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Keats's Voice

THE ACTIVE AND VEXED DELIBERATIONS OF KEATS'S POETRY—ITS VERY “thinking”—on the topic of human identity remain some of Romanticism's most incisive and expansive reflections on the constitution of selfhood. Keats's verse thinks through questions about human subjectivity and its horizons and limits in the world with an immense imaginative range, and his meditations on selfhood are often made all the more poignant and interesting by their at times startling untimeliness. Whereas most Romantics insist, in one way or another, on the priority of the self in relation to objects and in relation to the world, Keats famously asserts that the poetical character has “no identity” and allows his characters and speakers to dissolve into or be absorbed by other beings. From the early experiments to the Spring Odes, Keats's poems are populated by selves that are empty and have been hollowed out by the chameleon poet, selves that have dissipated and have come to fill out and think themselves into other bodies. Then again, the poems just as frequently are occupied with selves intensely saturated with emotion or overcome by personal feeling, strong selves full of, for example, heartache, desire, beauty, or joy. Similarly, Keats's poetic persona can at times surface in his verse as “dispossessed” or even acutely “disappointed” with itself—again, empty and vacant—but that persona can also come forward as vital, energetic, effusive, and abundant.¹ Readers of Keats have claimed that his verse is constitutively bound to a logic of the self's internalization and—with equal conviction—they have argued that Keats offers a critique of the self's autonomy and independence in the world.² Rarely has attention been given to the very breadth of literary thinking that constitutes Keats's active struggles with questions of subjectivity, human identity, and their forms of aesthetic voicing and articulation.

1. On Romanticism and dispossession of the self, see Jacques Khalip's *Anonymous Life: Romanticism and Dispossession* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009); on the Romantic self's disappointment with itself, see Laura Quinney, *The Poetics of Disappointment: Wordsworth to Ashbery* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999).

2. On Romanticism and the logic of the self's internalization, see Joshua Wilner, *Feeding on Infinity: Readings in the Romantic Rhetoric of Internalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); and on the Romantic critique of the self's autonomy, see Nancy Yousef, *Isolated Cases: The Anxieties of Autonomy in Enlightenment Philosophy and Romantic Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

Whether they emerge as rich and full or come forward as hollow and empty vessels, the selves in Keats's poetry always reach beyond their own identities. They stand for or are more than themselves. Keats's speakers, characters, and figures find that their "selves" are the openings to a precisely social, shared, and common experience. They find that their very souls (as Stanley Cavell might put it) are essentially impersonal.³ Their sense of self stretches out and extends beyond the particular and the personal (beyond the "sole self," one's discrete and distinguishable identity), and the pursuit of the self and self-knowledge therefore becomes in Keats's verse a pursuit and knowledge of others and of the world. The self in Keats's verse is more than itself, and its voice thus takes on an exemplarity, a political "standing for" or even "speaking for" others voiced within and made possible by a necessarily impersonal register of poetic expression. Keats's voice is more than his own.

For this reason, Keats's thinking through of human identity cannot be conceived as one step among many in a history of ideas about the self. Selfhood for Keats is not a conception, an abstract idea that then finds its manifestations in verse—a versified concept—but is instead a shifting locus around which some of his most intense questionings of personal and therefore common identity coalesce. Because it is inextricably part of Keats's sense of self that it is intimately bound to its aesthetic forms and material manifestations, that sense of self must be tied to a history of literary production as much as to a history of ideas or social institutions.⁴ When Keats rethinks the makeup and bounds of subjectivity, in other words, he does so specifically in the mode of literary exploration in the medium of verse. His poetry stretches and transfigures aesthetic forms—makes them reach—so that they can come to contain a changing picture of what it means to live with a human identity. For Keats, to divorce questions about the self from the ways in which it finds its voice in and through aesthetic production is to misunderstand the very nature of the fate and constitution of selfhood. The self for Keats is thus not a thing (or a non-thing) but a set of aesthetic, social, and political stresses that press at the possibilities that the poet has for

3. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 361.

4. For a history-of-ideas account of conceptions of the self particularly relevant for Romantic literature and philosophy, see Charles Taylor's magisterial *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); and also Jerrold Seigel's less successful and persuasive *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For a genealogy of the notion of the self as a social form, see especially Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

voicing and the horizons or the reaches and contours of that voice. Keats's voice and soul are emphatically *made*.

It is thus noteworthy that while Keats's characteristic modes of literary exploration tightly bind the fate of the self or the soul and its language together, they also thoroughly defy the commonplace that links poetry in the Romantic period to the category of "expression." That a notion of writing as "expression" comes to dominate aesthetic production in the Romantic period is a commonplace about Romanticism that appears and continues to reappear in even the most penetrating and insightful contemporary analyses of lyric poetry and the historical study of lyric forms,⁵ and it has an institutional history that finds its culmination in the theoretical proposition M. H. Abrams put forward in 1953 that Romanticism is characterized by a shift from a "pragmatic" to what he famously calls an "expressive" paradigm of understanding and practicing poetics. For Abrams, Romantic theory and aesthetic philosophy define poetry "in terms of the imaginative process which modifies and synthesizes the images, thoughts, and feelings of the poet." Poetry is, put simply, "the internal made external."⁶ Yet it is precisely such a picture of the inside being turned out or of personal affect being pushed upward or forward that Keats's highly wrought, richly orchestrated, and openly crafted style seems to defy. We might recall here, for example, that Keats's poetic persona does not emulate but instead envies the nightingale's ability to pour forth its song in what he jealously calls "full-throated ease" (10)—a capacity for effortless, unreserved, natural expression, or a seamlessness between the medium and the one issuing forth. That ease is something the speaker himself in the "Ode to a Nightingale" does not have. Instead, we hear the strain of his own song.

At the same time, the idioms that Romantic critical reception history has offered as alternatives to the concept of "expression"—a vocabulary of disfigurement, defacement, tropological substitutions, and self-contestation—also do not aptly represent or capture the stakes of Keats's struggles with his language and his aesthetic medium. Although Keats's poetry is marked by important moments of self-effacement and self-contestation, it captures neither the spirit nor the logic of those moments, turning instead to an idiom in which language, rhetoric, or tropes become active agencies in the trajectories of the poems. For there is a consistent sense with Keats, sometimes alarmingly acute, that his language has at once the ability to express his very soul *but yet also* to take his breath away from him—that poetry is at

5. See as representative, for example, Jonathan Culler's passing remark in the introductory comments of his recent "Why Lyric?" (*PMLA* 123, no. 1 [2008]) that Romantic poetics is marked by "the notion of lyric as expression of intense personal feeling" (201).

6. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 22.

once oppressive and enabling in the struggle for the constitution of an identity. The very condition of some of Keats's poetic utterances is the poetic persona's knowledge of himself as essential inheritor of an expressive medium, one that does not belong to him and at which he arrives belatedly. The notion that a poetic voice finds form through an expressive and unmediated singular human agency comes thoroughly undone in Keats's characteristically densely woven, concentrated, and often declaredly derivative style that puts craft itself so openly on display and always shows its hand—what the early reviewers found indulgent and exhibitionistic in Keats and what a critic like Marjorie Levinson aptly has termed an *overcultivated* style.⁷

In this essay I hope to show, through a rereading of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, that a theoretical space can be opened in which the concept of "voice" might be wrested from an expressivist poetics as well as from a merely self-canceling deconstructive reductionism and, instead, made useful for conceiving and framing the uniquely impersonal vocal register of Keats's later verse, a register in which the singular turns out to be the common, and in which the self discovers that it comes to stand for and speak for more than its "sole" self—that its impersonality loads it with the burden of something like a representativeness. Through an emphasis on Keats's experimentations with self, identity, poetic persona, speaker, and character, my analysis seeks to bring to light the problematic of what I would like to call *St. Agnes'* essential tonelessness, and it puts forward a reading and description of the ways this tonal indeterminacy results in the creation of Keats's impersonal voice. This essay takes up *St. Agnes* as its model because the poem is so often read with the assumption that Keats finally does grow into a full, mature poetic "voice" in this and the other works of 1819. In opposition, I hope to show that Keats precisely never arrives in this poem at what one could call a voice that is only his own.

Seen one way, *The Eve of St. Agnes* can be read as a montage of derivatives, an assemblage of genre conventions, images, and figures. While it would seem fitting to recount the narrative action of the poem in order to orient our reading, it is in fact difficult to extract any straightforward or cohesive dramatic trajectory from this text. The critical reception history of *St. Agnes* has centered on just this inability to distinguish discrete action from incidence, image, and background. Keats himself in a letter refers to the poem as "drapery," so that some critics, rather than interpreting the text's action, have opted to concede with him and argue that the dominant sense in the poem is not dramatic at all but instead highly pictorial—a com-

7. Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 9.

posite of especially vivid and sensuous imagery.⁸ The story, nonetheless, is in theme a romance and in form a narrative: Young Porphyro seduces Madeline on St. Agnes' Eve, the ritual during which she is said to be able to glimpse her future husband in her dreams. After his successful entry into her bedchamber and a scene of sexual consummation, the two escape from Madeline's castle. As both romance and ironic antiromance, the text is narratively unfulfilling. No paraphrase—and this is not the case for all of Keats's romances—seems aptly or rightly to capture what “happens” in this poem. Indeed, most allegorical readings of the text also disagree about what constitutes the text's central event. It is not that the sensuousness of the text's imagery exceeds paraphrase but rather that the tale itself is not focused on what is happening inside of it, and it often appears avowedly not to care about its own action. The arc of approach, meeting, and escape compulsory for the action of romance is sustained in this text in theme but not in actual narrative form and structure.

If Keats's poems, as Martin Aske has argued, are always to be read as endeavored rather than accomplished—that is, as inherently unfinished literary forms which both attempt coherence and completeness and necessarily also register its futility (as irreducibly *belated* forms, in other words)—*St. Agnes* must be read as Keats's attempt at romance.⁹ It is an openly failed antiromantic experiment, for Keats registers the futility of the ironic in this text just as he does the authentic. Parts are knowingly employed without purpose, and the locus around which the poem is organized, therefore, is neither allegory nor simply rich, sensuous imagery but rather its own failure to become a proper narrative poem—thus marking perhaps one of the ends of Keats's engagement with romance as the apposite form for staging questions about the possibilities for poetry that occupy him in his late works.

In the early months of 1819, then, the year *The Eve of St. Agnes* was

8. Letter to John Taylor, 17 November 1819, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 2:234. For a discussion of the debate between what Levinson calls the “gorgeous tapestry school” and the “metaphysical school” of interpretation, see *Keats's Life of Allegory*, 97–104. As representative of the former, see especially Earl Wasserman, who claims that the poem is “a storehouse of narrative, descriptive, atmospheric, and prosodic techniques for building a poetic dream-world” (*The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953], 100); Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), who argues that the poem's Spenserian stanzas result in “pictorial units” (438) that “tempt poetic narrative toward tableau” (441); and Grant Scott, who proposes “we read the poem as a painting” (*The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts* [Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994], 89).

9. Martin Aske, *Keats and Hellenism: An Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 74.

written and over the course of which he is said to have matured into a full poetic "voice," Keats dramatically is still citing, taking on other voices. If we read only *St. Agnes'* opening lines, we see, rhetorically condensed, what kind of interpretive difficulty this openly derivative text presents:

St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!
 The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
 The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,
 And silent was the flock in woolly fold:
 Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told
 His rosary, and while his frosted breath,
 Like pious incense from a censer old,
 Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,
 Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.¹⁰

Plainly these lines of poetry are not *written*, or not wrought, in the same way that, for instance, lines such as these are—

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time
 ("Ode on a Grecian Urn," 1–2)

The point may seem apparent: *St. Agnes* throughout openly makes use of tropes and clichés of medieval romance and gothic tales—chill, rituals, castles, maidens, and seducers. Walter Jackson Bate, for instance, in an unsympathetic reading, thus puts forward the judgment that the poem's imagery is flat and banal—stock and predictable.¹¹ Yet its exaggeratedly, flamboyantly derivative opening declares that *St. Agnes* knows itself to be not an entirely serious poem. What appears to be the obviousness of the contrast above in kinds of writing—the derivative and the original—testifies to the fact that from its very first lines *St. Agnes* tells its reader that it is citing and making use of genre figures and conventions.¹² That the poetic persona is in some way positioned by these lines—that they are not utterance but

10. *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), lines 1–9. Subsequent references to Keats's poems are quoted by lines from this edition.

11. Bate, *John Keats*, 448.

12. In her reading of *St. Agnes*, Elizabeth Fay similarly maintains that "it is the work in which [Keats] uses medievalism to overturn rather than enable romance" and that he is "not merely replicating a medieval poetic aesthetic" (*Romantic Medievalism: History and the Romantic Literary Ideal* [Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2002], 127, 135). More broadly, Fay argues that Keats's use of medieval genre figures and conventions recuperates and revives a troubadourian tradition and ethos that aligns him with an un-nostalgic "radical medievalism" (3), one which stands opposed to the chivalric conservative ethos she associates with Scott, Wordsworth, and Byron. The troubadour's song, Fay asserts, actually *subverts* the medieval

citation—they themselves precisely announce. The text forces the question of tone and poetic position right away, and it thereby also forces the question of what kind of poem it is. Is it to be satire? A rewriting of romance? *St. Agnes* indeed importantly contains elements of both. But what is most perplexing about the text's exaggeratedly derivative and generic opening is that it casts doubt on how the poem is to be read at all, for as the text unfolds, one feels that satire is not exactly the right term for this particular style of derivation, and no clear sense of allegory suggests itself. The uncertain status—their employment without clear design—of the tropes of both gothic and romance in the poem stems from the narrative voice's own lack of convincing investment in them, either genuine or clearly ironic. They are deployed without tone, in other words, simply cited, for Keats is not sufficiently committed to his ironies to warrant calling this poem's tone satirical. Very few readings of *St. Agnes* address the question of tone and tonality, which the text itself poses forcefully in the way it dramatizes—almost seems to hold up from the beginning—its own generic sources and styles. The text thus resists tonality.

St. Agnes commences, as Keats's poems often do, by announcing itself as a poem—the words “St. Agnes' Eve.” These words echo and restate the poem's title and announce determinatively, insistently (as if the impetus might fade otherwise) that we will be reading a poem about the Eve of St. Agnes. They attempt to establish, to *force* as it were, the poem into being. This beginning is comparable in its formal effect to lines such as these in the opening stanzas of *Endymion*:

Therefore, 'tis with full happiness that I
Will trace the story of Endymion

(34–35)

or, most prominently, the opening of the early peculiarly titled “Specimen of an Induction to a Poem”: “Lo! I must tell a tale of chivalry.” We can also pause to note that the opening of the “Ode to a Nightingale” insists on itself very forcefully as “lyric” in an analogous manner: “My heart aches . . . ,” and insofar as the form of the ode classically is structured as an address to a personified form, often a feminine one whose invocation then mirrors a structure of desire, the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” similarly though less obviously begins resolutely and self-consciously as “ode”: “Thou still unravish'd bride. . . .”

itself, as it critiques the representation of a hierarchical and patriarchal world. For Fay's historically sensitive readings of *St. Agnes* as balanced between troubadourian lyric stoppage and narrative time, and for her characterization of Porphyro as the radicalized and politicized poet-lover, see Chapter 4: “Keats and the Time of Romance.”

St. Agnes thus begins with resolution as a poem about St. Agnes' Eve. The most convincing accounts of this premeditated way of beginning the writing of a poem, through which the Keatsian text becomes diegetically conscious of itself and openly charts its plan for the reader, come from Marjorie Levinson and Thomas Pfau. Both read this formal feature critically, that is, outside of the question of Keats's poetic development and lingering self-consciousness or even immature awkwardness. As Levinson contends, it is moments such as these in which Keats publicizes his determined desire to "write poetry" and thereby shows his hand as a poet that unites a Wordsworth and a Byron in their strong animosity toward him.¹³ And as Pfau argues, the Keatsian text in all of its formal features and organization is characterized by precisely this kind of "fundamentally metalinguistic stance as poetry."¹⁴ As the opening words of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, "St. Agnes' Eve" bears out both points: as the repetition or underlining of the title of the poem, it functions as a confession that the poet is in effect filling space or that he experiences poetic space as something to be filled. The poem thus collects momentum from the sheer desire to write rather than tell this particular tale. We can even hear in the following "Ah" ("St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!") the poet's own surprise or relief at having managed momentum: "St. Agnes' Eve." What then? "Ah," yes! And as the following "Ah" also clearly shows, Keats's narrative persona is not at all identified with the first-person affective signifier of pure expression. *St. Agnes* thus commences by thematizing itself as a poem about St. Agnes' Eve—what might be called its metalinguistic or metapoetic stance.

Keats further thematizes the act of narration in *St. Agnes'* opening by explicitly and exaggeratedly foregrounding his narrator. The weaver of illusion is a figure in the text, and if we follow the subtle changes of tense in just the poem's opening line, we see how Keats's construction has the effect of underlining this persona. Like a film, the poem's opening line places the narrator at once in the distant and opaque past ("St. Agnes' Eve . . ." he muses) and immediate present ("Ah, bitter chill it was!"). It is as though we are being shown something before our very eyes, which we are also to understand actually took place "ages long ago" (370). The past takes on narrative form from the point of view of an immediately present subjective position—a "persona."

The use of tense in the poem's opening line and throughout the text also establishes the narrative voice's belated role. He is one who acts as if he were a witness to a tale whose "pastness" is completed rather than one who weaves and controls the poem. Keats arrives belatedly to the scene of old

13. Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory*, 17.

14. Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790–1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 325.

romance, in other words. This construction of point of view exemplifies Keats's tendency to narrate story as if both immediately present and distanced from above—narrative which absorbs a narrative persona rather than one of which he is actually in control. In the case of *St. Agnes*, Keats thematizes this tendency through the attempt to foreground our narrator. The narrative persona watches the tale unravel and moves with the story, appearing to follow it around corners and bends, sometimes as (ironically) surprised or delighted by its movements as the reader ought to be. Explicit references that thematize this role of the narrator and thus that highlight and probe the role of "chance" abound in the text: "And so it chanc'd" (21), "Ah, happy chance!" (91), or "These let us wish away / And turn . . ." (41-42), the narrator interjects. Our foregrounded teller is thus made a figure in the tale, deliberately exposing the devices and illusions of the act of fiction-weaving.

The poem's opening line, then, places the narrator in the mythic past by simply repeating the poem's title. In order to better grasp what the tense and tonal construction of *St. Agnes'* opening lines accomplish, we might note again that structurally the text begins like a work of cinema.¹⁵ That films and generally not novels or poems tend to include their titles within themselves or tend to "start" with their titles is not irrelevant to conceptualizing what Keats's narrative eye here accomplishes. A film announces itself or can announce itself by explicitly stating or giving us its title because the grammar of its reception is not tied to an imaginary of enunciation or expression. Understanding images as ways of meaning, in this case that the words are passing across the screen and are not "uttered," is constitutive of understanding what a film is.

One way critics account for the structure of *St. Agnes'* first line is by speaking of Keats's opening words "St. Agnes' Eve" as a way of establishing

15. On the analogy between Keats's poetry and the unique structure of viewing in cinema, see especially Orrin N. C. Wang's "Coming Attractions: *Lamia* and Cinematic Sensation," *Studies in Romanticism* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 461-500. Wang argues that Keats's *Lamia* allegorizes the conflicted principles of visibility present in what is called pre-cinema in its relation to visual sensation, immediacy, and motion. On the relation between Romanticism and the visible, the logic of visibility, and "vision," particularly relevant for disciplinary concerns in film studies, see William H. Galperin, *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). For studies that offer only implicit yet very suggestive parallels between Keats's characteristic ways of viewing, seeing, and watching and the unique ontology of the cinematic image, see especially Charles Rzepka, *The Self as Mind: Vision and Identity in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats*, Chapter 4: "Keats: Watcher and Witness" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), which emphasizes Keats's unobserved and disembodied voyeurism (165, 170) and his desire to be a "sublime spectator" rather than participant in what appears before him (180); and Grant Scott, *The Sculpted Word*, whose emphasis falls on Keats's obsession with "watching" (xiv) and its relation to the psychological, historical, cultural, and especially gendered dimensions of the use of ekphrasis.

setting. Their function, however, is more analogous to a title sequence than an opening pan, for no "setting," we can note, is actually established at all. What does it mean, in other words, to establish "setting" in a work of writing by the inscription of the name of a ritual that happens to echo almost exactly the title of the work to which it belongs? What is "setting" in that sense? Again, the tropes of satire or antiromance may suggest themselves here as interpretive options, underlining the shallowness or flimsiness of the generic setting and narrator, but understanding *St. Agnes* as either one hinges, as does the understanding of the poem as genuine and not ironic at all, on the reception of the words as uttered from a speaker's position, that is, with tone. What would it mean to imagine "St. Agnes' Eve" as both the first words of *The Eve of St. Agnes* and as uttered with tone? Keats is not sufficiently committed to his satire of the conventions of gothic and romance in this poem to warrant its description as ironic. What tone and what narrative position, then, capture what these opening words accomplish: the bare naming of a setting, one whose associations are strictly generic and mythic, which designates the very world in which the poem will unfold and, in addition, designates the poem itself? The opening words in fact establish the very disavowal of narration as utterance and thus of meaning as "deep." Keats simply cites his own title—precisely where a poem starts. The stance that captures the opening utterance, therefore, is that of someone positioned at the beginning of a tale who simply names it—forces it into movement. It suggests that as narrator he has little investment in the unfolding or evolution of that tale as a tale about St. Agnes' Eve and with whose wonder as well as anticipation or indifference at the metonymic chain that will unfold we are asked to identify. "St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!" The text entreats either our identification or our sense of humor with the exaggerated tonality and overstated immediacy of "Ah, bitter chill it was!" Yet it denies our access to the meaning of these words as precisely inflected by any voice since their tone is so very exaggerated and their syntactic and affective makeup is entirely generic. "St. Agnes' Eve." What then? What next? What are the associations? Ah . . . I know. In this way, the rhetorical effect is that something like a voice is not in control of this poem.

Keats carries the cinematic point of view established in the poem's first line throughout the course of the text. The narrative persona appears to "chase" the narrative in a combination of a present tense that marks his arrival on and voyeuristic hovering above a scene and a past tense that marks his absence from within that scene. *St. Agnes* is not paced in the characteristic "slow time" of some of Keats's verse. It begins with the Beadsman, for instance, his fingers "numb" from telling his rosary, framed by "emprison'd" sculptures that "seem to freeze" and "ache" as he passes by in "slow

degrees" (1-9), but this static or indolent tempo is soon replaced with a narrative pace one might term stalling,

So, purposing each moment to retire,
She linger'd still . . .

(73-74)

writes Keats of the narrative's refusal to retire Madeline finally to bed. The reference to "lingering" is at once to Madeline's and therefore the poem's disinclination to retire her to bed. Madeline lingers awhile as the poem lingers awhile and thus we too linger on what she sees and the scene around her. The narrative here puns on its own refusal to move and its insistence on poetically loitering. The most notable instance of this kind of stubborn imaging occurs when Porphyro prepares a lavish feast for Madeline. While poetic investment is clearly expended on the meal, the feast is immediately abandoned altogether by the poem. Keats's description of the feast is as lavish and elaborate as the feast itself, but the meal is precisely uninstrumental with regard to the meeting between the two lovers. It thus constitutes one of several minor anticlimaxes within the text, that is, moments in which narrative and poetic expenditure are clearly unaligned and incommensurate with one another, and the text's "poetry" appears to disavow the narrative poem to which it in fact belongs.

The whole of *St. Agnes'* trajectory is structured around a failed and unfulfilling anticlimax for which Keats compensates with an ironically "fulfilling" scene of sexual consummation. Madeline awakens on St. Agnes Eve to find Porphyro and the lavish feast he has prepared, and the impression of the reality of her pallid and drear lover disappoints her:

There was a painful change, that nigh expell'd
The blisses of her dream so pure and deep;

(300-301)

Madeline's moment of Keatsian disillusionment and return to the cold world is unfulfilling in the course of this particular poem because Keats allows his lovers the luxury of sexual intercourse and escape from the castle anyway. Madeline's anticlimactic disappointment thus acts as a climax solely because of its narrative position; a failed meeting between the two lovers propels the poem in exactly the direction a flourishing meeting should have. Madeline and Porphyro meet on St. Agnes Eve; Madeline feels deep despair and disappointment at the reality of her lover; and the two escape together from the castle anyway. It is as though—in a play on the expectations of a spiritual communion around which the romance should have been shaped—Madeline and Porphyro's sexual fulfillment acts to atone for the lack of *narrative* fulfillment. With a play on the notions of

love, climax, and plot, we and they, in other words, are permitted a scene of thematic sexual consummation, beautifully expounded no less, at precisely the moment the narrative, structurally, fails to consummate.

No tension, knowledge, or past experience shapes the exchanges between Madeline and Porphyro. It is strange that the relationship of the two lovers is characterized by nothing other than an explicitly and singularly sensuous sexual act. Keats deliberately gives Madeline and Porphyro's romance neither reason nor past; their characterization as figures to be in love is not shallow but absent entirely. Keats gives their love so little purpose textually that the interpretations of the text as one in which Porphyro "hoodwinks" Madeline through a deceiving stratagem or in which he is "blind" in his love for her have had considerable evidence and sway.¹⁶ But the fact that the characters' act of consummation can so easily be interpreted as incidence rather than as a textually motivated inevitability testifies not to Porphyro's deceptive spirit but to the uniquely superficial mode of characterization in the text. Madeline and Porphyro do not act as if they were characters in a text but generic figures who behave, as one critic puts it, rather like colors on a palette.¹⁷ Their makeup is of the exigencies of narrative and image rather than character in any meaningful sense. Madeline acts as a Madeline should—both her "sweetness" (141) and her weakness are already known—and Porphyro (purple-red), as one whose singular narrative act is to plot a sexual encounter, does as well. "His characters are completely physical in a physical world," writes Harold Bloom, and Susan Wolfson comments that they are "figures of pure art," in effect, prefigurative.¹⁸ They do not "act" or have the capacity to act; instead, they "glide" (361) throughout or within the poem.

Madeline and Porphyro, then, are each so singularly identified with the physical impulse that determines the action of the story—enchantment and sexuality—that nothing like "character" can be said to emerge. It is not that Keats reduces them to a singular desire; rather, it is as though the text unfolds according to the pull of what is portrayed as their physicality as such. It is not simply that they do not strain or struggle as full characters might but that narrative event in the text comes to be synonymous with their physical characteristics. Madeline is "thoughtful" and full of "whim"

16. My reference here is to Jack Stillinger's often cited "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" in *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

17. Scott, *Sculpted Word*, 89.

18. Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 379; and Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 295.

(55); while "young Porphyro" (75) simply has his "heart on fire for Madeline" (75)—to "speak, kneel, touch, kiss" (81) her. Keats's descriptive imagery extends little beyond these attributions. "Burning Porphyro" (159) flushes, stands, kneels, and implores, while Madeline throughout is full of "sleepy-eyed" (169) enchantment with the story of St. Agnes' Eve and sleeps among "blanched linen" (263). Madeline and Porphyro are not characters but purely physical images whose qualities determine the poem's movement as romance. They are part of what Christopher Ricks characterizes as a full "physicality" in this text.¹⁹

The Eve of St. Agnes is not only an endeavored or unaccomplished anti-romance, but it is also un-accomplished, that is, like the Hyperion poems, in a sense unfinished. The lovers do, to be sure, escape from the castle, but only because they have to. Structurally, the text remains unclosed. Keats lets the lovers go only by letting go of the poem itself from its own point of view. In the poem's closing stanzas, Keats gives us a unique and even unsettling moment of play with voice, tone, and poetic identity. It is indisputable that he lets go in *St. Agnes'* concluding stanza—and all critics comment on the consequent surreal or dreamlike effect—of diegesis as such. He abandons his figures and his own poem. At the end of this poem, Keats literally lets his lovers leave its world, *St. Agnes' Eve*, with a veritable pan-out and cut. While there is extensive critical debate about how *St. Agnes* is to be read, and while infinite textual details can be brought out to support any contending allegorical interpretation—the text's critical reception history supports a tremendous variety—the poem itself remains sealed off through its insistent tonelessness and indeterminate vocal register as it ends. In its concluding lines, Keats's poetic voice appears not to know how to continue narrating and looking at his own text. As if allegorizing this very lack of obligation and commitment to its subject and its plot, the poem in the break between its penultimate and final stanza simply lets the lovers go, move on into some other imaginative world:

By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide:—
 The chains lie silent on the footworn stones;—
 The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.
 And they are gone: ay, ages long ago
 These lovers fled away into the storm.

(367–71)

What the abrupt change in tense here enacts ("turns . . . opens . . . they are gone . . . these lovers fled") is not the lovers' successful escape from the

19. Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 92.

castle but their sudden vanishing from the poetic field of vision. This field of vision from its first words had been anchored to the immediacy of affect ("Ah, bitter chill it was!"). The poem's penultimate stanza exaggerates this dedication to immediacy through regular, consecutive interjections of the present tense: full easy slide / lie / turns . . . opens . . . groans. At the end of this present-tense sequence, the lovers escape, quite simply, from the poem: "And they are gone," Keats writes. The commencing "And . . ." and the final interjection of the present tense ("are gone") captures their momentum out. Eager for orientation and meaning at the conclusion of this difficult tale, we are then told that they in fact fled "ages long ago," as if that meaning were being held not only out of our reach but out of the poet's own reach as well.

In thinking through the relation between Keats's politics and Keats's voice in the 1986 *Studies in Romanticism* forum dedicated to Keats and Politics, Alan Bewell writes the following about the political investments of Keats's vocal registers: "Keats's inability to speak in an assured political voice and his discomfort with the political languages that were available to him as a poet constitute, in themselves, a political viewpoint."²⁰ One might broaden the idea further and note that Keats's tangible discomforts—what Bewell aptly marks by drawing our attention to a lack of *assurance* in the voice—manifest themselves not only in Keats's reluctance to take on the explicit languages of politics but also in his inability to take on any full-throated language with ease at all. Keats's voice, as I have tried to show, is never comfortably his own, and it can therefore be more than his own, an impersonal voice that speaks out beyond the contours of its own discrete identity and pushes our understanding of what it means to be or have or represent a self more than any other Romantic poet, thereby expanding our thinking of the political dimensions of selfhood and agency. For it is in the poetic self's evacuation of its inwardly individuated identity and in the voice's evacuation of a tone and register of its own that Keats asks us to think selfhood—in its simultaneous being as ours and not ours, speaking as and speaking for—precisely as a political entity, one through which a common world of experience comes into view.

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20. Alan J. Bewell, "The Political Implications of Keats's Classicist Aesthetics," *SiR* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 229.

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