friend's death, he also emphasises how Keats's last moments are 'without pain'. This seems unlikely: as Nicholas Roe notes, towards the end of his

life 'Keats coughs up blood with no change for the better, repeatedly enduring the horrors of drowning and suffocation'.[5] Severn shows something of this with the 'boiling' mucus, but otherwise hides it behind his charged rhetoric. In this letter, Severn gives Keats a dignified death modelled on the stereotype of the man of Sensibility and the idealised consumptive patient. His letter takes on the qualities of the sentimental novel.

As Clark Lawlor explains, during Keats's lifetime, consumption was considered the 'ideal physical disease of sensibility'.[6] Often 'aestheticised in a positive manner as a sign of passion, spirituality and genius',[7] it was widely believed that consumption would result in a 'good and easy death'.[8] Of course, the positive aestheticization of consumption did not accurately represent the gruesome reality of a consumptive death, but, as Lawlor explains, idealising the disease as 'good and easy' was a common trope in sentimental literature, and a prominent feature in sentimental narratives that contained – or even culminated in – a Christian deathbed scene. It was believed that dying from consumption, a disease that did not typically affect the mental faculties and gave the sufferer time to get their affairs in order and prepare for death, 'allowed one to fight the good fight in one's last hours and so prove oneself – spectacularly in all senses of the word – to be a valiant Christian'.[9] Sentimental novels exploited the connection between preparedness, clarity, piety, and the consumptive death to prove a character's goodness in their final moments. This connection was also exploited by Severn in his portrayal of Keats's deathbed scene. According to Severn's account, in his final moments Keats is 'calm and firm to a most astonishing degree'.[10] Severn writes to Taylor:

> he told [me] not to tremble [. . .] he said – 'did you ever see any one die' no – 'well then I pity you poor Severn – what trouble and danger you have got into for me – now you must be firm for it will not last long – I shall soon be laid in the grave – thank God for the quiet grave – O! I can feel the cold earth upon me – the daisies growing over me – O for this quiet – it will be my first'.[11]

Severn implicitly enters Keats into the narrative of 'great spiritual preparedness' that typically accompanies a consumptive death.[12] Even in the throes of death Keats is pious, prepared, and considerate, and rather than accepting pity, he pities the friend who must watch him die.

What is evident in Severn's portrayal of Keats – as a figure of Christian fortitude, a hero figure, a wise moralist, even in extremis – is a strong sense of a staged scene. Severn makes Keats the hero of a complex narrative that is strongly Christian in grounding, and his letters tend in the direction of the sentimental novel. One of the consequences of this merging of registers is that Severn generates, for himself and his recipients, a familiar form of consolation by associating Keats with sentimental heroes and heroines for whom death is 'good' and 'easy'.[13] Another consequence is the denaturing of the letter as a letter. For Severn, the letter is inadequate for expressing the gravitas of the situation, so he borrows from more established forms of literature to do the work for him. That his depiction of Keats's deathbed scene is expressed in a letter is tangential; the letter, for Severn, is purely functional in that it is the quickest way to convey the news. Consolation is arrived at because of the letter's association with the sentimental novel, and not because of the specific processes and logistics of letter writing.

When Keats describes the circumstances of his brother's death two years earlier, however, the fact he is writing a letter is a fundamental part of his response and crucial to achieving a sense of consolation. On 1 December 1818, Tom Keats died from consumption. Two weeks later, on 16 December 1818, Keats writes to his surviving brother, George, and sister-in-law, Georgiana who had recently emigrated to America:

> You will have been prepared, before this reaches you for the worst news you could have, nay if [William] Haslam's letter arrives in proper time, I have a consolation in thinking the first shock will be past before you receive this. The last days of poor Tom were of the most distressing nature; but his last moments were not so painful, and his very last was without a pang. (*LJK*, 2, p. 4)

There are similarities between Severn's method and the way Keats announces Tom's death. Keats notes that Tom's 'very last' moments were comfortingly pain-free, a probable embellishment that is not unlike Severn's emphasis on Keats's peaceful final moments. This narrative is disrupted, however, as Keats notices and considers a key epistolary predicament: the slowness and unreliability of the international mail service. This was not an unusual observation to make about letters in the early nineteenth century: many of Keats's contemporaries were similarly sensitised to the practical problems of long-distance letter writing.[14] Contrary to what might be expected, these practical problems offer Keats a possibility of comfort. He hopes that George and Georgiana will have already received the news of Tom's death because then, by the time his letter arrives, the first blow of grief will be passed. Keats uses the temporal dislocation of the letter to generate what he terms 'a consolation', both for his recipients and himself, and, by engaging with this aspect of the letter form, begins to dilute the anguish of the present.

After sending this letter, Keats did not hear from George and Georgiana for several months. It is unclear whether it was a letter written by Haslam (Keats's friend), or a letter written by Keats himself that first communicated the news of Tom's death, or whether the passage of time between sending and receiving did indeed result in comfort for either party. What is discernible, however, is that the act of writing a letter – and particularly one that travels across a significant distance – brings Keats a sense of present consolation.[15] This is not an isolated incident. In late October 1818, in a different journal letter to George and Georgiana, Keats writes:

> Mind you I mark this Letter A. By the time you will receive this you will have I trust passed through the greatest of your fatigues. As it was with your Sea sickness I shall not hear of themtill they are past (*LJK*, 1, p. 405).

These are instances of how the culture and forms of letter writing become, themselves, an intrinsic part of the way Keats writes about suffering, illness, and grief. Through the delay involved in the practice of writing and sending long-distance letters, Keats finds a way to manage and organise painful or troubling aspects of daily life.

Keats finds consolation in the face of Tom's worsening health and eventual death by exploiting the temporal dislocation that comes with sending and receiving letters over long distances, but most of the letters he writes in 1818, the year Tom's health began declining rapidly, are not destined to travel far. Before George and Georgiana emigrate to America in early July, Keats has nobody with whom he can engage in a long-distance

correspondence and therefore cannot yet rely on distance to reframe his experience of illness, dying, and death. Distance is not, however, the only means through which the letter can alter the hard facts of Keats's personal circumstances. In response to the threatening finality of death, Keats experiments with the letter form's innate mutability to reimagine the physical parameters of his brother's disease. While he records the facts of Tom's worsening symptoms, Keats resists – by modifying his language, by objectifying and personifying disease – associating the prospect of death with a sense of finality.

Of the eighty or so letters he writes in 1818, Keats makes around forty references to Tom's illness. When he is not writing about Tom, Keats writes to him: seven of his twelve travel letters, written as he walks through the Lake District, Scotland, and Ireland, are addressed to Tom. Roe explains the emotional context of the supportive, fraternal sphere Keats shared with both Tom and George, and how it was devastated in 1818:

> 'George's future lay across the Atlantic. Tom [. . .] also talked of travelling – he would go to Pavia to acquire "knowledge and strength", although it was obvious he was destined for the grave'.[16]

Keats loses George to distance; and, with his extensive medical knowledge and previous experience nursing his mother through her consumption, he knew that Tom's chances of survival were slim. Despite his brother's bleak prognosis, Keats's letters of late spring and early summer 1818 show glimmers of hopefulness: on 8 April he writes, to his friend, B. R. Haydon, of 'Tom (who is getting greatly better)' (*LJK*, 1, p, 264). 'Tom is getting better he hopes you may meet him at the top o' the hill' (*LJK*, 1, p. 268), he writes the next day to another friend, J. H. Reynolds, whose health was also suffering at this time. In a letter to John Taylor a few weeks later, he writes, 'My Brother Tom is getting better and I hope I shall see both him and Reynolds well' (*LJK*, 1, p. 271); and in early May, he writes to Reynolds, 'Tom, after a Night without a Wink of sleep, and overburdened with fever, has got up after a refreshing day sleep and is better than he has been for a long time' (*LJK*, 1, p. 276). The letter allows for repetition: Keats can address the facts of his brother's illness while reinforcing his prognosis that Tom is 'much better' by communicating it to a variety of recipients across multiple letters.

The letter's capacity for conversational, casual discourse also plays a role in sustaining Keats's tentative optimism by allowing him to modify spelling and phrasing in a way that downplays the severity of his brother's condition. On 3 May, for example, he writes to Reynolds, 'Tom has spit a leetle blood this afternoon, and that is rather a damper' (*LJK*, 1, p. 282). Keats acknowledges this discouraging sign, but the subtle evocations in his language invite an alternate reading. Keats resists the facts of Tom's health by changing the spelling of 'little' to 'leetle'. Spitting a 'little' blood is likely a restrained version of the truth, and 'leetle' works to intensify this remove, turning the troubling recognition of Tom's blood spitting into something less threatening by making the word sound more child-like. Additionally, describing this change as 'rather a damper' is an attempt at modifying the emotional impact of Tom's blood spitting, putting distance between the blood spitting and Keats's reaction to it.[17] Keats was proficient at medical Latin and knew how terrifyingly official and final it could sound. Here, he is pushing language as far from this as possible. Even before Tom's death, the letter functions as an essential means of managing grief; as a form of communication it is as necessary for the consolation of the writer as well as the recipient.

If, in some letters, Keats modifies the threatening authority of medical language, in others he objectifies illness, giving it a physical dimension that works to mitigate its power as an invisible, untouchable unknown. On 13 March, Keats writes a letter to Benjamin Bailey to explain that caring for Tom has led (on Keats's side) to a lapse in the upkeep of their correspondence. Before he gets to this admission, however, Keats takes Bailey through a series of elaborate and playful excuses that culminate in the textual transformation of illness, from an intangible threat to an observable part of physical reality:

> I have been rubbing up my invention; trying several sleights – I first polish'd a cold, felt it in my fingers and tried it on the table, but could not pocket it: I tried Chilblains, Rheumatism, Gout, tight Boots, nothing of that sort would do (*LJK*, 1, p. 241).

Keats's letter becomes reflexive, comically honest, a thinking through of the imaginative processes through which illness has been transformed. By reimagining the physical dimensions of 'a cold', the letter turns illness into something that can be managed or altered in a physical sense, something Keats can manipulate or discard. Keats's inventive interaction with what he cannot control allows him to disorganise the power of disease with language. What Christian fortitude and firm faith does in Severn's portrayal of Keats's final days, Keats achieves in the liminal literary mode of letter writing. Illness is given an imaginative substance it otherwise lacks that works to displace the real, immovable situation of Tom. Thus, the letter, as a form of distance communication, provides an outlet for Keats, his responsibility to keep up with his correspondence providing the motivation for this consoling reimagining.

Keats uses the letter to objectify illness in his letter to Bailey, and a day later, on 14 March, he personifies 'sickness' in a letter to his friend J. H. Reynolds, who was himself 'ill with rheumatic fever'.[18] Keats announces his intention to

> cut all sick people if they do not make up their minds to cut sickness – a fellow to whom I have a complete aversion, and who strange to say is harboured and countenanced in several houses where I visit – he is sitting now quite impudent between me and Tom (*LJK*, 1, p. 245).

Tom's consumption – its cause and outcome – is an abstract and threatening unknown, so giving 'sickness' a physical, human presence works to alleviate the threat. With several of his friends and acquaintances falling ill around this time, personifying 'sickness' gives Keats an idea of control over a troubling situation: 'sickness', he writes, 'insults me at poor Jem Rice's – and you have seated him before now between us at the Theatre – where I thought he look'd with a longing eye at poor Kean' (*LJK*, 1, p. 245). As a 'fellow to whom I have a complete aversion', Keats turns 'sickness' into someone he can interact with, and, most importantly, 'cut'. The word 'cut' is used in a comic context, but it is also final: it carries with it the sense of cutting someone from a social circle, as well as bringing to mind Keats's career as a dresser at Guy's Hospital, where terrible, agonising surgery without anaesthetic was a daily experience. If only this 'sickness' could be cut out like a cancer, removed like a rotten tooth. But Keats cannot 'cut' the source of Tom's worsening consumption. Instead he finds a peculiar form of fortitude in an act of writing – specifically writing letters – that enables him to familiarise 'sickness' while maintaining a sense of the reality and finality of consumption.

Writing about 'sickness' by reimagining and challenging its physical parameters within the letter is very different to the robust and practical dialogue that characterises the following letter, written to Keats by his brother, George, on 18 March 1818:

> Poor Tom—who could have imagined such a change? I have indeed been sanguine; whenever he has occurred to my thoughts he has appeared nearly in good health, every answer I have given to enquiring Friends, has been, 'much better' and 'improving every day' I can hardly believe this melancholy news, Having so long accustomed myself to think altogether otherwise—I hope and trust that your *kind* superintendence will prevent any violent bleeding in future, and consequently that this alarm may prove in the end advantageous; Tom must never again presume on his strength, at all events untill [sic] he has *completely* recover'd.[19]

George's letter is a direct response to facts. He admits, like Keats, to a form of self-delusion regarding Tom's worsening illness; but in the instance of writing this letter, his 'Having so long accustomed myself to think altogether otherwise' no longer seems to affect his judgement. George communicates the facts and articulates his disbelief: 'who could have imagined such a change?', 'I can hardly believe this melancholy news'. Keats, on the other hand, renders these facts into the letter's literary capacity to reimagine disease. If he is ever surprised in the manner George expresses, it is hidden in the playful discourse he practises in his letters to Bailey and Reynolds. There is nothing playful in George's letter, and no attempt to challenge or reimagine the boundaries of illness in text; his use of 'sanguine' to describe his optimistic temperament overlooks the word's alternate meaning as an adjective describing the colour of blood, the irony of which Keats would no doubt have picked up on. Where Keats imbeds the facts of Tom's illness in his epistolary fictions, George is direct, serious, and practical. Both brothers practice a form of self-delusion; but George admits to and seeks to rectify his. They each handle the facts and look towards consolation in different ways: George through practical solution, and Keats through imaginative alteration and a passionate, wishful belief in the letter's ability to alter painful truths.

Keats does not express surprise over Tom's condition in his letters and he tends to resist a practical dialogue that admits the facts and works out potential solutions. However, as his brother's consumption becomes more problematic and death the likely conclusion, Keats's energetic hopefulness and creativity, prevalent in his earlier letters, diminishes. As Roe notes, by the autumn of 1818, the 'reality' of Tom's illness 'surfaces in almost all of Keats's letters',[20] and they come to reflect the exhaustive weight of responsibility he takes on as Tom's sole carer: 'Tom gets weaker every day and I am not able to leave him for more than a few hours' (*LJK*, 1, p. 375). If, in the spring, Keats found a form of fortitude by creating epistolary fictions that worked to objectify or personify his brother's illness, here he writes with staccato factuality, as far from imaginative writing as possible. The reality of Tom's situation seems to encourage another, and very different, imaginative process in Keats's letter writing – not of transforming the situation, but of being transformed by it. On 21 September, he writes to his friend and landlord, Charles Dilke:

> I wish I could say Tom was any better. His identity presses upon me so all day that I am obliged to go out—although I intended to have given some time to study alone I am obliged to write, and plunge into abstract images to ease myself of his countenance his voice and feebleness. (*LJK*, 1, pp. 368–9)

Earlier in the year, Keats's letters were, in part, a creative thinking-through of his brother's illness. Now his writing is fuelled by obligation. 'Obliged to go out' and 'obliged to write', his energy, both physical and creative, is forcibly rerouted. Writing becomes a necessary distraction for Keats, enabling him to 'plunge into abstract images'. However, these images are not the immersive, entertaining, or tongue-in-cheek metaphors of letters past. Keats is only able to tell that he 'plunges into abstract images', rather than show it. At this juncture in his letter writing there is no creative specificity possible. Life and imagination become equally bleak and Keats can no longer play them off against each other, able only to nod towards, rather than perform, a distraction from his brother's illness.

The increasing likelihood that Tom will die transforms Keats's relationship to the letter. There is a growing sense of conflict between Keats's skilful epistolary ability to reimagine illness and death and his dependence on the form, between being in control of the letter and being controlled by it. He writes to Dilke,

> I am sorry to give you pain—I am almost resolv'd to burn this—but I really have not self possession or magnanimity enough to manage the thing othe[r]wise—after all it may be a nervousness proceeding from the Mercury. (*LJK*, 1, p. 369)

Keats cannot name 'the thing' the letter has become so crucial in managing. Consistent with much of his letter writing in 1818, to address in plain terms the (by now) inevitable reality that Tom will die is beyond Keats's emotional and linguistic register. At this point, however, death is too near for Keats to write it away in a fiction or personify its cause. Without the letter, he cannot 'manage' the nameless reality that dogs him. This inelo-quence and sense of helplessness is at odds with the way Keats begins this letter, however, with a lengthy, joking aside about his relationship to letter writing.

> I have a Mind too well regulated to proceed upon any thing without due preliminary remarks—you may perhaps have observed that in the simple process of eating radishes I never begin at the root but constantly dip the little green head in the salt [. . .] So how can I with any face begin without a dissertation on letter writing. (*LJK*, 1, 367)

What follows is not a dissertation but a table of information that occupies 'the remainder of this first page' (*LJK*, 1, p. 368) and aligns certain professions with different kinds of letter writing paper. Keats displays a reflexive and playful understanding of letters and the process of letter writing that suggests a level of mastery over the form; but this light-hearted, confident approach is undone as he makes plain his increasing dependence on the form a few lines later. That he has 'a Mind too well regulated' suggests a level of organisation that is contradicted by his subsequent lack of 'self possession'. Keats's capability as a letter writer, highlighted by his witty and self-reflexive introduction, becomes, in the space of a page, an expression of misery so intense that he almost resolves to burn the letter.

Conflict comes to characterise the way Keats relates to and writes letters in the autumn of 1818. If, for example, writing provides Keats with a means of distraction necessary to his sanity, it also represents a threat to his own health. This conflict is at the heart of his letter to Dilke: using writing to 'plunge into abstract images' and escape Tom leaves Keats 'in a continual fever – it must be poisonous to life although I feel well' (*LJK*, 1, p. 369). In a letter to Reynolds written on

22 September, Keats describes his poetic process as a 'feverous relief' (*LJK*, 1, p. 370). Earlier in the year, there is little indication that writing – letters or poetry – could cause or exacerbate disease. There is cohesion in the way Keats writes about his brother's condition, an implicit understanding that writing has the potential to provide a consoling, albeit temporary, remedy. As Jennifer Davis Michael notes, however, by the autumn Keats's writing is not 'a healthful escape from disease but the disease itself: a fever of writing that exerts some "poisonous" influence, the more insidious because he does not feel it'.[21] Now, there is a misalignment between what Keats thinks and feels: though he acknowledges writing 'must be poisonous to life' he feels 'well'.

This conflict is crystallised in the sheer contradiction of the following phrase from Keats's letter to Dilke: 'There is an awful warmth about my heart like a load of Immortality' (*LJK*, 1, 370). This sentence is at odds with itself. Words like 'warmth' and 'heart' bring to mind the adjectives heart-warming and warm-hearted. What Keats feels, however, is an 'awful warmth' which not only undermines any suggestion of harmony or affection, but sounds alarmingly medical, like an affliction of the heart. An 'awful warmth' is an expression of the pressure Keats experiences, as is being under the weight of a 'load of Immortality', a quantification that challenges logical interpretation because 'Immortality', by its nature infinite, cannot be quantified. There is tension here between the persistent threat of death and the overwhelming pressures of being alive and going through horrific experiences, as well as the guilt that comes with survival. Here, with Tom on his deathbed, the interfusion of life and death, that characterises so much of Keats's letter writing – and poetry – and that provides him with a unique sense of consolation, is the source of a complex, conflicted, and turbulent form of grief.

Writing once helped Keats disorganise the terms of disease, but now, in the face of this 'new strange and threatening sorrow', disease disorganises Keats's relationship to writing. However, it is through continuing to write letters that Keats seems to arrive at a means of managing this conflict. On 27 October he writes to Richard Woodhouse:

> 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 everyone in the room begins to press upon me that, I am in very little time annihilated (*LJK*, 1, pp. 387–8).

A month ago, Keats struggled against the 'press' of Tom's identity; now, he feels the 'press' of 'everyone in the room', a sensation that leaves him 'annihilated'. However, rather than an indication of hopelessness or misery, Keats's experience of these pressing identities helps him to regain something like control over his situation. Yet another imaginative process begins to take over here, one in which Keats turns the obliterative idea of annihilation into something like empowerment in the form in one of his most famous epistolary metaphors: the 'camelion Poet'.

Keats writes, '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' (*LJK*, 1, p. 387). In a remarkable shift, Keats manages to turn the diminishing effect of a pressing identity into a positive, enduring, and resonant poetics. His own identity 'annihilated', Keats can 'enter imaginatively into the consciousness of another', as Jonathan Mulrooney explains, allowing him 'to posit what we might call a virtual self for the purposes of aesthetic creation'.[22] Throughout his letters, Keats's empathic self-

projection means he can inhabit the identities of other people, animals – even inanimate objects. Writing to Bailey on 22 November 1817, Keats writes, 'if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel' (*LJK*, 1, p. 186). In April 1818, Keats describes to Reynolds how he 'listens to the Rain with a sense of being drown'd and rotted like a grain of wheat' (*LJK*, 1, p. 273). In a letter to John Taylor, Keats's friend Richard Woodhouse writes of Keats: 'He has affirmed that he can conceive of a billiard Ball that it may have a sense of delight from its own roundness, smoothness ˂ & very ˃ volubility. & the rapidity of its motion'.[23] Keats's 'camelion Poet' would shape his compositional process as a mature poet; but equally, it provides him with a unique epistolary method through which to manage his brother's impending death.

Keats can experience his situation from the perspective of the 'camelion Poet', a 'Character' that 'is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character' (*LJK*, 1, p. 387), and in doing so he can mitigate the direct impact of Tom's suffering and alleviate some of the pressure he is under as Tom's sole carer. More than this, the 'camelion Poet' seems well adapted to mediating the tense and conflicting situation Keats finds himself in: 'it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated' (*LJK*, 1, p. 387). Writing in the third person extends Keats's remove from the reality of his circumstances. He is so far into the imagined alternate narrative now that he can view himself as another character; what Keats finds difficult to manage, the camelion poet can resolve. As well as enhancing his poetic ability, the new breadth of Keats's imagined identities means that he can approach personal troubles not 'from myself; but from some character in whose soul I now live' (*LJK*, 1, pp. 388).

Finally, the change Keats undergoes in this letter – that turns self-annihilation into a form of personal affirmation – is itself a shape-shift, an embodiment and performance of the 'camelion Poet'. Rather than a point of origin, defining the 'camelion Poet' is part of its ongoing existence. This suggests that the unavoidable facts of Tom's worsening illness force Keats to realise and define this mutable mode of being. But it also suggests that, if defining the 'camelion Poet' is part of an ongoing performance, potentially there is no limit to how long Keats has been the 'camelion Poet'. Not only does the 'camelion Poet' allow Keats to manage the present impact of illness but if it has always been, there is the suggestion that it always will be. As an omnipresent force that works backwards and forwards in time, the 'camelion Poet' works to dilute the finite connection between time and death, providing Keats with a new way of resisting finality and fixity through a perpetual epistolary performance.

Keats's letters of 1818 read as a record of Tom's worsening consumption while demonstrating how the form can be used to mitigate the severity of the reality of disease. As Tom's symptoms become more desperate, Keats's ability to imaginatively alter the facts of his situation wavers. He becomes increasingly dependent on the letter as Tom's death becomes an unavoidable certainty, but to counter the growing intensity of this threat he extends his imaginative epistolary narrative, developing an alternate persona capable of dealing with tragedy and loss. Tom's condition offers opportunity and the potential for literary experimentation. Michael O'Neill's comment, that death in Keats's poetry 'signal[s] the emergence of crises and further thresholds', is applicable to his letters, too.[24] Each spitting of blood, each day confined to Tom's sickroom, indicates 'the

emergence of crises'. But each of these passing incidents is also a 'further threshold', a challenge or boundary that Keats, as a letter writer, routinely takes on or moves beyond.

The mutability of the letter form allows Keats to develop epistolary narratives that are equally mutable, and through which he can simultaneously address and reimagine the facts of his situation. Consolation is arrived at, for Keats, through experimenting with the form's unique flexibility to hold together and integrate hard facts with imagined circumstances. Conflating the often cruel facts of reality within a consoling imaginative discourse is a persistent pattern in Keats's letters, and is perhaps especially pronounced in the way he looks to close his final letter, written as Keats himself is dying from consumption two years after Tom.

This letter, written from Rome to Charles Brown, contains a strong sense of how far Keats is both enabled and disabled by the letter form. He enacts an instinctive compression of physical suffering and literary physicality, evident from the very first sentence: ''Tis the most difficult thing in the world <for> me to write a letter. My stomach continues so bad, that I feel it worse on opening any book' (*LJK*, 2, p. 359). The intensity of Keats's real-life circumstances means that letter writing, as a form of reciprocal communication, has broken down. He writes to Brown:

> I cannot answer any thing in your letter, which followed me from Naples to Rome, because I am afraid to look it over again. I am so weak (in mind) that I cannot bear the sight of any hand writing of a friend I love so much as I do you. (*LJK*, 2, p. 359–60)

The letter's threatening potential is highlighted in that it 'followed' Keats; it has become predatory, perhaps. Brown is, by now, Keats's sole correspondent. That he finds himself unable to read even Brown's handwriting shows how sharing letters has become almost impossible. Keats faces yet another stage in his own epistolary degeneration as the back and forth interaction, intrinsic to the letter form, is no longer available to him. There is no resolution here.

However, Keats's last letter is not a surrender. While it functions as an expression of sorrow, it also demonstrates an ongoing resilience:

> Yet I ride the little horse,—and, at my worst, even in Quarantine, summoned up more puns, in a sort of desperation, in one week than in any year of my life. There is one thought enough to kill me—I have been well, healthy, alert &c, walking with her—and now—the knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem are great enemies to the recovery of the stomach. There you rogue, I put you to the torture,—but you must bring your philosophy to bear—as I do mine, really—or how should I be able to live? Dr Clarke is very attentive to me; he says, there is very little the matter with my lungs, but my stomach, he says, is very bad. (*LJK*, 2, p. 360)

This passage is indicative of the extent of Keats's suffering. Though 'very attentive', the limited medical knowledge that informs Dr Clarke's mistaken diagnosis, and his consequential prescription, intensified Keats's physical symptoms.[25] Adding to his suffering are memories of the things he has lost. He finds himself locked out of the state of physical well-being necessary to write poetry. He is no longer 'healthy' and 'walking with her' (a reference to his fiancée, Fanny Brawne). But Keats positions these painful truths between two lighter admissions. There is something comical and touching in Keats finding solace riding 'the little horse', and he trivialises his worst experiences in quarantine by discussing his productive punning.[26] Robert Gittings even suggests that 'the little horse' is not to

be taken literally, and in fact refers 'to the "little Pegasus" of stanza 71 in his own *Cap and Bells*, an allusion Brown would recognise', meaning 'that Keats was once more letting his mind play with the idea of a poem'.[27] Though too physically ill to write a poem, he is not without a sense of the creative energy he once fostered. His private nods to Brown go some way towards lightening the situation, and when he affectionately addresses Brown with 'There you rogue', Keats is offering his friend temporary relief from this sorrowful, final letter. Keats has not lost the astute reflection and self-awareness of his earlier letters: writing to Brown in a way that is familiar and funny provides consolation for them both.

Despite the extent of his misery and the unnecessary levels of pain he suffers, Keats's final sign off is a testament to his poetic imagination and his continued ability to alter the terms of illness and death in the letter. 'I can scarcely bid you good bye even in a letter', he writes to Brown, 'I always made an awkward bow' (*LJK*, 2, p. 360). J. R. Watson reads Keats's final sign off as an indication of failure:

> Now he can find no language to say good-bye: death, the high meed, is also the destroyer of speech. And then comes the bow: you cannot speak and bow at the same time, and so Keats ends, not with the sound of words, that he would have been good at, but with the silent gesture that he performs awkwardly and without dignity.[28]

To suggest the 'awkward bow' indicates a loss of dignity ignores the humour and poise of Keats's final sign off. Watson's reading also implies Keats's 'awkward bow' showcases his inability to find the right language to say goodbye. However, I believe this final epistolary gesture, rather than an indicator of Keats's inability, is a shrewd use of language that works to dissipate the tragedy of his farewell. Saying goodbye is difficult, 'even in a letter', so to avoid this difficulty, Keats does not say it. Instead, he involves Brown in an intimate gesture that invites a mutual, imaginative exchange. Keats draws Brown's attention to who he was, and away from who he has become now he is living his 'posthumous existence', and this requires an imaginative engagement on both their parts. The intimacy of Keats's closing line is enhanced by the supposition that it is a private joke between himself and Brown, one that probably has to do with Keats's short stature. As Jack Stillinger writes, the implied awkwardness of Keats gracelessly bowing out of a room turns this into a 'poignantly comic gesture'.[29] If, after Tom's death, the temporal dislocation of letter writing allowed Keats to mitigate his present grief by directing his attention to a hopeful future, in this final farewell the letter sets Keats and Brown firmly within the touching and intimate gestures of a lighter past.

There is a tension, staged in Keats's correspondence, that reveals the letter's capacity to simultaneously resist and outmanoeuvre the finality of illness and death while functioning as a constant reminder of it. In 1818, Keats's epistolary playfulness allows him to manage the threat of disease; when this method no longer seems to work for him in the same way, when Tom's illness worsens towards the end of the year, Keats uses the letter to experiment with an epistolary identity that offers, if only for a brief period within the letter, the ability transcend the boundaries of his situation and suffering. Then, after Tom's death, Keats turns to the letter's unique relationship with distance to generate consolation. In so doing, Keats challenges the assumption that separation from loved ones is an obstacle. In late 1820-early 1821, during the final few months of his life, Keats again turns to his correspondence, capitalising on the distance between himself and Charles Brown, and the imaginative potential of the letter, to generate a sense of consolation for them both in his

'awkward bow'. As Keats demonstrates with his self-conscious manipulation of the logistics involved in sending and receiving letters, and his relentless efforts to tap the letter form's experimental potential to manage the reality of illness, there is a unique consolation to be found in epistolary exchange. Keats masterfully works the letter – as a form of distance communication, as a literary means of reimagining illness, as a vessel for experimenting with identity – to find comfort in the face of suffering.

Notes

1. Madeleine Callaghan and Anthony Howe, "Introduction," in *To Romanticism and the Letter*, ed. Callaghan and Howe (London: Palgrave, 2020) pp. 1–14; (p. 5–6).
2. Callaghan and Howe, "Introduction," to *Romanticism and the Letter*, pp. 1–14 (p. 14).
3. Sarah Goldsmith, Sheryllynne Haggerty, and Karen Harvey, "Introduction," in *Letters and the Body, 1700–1830, Writing and Embodiment*, ed. Goldsmith, Haggerty, and Harvey (New York: Routledge, 2023), 1–13 (p. 3).
4. Joseph Severn to John Taylor, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) vol. 2, pp. 377–8 (All further quotations from Keats will be from this edition, with volume and page numbers following in parentheses).
5. Nicholas Roe, *John Keats: A New Life* (Cornwall: Yale University Press, 2013), 392.
6. Clark Lawlor, *Consumption and Literature: The Making of the Romantic Disease* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 2007), 44.
7. Lawlor, 1–2.
8. Ibid. 69.
9. Ibid. 36.
10. Severn to John Taylor, *The Letters of John Keats* 2, p. 378.
11. Ibid.
12. Lawlor, p. 39.
13. Severn seems to have had in mind the famous, if disputed, death bed scene of Joseph Addison, whose final wish was to demonstrate "'in what peace a Christian can die'" (Joseph Addison quoted in Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition: In a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison* (Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2009), 103–4). His record of Keats's exclamations ('O! I can feel the cold earth upon me', 'O for this quiet') echoes the weeping and sighing of Richardson's Clarissa as she lies on her deathbed: '*Oh Death!*'; 'Oh dear, *dear* gentlemen'; 'Oh come – blessed Lord' (Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady*, ed. Angus Ross (London: Penguin, 2004), 1361–2). There are parallels between Keats's last moments, as Severn portrays them, and Harley's final speech from Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*: 'To meet death as becomes a man, is a privilege bestowed on few.—I would endeavour to make it mine;— nor do I think that I can ever be better prepared for it than now' (Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 96).
14. While nursing Keats, on 22 February 1821, Severn wrote to William Haslam: 'O! how anxious I am to hear from you – none of yours has come – but in answer to mine from Naples – I have nothing to break this dreadful solitude – but Letters (*LJK*, 2, p. 375). Byron, too, nods towards the inadequacy of the postal service in a letter to John Cam Hobhouse: 'I believe the best way is to write frequently and briefly – both on account of *weight*—& the *chance* of letters reaching their destination' (*Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1980–94) vol. 5, p. 79).
15. Sections from these paragraphs are reprinted from Rosie Whitcombe, 'Connection, Consolation, and the Power of Distance in the Letters of John Keats', The Keats-Shelley Review, vol. 35 (2021) pp. 86-92 (p. 89). Copyright © The Keats-Shelley Memorial

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16. Roe, 230.
17. According to the OED, a 'damper' is a generalised term that refers to 'something that damps or depresses the spirits'. Keats's 'rather a damper' is a colloquial turn of phrase used to offset the seriousness of Tom's situation.
18. David Luke, "Keats's Notes from Underground 'To J. H. Reynolds'," *Studies in English Literature* 19 (1979): 661–72 (p. 661).
19. George Keats to John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats* 1, p. 247.
20. Roe, 264.
21. Jennifer Davis Michael, "Pectoriloquy: The Narrative of Consumption in the Letters of Keats," *European Romantic Review* 6 (1995): 38–56 (p. 43).
22. Jonathan Mulrooney, "Keats's Avatar," *European Romantic Review* 22 (2011): 313–21 (p. 313).
23. Richard Woodhouse to John Taylor, *The Letters of John Keats* 1, p. 389.
24. Michael O'Neill, "Keats's Poetry: 'The Reading of an Ever-Changing Tale'," in *Keats: Bicentenary Readings*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Edinburgh: EUP, 1997), 102–28 (pp. 104–5).
25. Keats was made to suffer inadvertently under the hands of Clark, whose treatments, including blood-letting and a 'starvation diet of an anchovy with a morsel of bread a day' (Roe, 392), were 'useless and did far more harm than good' (Roe, 389).
26. As Roe notes, Dr Clarke encouraged Keats to take mild exercise once he arrived at Rome, advising him 'to hire a horse and ride whenever the weather was favourable' (Roe, 389).
27. Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (London: Penguin, 1968), 423.
28. J. R. Watson, "Keats and Silence," in *Keats: Bicentenary Readings*, 71–87 (p. 86).
29. Jack Stillinger, "Multiple Readers, Multiple Texts, Multiple Keats," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 96 (1997): 545–66 (p. 560).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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