

Sarah Wootton

**Keats in 1819,
Essays in Honour of Michael O'Neill**

Introduction

No other writer is as synonymous with a single year as John Keats is with 1819. Most of the poems Keats is remembered for were written during 1819: *The Eve of St Agnes*, 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', the spring Odes, *Lamia*, and 'To Autumn'. Robert Gittings's seminal book, *John Keats: The Living Year*, enshrined 1819 as a monumental year for Keats and for literary history.¹ That sense of Keats's 'living year' has retained a cultural resonance, some sixty years since the study was published, as is evident in the essays in this issue that make reference to Gittings's phrase. It is important to keep in mind that the dates specified in Gittings's subtitle – 21 September 1818 to 21 September 1819 – do not constitute a calendar year, but the '365 days' which guaranteed Keats's posthumous reputation, that ensured he would be, as he hoped when faced with hostile criticism of *Endymion*, 'among the English Poets after my death'.² As Gittings starts the clock in the autumn of 1818, a number

of the essays that follow draw on events in Keats's life before 1819 to recontextualize our reading of the poet during that year.

The dates of Gittings's study correspond with the commencement of *Hyperion* in September 1818 and the abandonment of *The Fall of Hyperion* in September 1819.

...on Monday, September 21st, 1818, Keats plunged into the most amazingly creative year that any English poet has achieved. Two great unfinished poems on the same theme, *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, mark the opening and the close of this period, to the very same day of the year. In this exact year, Keats wrote, with numerous other works, practically every poem that places him among the major poets of the world. (Gittings, 4)

The 'living year' is bookended, then, not by narrative poems, sonnets, or the Odes, but by Keats's renewed ambitions with the epic (at a time when his earlier venture with the form, *Endymion*, had been attacked by John Gibson Lockhart in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*). For Walter Jackson Bate, *Hyperion* marked, too, a 'new level of writing' for Keats, beginning what he terms the 'fertile year': 'The year that it ushers in (starting about mid-September, 1818) may be soberly described as the most productive in the life of any poet of the past three centuries. The mere variety in style is difficult to parallel within the same limit of time'.³ Keats was occupied during this period with many works besides those already mentioned – including a five-act play, *Otho the Great*, co-authored with his friend, Charles Armitage Brown, the medieval fragment, 'The Eve of St Mark', sonnets on fame and (possibly) his sonnet 'Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art'. Equally, what is characterized as a 'living' or

‘fertile’ year for Keats – in terms of an extraordinary intensity of vision that has been prized by posterity – is bookended by its obverse. The period begins with Keats in poor health, returning early from his northern walking tour with Brown to find his brother Tom very ill. As 1818 draws to a close, Keats moved into Wentworth Place with Brown after the death of his brother from tuberculosis, he met and formed a romantic attachment with Fanny Brawne, and he remained troubled by the sore throats he cannot shake off. The year ends with Keats ominously ‘unwell’ and engaged to Fanny.⁴ As Nicholas Roe perceptively puts it, 1819 for Keats is a year of ‘Conjunctions’.⁵

The conjunctions in his life ‘dovetail’ in his poems, a term Keats employed for the convergence of temper and occasion that provided a catalyst for his much remarked on philosophy of ‘*Negative Capability*’ (*LJK*, i. 193).⁶ In *The Eve of St Agnes*, for instance, the anticipated death of the Beadsman frames Porphyro’s pursuit of Madeline – decrepitude and decomposition cuts through the cloying sweetness of ‘old romance’, ‘painful change’ arrests and ruptures agitated pleasures.⁷ In ‘To Autumn’, quickening decay is metered out as unctuous languor, and the liquid poise of ‘last oozyngs hours by hours’ (22) gives way, in the final stanza, to discordant wails, whistles, bleatings, and twitterings. Always about to capture the perpetually passing moment between life and death, fertility and mortality, through the looked-for figure of autumn, the poem’s permeable dualisms disconcert as they captivate: copious, souring fruits overhang and burden the ‘thatch-eves’ (4) while the bees are hoodwinked by the floriferousness of an apparently endless summer. The rose-tinted tones of autumn’s ‘soft-dying day’ (25) hold autumn in abeyance as they herald the hardness of winter, the viscous abundance of harvest-time striated by the spectre of

the Peterloo Massacre. Similarly conspiring at opacity through lyric precision, the ‘sweet moan’ (20) of sensual satisfaction in ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ is recounted from a perplexed outlook of sickening dejection; the ‘cloudy trophies’ (30) of ‘Ode on Melancholy’ yoke together and interweave a spontaneous delight in sensation with the bitter aftertaste of loss.⁸

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;

And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips

Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,

Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips

(‘Ode on Melancholy’, 21-4)

1819 was a restive year, politically and personally, for Keats. Alongside the significant events that occur in the twelve months between the Septembers of 1818 and 1819 – which include the death of Tom, fears over his own deteriorating health, and falling in love with a woman he has little chance of marrying – he is also plagued by the financial problems that persisted throughout his adult life. Borrowing money from his friends, living in ‘fear of the Winchester Jail’, and ‘speaking, writing or fretting about my non-estate’, Keats contemplates occupations with more stable prospects (*LJK*, ii. 154, 219). The poet abandons such plans as quickly as they are conceived – although the necessity of returning to the ‘Apothecary line’ is contemplated in the summer of 1820 – and he resists Richard Abbey’s suggestions that he ‘turn Bookseller’ or profit from tea brokerage (*LJK*, ii. 298, 230). It is this life of contingencies, a Keats of rapid changes in mood and situation, as Roe’s biography demonstrates, which proves conducive to the creative flourishing of 1819. While Keats spends significant stretches of 1819 at Wentworth Place, he also goes to

Chichester (from where he visits Bedhampton), stays in Shanklin on the Isle of Wight before moving to Winchester, and briefly stays in other lodgings in London. The importance accorded to these places in the essays that follow, and the circumstances (sometimes short-lived or precarious) under which Keats encountered and inhabited them, take up and extend debates in *Keats's Places*, a collection of essays published in 2018.⁹ The essay by Richard Marggraf Turley and Jennifer Squires, the fourth in this issue, recalls Richard Woodhouse's observation that 'There is a great deal of reality about all that Keats writes: and there must be many allusions to particular Circumstances, in his poems', as the enigmatic dreamscape of 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' is located among the effigies Keats saw in Chichester Cathedral and the landscapes surrounding Lower Mill in Bedhampton.¹⁰ Their essay investigates the artistic nexus between the sights, sounds, and silences Keats experienced when visiting new places (including the sculptured forms that figure prominently in his poems) and the topography of a ballad in which the protagonist, stranded on the unseasonable 'cold hill's side', is transfixed by an enchanting 'elfin grot' ('La Belle Dame sans Merci', 36, 44, 29).

The opening essay in this issue, by Seamus Perry, directly draws on Woodhouse's note in his copy of Keats's poems, a note which also serves as an epigraph for Gittings's study. The 'particular Circumstances' that Perry is concerned with is Keats's experience of living in Wentworth Place, as he and Brown shared the double-house with the Dilkes and then the Brawne family. Perry relates this domestic co-occupancy to the writing of the Odes and argues for the significance of Shakespeare's play, *Troilus and Cressida*, in the development of Keats's poetical character. The second essay, by Meiko O'Halloran, uncovers another important

literary source for Keats during this period by retracing his steps. Keats's ideas about the epic, as well as the poet-healer who figures in the "Hyperion" poems, find a model in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, a closet drama Keats and Brown read as they set out on their walking tour north in the summer of 1818. O'Halloran challenges an understanding of Keats's relationship with Milton based primarily on *Paradise Lost* and casts the poet's changing regard for suffering in a Miltonic light. Heidi Thomson's essay, the third in this issue, retains a focus on Keats's increasing empathy with and compassion for 'patient travail' (*The Fall of Hyperion*, I. 91). Thomson charts a path from Guy's Hospital in London, where Keats trained and practised surgery, to the Hospital of St Cross in Winchester, a charitable institution the poet regularly walked past in autumn 1819, a path that corresponds with the transition in Keats's poems from visions of incurable suffering in *Hyperion* to the 'palliative poetics' of 'To Autumn'. Suggestive parallels are drawn between Keats's reflections on terminal illness and the late poetry of Michael O'Neill.

The fifth essay, by Emily Rohrbach, does not seek out continuities between Keats's poems or the literary conversations within them. Rather, Rohrbach alerts us to a signal change in the poems Keats wrote before 1819 and those he wrote during 1819, a change which coincided with his separation from the politics and influence of Leigh Hunt. Where the poems that Keats wrote before 1819 engage with books on many levels – as material objects, as occasions for inspiration, as impediments to original thought – books have all but vanished in the poems of 1819. Kelvin Everest, in the sixth essay of this issue, concentrates on a single momentous day, 11 April 1819, when Keats encountered Samuel Taylor Coleridge on Hampstead Heath. The consequence of this conversation, ranging (as Keats detailed in a letter) across various

topics relating to poetry and philosophy, is, for Everest, a new degree of sophistication in Keats's writing, discernible initially in 'Ode to Psyche' and developed through the spring Odes that follow. This issue concludes with an essay by Mark Sandy on shifting fictions, imaginative flights and returns, and the prevailing sense of endings in Keats's Odes, the legacy of which is explored in the post-Romantic poetry of Wallace Stevens. Collectively, these essays delve into and draw out a poetic imagination that is uniquely receptive – to the immediacy of surroundings, the peculiarities of circumstance, and the soundings of poets, both past and present.

The essays in this issue were originally given as papers at the Keats Foundation Conference 2019 at Keats House in Hampstead. This conference was the sixth in a series of bicentennial events that bring academics into conversation with a wider audience, discussing new critical thinking on Keats's poetry, his life, and his afterlives. Speakers from as far afield as Australia, Hong Kong, Iraq, Japan, New Zealand, and Tunisia came together with speakers from across Europe and North America to reflect on Keats in 1819 and how two centuries of scholarship have shaped our understanding of the poet in that year. Sincere thanks go to those who contributed to the conference, as speakers and participants, and to my fellow organisers – Nicholas Roe, Richard Marggraf Turley, and Hrileena Ghosh – without whom the annual Keats conference would not take place. Over three days in May 2019, delegates revisited this remarkable year in the life of John Keats and considered new ways in which his poems and letters might be read.

We also marked the passing, in December 2018, of Michael O'Neill, a leading authority on Romanticism, an eminent scholar of poetry, and an award-winning poet. Michael was honoured posthumously as a Distinguished Scholar by the Keats-Shelley Association of America at the MLA Convention in 2019. He was a regular speaker at the annual Keats Foundation Conference. In 2016, as Guest of Honour, he gave an incisive and eloquent lecture on Keats's relationship with Shelley, moving far beyond the well-rehearsed exchanges in their letters to show a deeper and more resonant interaction through their poems. The resulting essay, "'The End and Aim of Poesy': Keats and Shelley in Dialogue", was published in *Keats's Places*. The 2018 Keats Foundation Conference hosted an event for Michael where he read poems, from across his five collections, that were inspired by Romantic writers. 'On Hold', from *Return of the Gift* (2018), prefaces the nightmarishly visceral image of 'a malignant strictured foodpipe walking freely' with the opening of Keats's sonnet, 'When I have fears that I may cease to be', a line revisited and abridged, to ominous effect, at the poem's close: '*When I have fears... cease to be*'.¹¹ Yet, as Heidi Thomson reminds us in her essay, while poems might make agonizing fears more tangible, they also offer respite. Poetry was, for Michael as for Keats, a 'Sure solacer of human cares, / And sweeter hope, when hope despairs!'¹² Michael also read poems, with heart-rending candour and humour, from his last collection, *Crash & Burn*, published posthumously in 2019. 'Soliloquy', about a lecture Michael gave shortly before being hospitalized, documents the ravages of chemotherapy as the speaker quips, with dark relish, at Hamlet's existential crises: '(to be or not to be – nice to have a choice)'; 'tempted to misquote / last words as "The rest is sickness"...'.¹³

Michael will be remembered as a leading critic on, and editor of, the works of Percy Bysshe Shelley. He was also an expert on an enviable range of poets from Dante to Geoffrey Hill. Most notable among his esteemed publications on Keats were the collections he edited: *Keats: Bicentenary Readings* (Edinburgh, 1997) and, twenty years later, *John Keats in Context* (Cambridge, 2017). Many of the essays that follow engage with Michael's chapters in these volumes. For Michael, Keats was a poet of quicksilver moods, of vibrant tensions, and generous (as well as generative) open-endedness, a poet 'caught up in acts of linguistic alchemy', for whom the possible treachery of imaginative experience was also a 'spur to further creativity'.¹⁴ Keats's inexhaustibility as a poet is borne out, for Michael, in the writers inspired by him and the scholars who have sought to elucidate him. As Michael advocated and embraced a pluralist approach to Keats, so this issue casts 'many-angled lights' on its subject.¹⁵ Michael was Professor of English Literature at Durham University, where he worked for nearly forty years, twice serving as Head of Department. It was a great privilege to convene Durham's Romantic-period module with Michael and, in later years, to teach Keats with him on his hugely popular undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The essays that follow are dedicated to a much-loved and much-missed mentor, colleague, and friend.

¹ Robert Gittings, *John Keats: The Living Year, 21 September 1818 to 21 September 1819* (London, 1962). Gittings states in the foreword: 'Nearly all the greatest poetry of Keats was written in the 365 days of a single year' (xi).

² Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, dated 14 October 1818, in *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (2 vols, Cambridge, 1958), i. 394. Hereafter *LJK*.

³ Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), 388. Chapter twenty-one, covering July to September 1819, is titled ‘The Close of the Fertile Year’.

⁴ Keats writes to his sister, Fanny Keats, on 22 December 1819: ‘I am sorry to say I have been and continue rather unwell’ (*LJK*, ii. 238).

⁵ Nicholas Roe, *John Keats: A New Life* (New Haven and London, 2012).

⁶ See, most recently, *Keats’s Negative Capability: New Origins and Afterlives*, ed. Brian Rejack and Michael Theune (Liverpool, 2019).

⁷ John Keats, *The Eve of St Agnes*, ll. 41, 300, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London, 1978). Subsequent quotations from Keats’s poems are taken from this edition.

⁸ Keats uses the word ‘interwoven’ (5) in his sonnet, ‘If by dull rhymes our English must be chain’d’, written as he began experimenting with the stanzas of the ode in spring 1819.

⁹ *Keats’s Places*, ed. Richard Marggraf Turley (Cham, 2018).

¹⁰ See *The Manuscripts of the Younger Romantics: John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (7 vols, New York, 1985-8), iv. 240.

¹¹ Michael O’Neill, ‘On Hold’ (‘From the Cancer Diary’), in *Return of the Gift* (Todmorden, 2018), 89, ll. 9, 14. This collection received a Special Commendation from the Poetry Society. I am very grateful to Tony Ward at Arc Publications for permission to quote from Michael’s poems in this introduction and in Heidi Thomson’s essay.

¹² Emily Brontë's poem, 'To Imagination', wrestles with, as it is inspired by, a Romantic inheritance. See *The Complete Poems*, ed. Janet Gezari (London, 1992), 20, ll. 35-6.

¹³ Michael O'Neill, 'Soliloquy (for Robert Carver)', in *Crash & Burn* (Tadmorden, 2019), 12, ll. 14, 17-18.

¹⁴ O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford, 1997), 180-1.

¹⁵ O'Neill, 'Introduction', in *John Keats in Context* (Cambridge, 2017), 1-5, 2.