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Keats and America: Attitudes and Appropriations

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by

Jessica Hall

May 2016

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Keywords: John Keats, Transatlanticism, Appropriations, Stanley Plumly,  
B.H. Fairchild, Amy Clampitt

## ABSTRACT

Keats and America: Attitudes and Appropriations

by

Jessica Hall

While John Keats never traveled to America and only wrote a handful of admittedly hostile lines about it in his poetry, American writers and readers have consistently regarded Keats as one of the greatest and most influential poets of the past two centuries. His critical reputation in America has been stable since the 1840s, enduring throughout changing tastes and movements, and his biography and work have been utilized in manifold appropriations by American poets and writers. I examine Keats's attitude toward the United States—which was in conflict with the general feeling regarding the country by his fellow Romantic poets—and briefly review the American reception of Keats's poetry in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries before considering quintessential appropriations of Keats and the Keats biography in works by three American poets: Amy Clampitt, Stanley Plumly, and B.H. Fairchild.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Although John Keats's view of America bordered on contemptuous at its worst and was marked by an uncharacteristic lack of imaginative sympathy at best, Joseph Severn's 1863 remark about the poet's standing in the United States has remained consistently true. "[I]n America," Severn wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly*, "he has always had a solid fame, independent of the old English prejudices" (401). In the nineteenth century Keats's reputation in America was more favorable than his concurrent status in England; and the twentieth century, supported by the American New Critical movement, and energized by the publication of Walter Jackson Bate's landmark biography *John Keats*, regarded Keats with more approval than the other canonical Romantic poets. So strong was this approbation that it spawned continual and varied appropriations and adaptations of Keats's work and life throughout the twentieth century in American literature. The discrepancy between Keats's rejection of America and America's reception of Keats is obviously a testament to the poetry, but American appropriation of Keats's life and work also reflects his negatively capable, "allegorical" (to use Keats's own word) nature as a poet. Jack Stillinger—another American—has defined this chameleon-poet ability to "[be] all things to all people" as "Multiple Keats" (120); in America that multiplicity has often translated to an emphasis on the poet's working or middle class origins, his well-documented penchant for self-discipline and self-discovery, and the modern sensibility of much of his best work.

There is nothing especially "American" about Keats's poetry. In terms of place, his primary textual wellsprings are England, Greece, and Italy; America is quite literally a footnote in most editions of Keats's work, as the only reference he makes to it is a veiled one in an

extemporaneous poem that is not particularly well-thought-of, if it is thought of at all. Nor does Keats himself have a concrete relationship to America. While his brother George's emigration to the U.S. in 1818 ensured that America would play a part in the Keats biography, Keats never journeyed across the Atlantic and seemed to have no desire to ever do so outside of an obvious wish to see his brother's new family. Indeed, he wrote to George and his sister-in-law Georgiana in September 1819 that he could not imagine himself there: "You will perceive it is quite out of my interest to come to America—What could I do there? How could I employ myself?" (301). Keats would continue to regard the American continent as alien and strange; after learning of George's financial ruin there in 1819, that wary lack of sympathy would become decidedly hostile.

Yet whatever Keats thought of America, twentieth-century American poetry is thoroughly loaded with Keatsian appropriations, perhaps most notably in the work of Wallace Stevens, an intertextual relationship many critics, including Helen Vendler, have explored. The most pointed appropriations of Keats in late twentieth-century American poetry, however, are not merely allusions to or borrowings from his poetry, or what is simply Keatsian, but incorporations of Keats the individual and the Keats story into the American mythos, landscape, and poetic tradition. I have chosen to examine this type of appropriation as it is represented in the work of three American poets in the last quarter of the twentieth century and into the beginning of the twenty-first: Amy Clampitt, Stanley Plumly, and B.H. Fairchild.

Amy Clampitt's 1984 series *Voyages: A Homage to John Keats* integrates American landmarks and poetic history into a retelling of the Keats biography, even as she directly addresses Keats's antipathy toward America. *Voyages* is not a wholesale reinvention of the life or myth of Keats, but rather a reworking of what might be called Keatsian metahistory, utilizing



satirical and tragic emplotments.<sup>1</sup> Clampitt employs and conflates direct quotes from Keats's letters and poetry, as well as from Bate's *John Keats* and the work of American poets such as Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, T.S. Eliot, and Hart Crane, so that the overall effect of *Voyages* is one of amalgamation, as the landscape of nineteenth-century America, Keats's image of America, and the poetic histories of two continents blend and converge. Clampitt's variation on Keats's story encompasses the becoming of America itself, both as a frontier nation distinct from England and as a country establishing its own specific literary tradition.

Clampitt links Keats to the life and work of Whitman in particular, a precedent followed by Stanley Plumly's 2000 poem "Reading with the Poets," which draws connections between Keats's medical background and Whitman's tending of the wounded during the Civil War. "Reading with the Poets" is only one piece of Plumly's decades-long Keats project, which culminated in the non-linear, self-styled "personal biography," *Posthumous Keats*, in 2008. As the title suggests, Plumly's Keats biography is principally concerned with the development of the poet's reputation over the nearly two hundred years since his death. Plumly considers this issue from every conceivable angle: portraits of Keats—both living and posthumous—by Charles Brown, Joseph Severn, and Benjamin Robert Haydon; the epitaph desired by Keats and the "compromise" fashioned by Brown and Severn; Shelley's elegy *Adonais*; the admiration of the Pre-Raphaelites; and the many attempts at literary homage by those in the Keats Circle. In weighing each of these tributes with a protective love of Keats that is at once unconditional and unflinching, Plumly explores the fallacy and good intention behind them—each of which he believes has, in one way or another, perpetuated a conception of Keats that has little to do with who he really was. Plumly's role as biographer is both reinforced and complicated by the fact

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<sup>1</sup> I reference these terms as they are defined by Hayden White in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1973).

that he is also an elegist for Keats himself, most famously in the 1983 poem that shares a title with the subsequent biography, "Posthumous Keats," but also in poems such as "Keats in Burns Country," "Constable's Clouds for Keats," and "Reading with the Poets." Plumly rewrites Keatsian metahistory in a more speculative manner than Clampitt, with senses attuned to what is left out of the Keats story as we know it and with less interest in Keats's relationship to America (except in the aforementioned "Reading with the Poets"). Yet Plumly's tendency to take up the mantle of elegist for Keats is particularly interesting when Keats's view of Americans is considered alongside Plumly's work on the poet, which also deals with Americans' attachment to Keats. Plumly is deeply invested in the idea that posthumous representations of Keats are almost always distortions; as a result, Plumly's own representations of Keats are multilayered and self-referential.

In a manner entirely distinct from Clampitt's and Plumly's, B.H. Fairchild's Keats appropriations place an especial emphasis on the nineteenth-century poet's socioeconomic status, as he assimilates Keats into the American working class and Fairchild's own Midwestern background. Of the three poets, Fairchild appropriates Keats in the purest sense of the word, in service of his poetry's larger thematic agenda. In his poems "Keats" and "The Student Assistant," Fairchild utilizes Keats for what readers generally know of the poet's biography, rather than relying heavily on specifics as Clampitt and Plumly do. Fairchild is not retelling the myth of Keats, nor is he attempting to comprehend the "whole" Keats, but instead uses what Plumly calls "Keats clichés" to his poems' advantage. For Fairchild, the truth of these clichés or the elements of the biography that he employs are irrelevant; what his poems require is what most readers think they know about Keats, and these general truths or assumptions serve the poems as no other poet's life story could.

In his essay entitled “The ‘Story’ of Keats,” Stillinger highlights the manner in which artists and critics of every literary movement and group since the 1840s have been taken by and often worked upon different aspects of Keatsian history and poetry; the work of these American poets represents another phase of Multiple Keats, which becomes apparent in a tendency to make Keats himself a part of the American story. To appreciate this uniquely American version of Keats, his vision of America must first be considered and America’s overall reception of his poetry should be reviewed. These elements of the relationship between Keats and America are the beginnings of the project of putting Keats’s work in a transatlantic context, a process that has not yet been undertaken in a comprehensive way.

## CHAPTER 2

### “MY OWN PARTICULAR IDEA OF AMERICA:” KEATS AND AMERICA

In *The Keats Brothers*, Denise Gigante writes that, unlike his brother George, “John had never been swept away by the idea of America” (143). This is demonstrated in the sporadic mentions of the United States in John Keats’s letters, references which range from indifferent and unimpressed digressions to more direct statements of intense distaste. Unsurprisingly, nearly all of the latter occur after Keats learned of George’s financial tribulations across the Atlantic, as well as after his own hopes of solvency were dashed when the actor Edmund Kean left for a tour of the States. Keats and Charles Brown had co-authored their tragedy *Otho the Great* in the hopes that Kean would star in the titular role, but in August 1819 they learned that Kean was preparing to leave England for an American tour (Bate 572). In three letters of late August and mid-September, written respectively to Fanny Keats, John Taylor, and George and Georgiana, Keats emphasizes how devastating this news was:

28 August 1819: I have still been hard at work, having completed a Tragedy I think I spoke of to you—But there I fear all my labour will be thrown away for the present, as I hear Mr Kean is going to America[.] (263)

31 August 1819: We have been much in want of news from the Theatres having heard that Kean is going to America—but no—not a word[.] (265)

17-27 September 1819: Mine I am sure is a tolerable tragedy—it would have been a bank to me, if just as I had finish’d it I had not heard of Kean’s resolution to go

to America. That was the worst news I could have had. There is no actor can do the principal character besides Kean. (284)

Neither Bate nor Gigante, who each touch upon the subject of Kean's American tour and the blow it was to Keats's and Brown's plans for *Otho*, draws any conclusion regarding Keats's feelings about America from these reflections. Certainly it cannot be considered as influential an impetus for the shift as the more frequently and clearly documented financial disaster George experienced, but Keats's faith in *Otho* as a moneymaker and dependence on Kean's participation as part of that plan suggest that it might have played a larger role than has been previously supposed.

The aversion Keats's letters express for America after these events is understandable and much more expected than the manner in which he discusses it in earlier letters. In those previous letters, written just before and in the first year after George and Georgiana emigrated, Keats writes of America with a sense for its vastness and strangeness that seems typical for the Romantic era, during which William Blake's *America: a Prophecy* (1793) and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam* (1818) were also written, with a sense of fascination and admiration for the American revolution and its possibilities. Likewise, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey made plans, although they were never acted upon, to emigrate to the American backwoods themselves (Gigante 115). What is noteworthy about Keats's approach to America is his tone of skepticism, which varies from apathetic to deeply invested—once his brother's fate is tied to the American economy, naturally—but is always present. “[Charles] Dilke... pleases himself with the idea that America will be the country to take up the human intellect where England leaves off—I differ there with him greatly—” (154), Keats writes to George and Georgiana in October 1818. Far from viewing the fairly recent revolution and some

of its key figures with optimism for humanity, Keats goes on to explain his reason for doubt that the United States can produce thinkers or poets of the stature of England's Milton or Algernon Sidney:

A country like the united states whose greatest Men are Franklins and Washingtons will never do that—They are great Men doubtless but how are they to be compared to those our countrey men Milton and the two Sidneys—The one is a philosophical Quaker full of mean and thrifty maxims the other sold the very Charger who had taken him through all his Battles—Those American's are great but they are not sublime Man—the humanity of the United States can never reach the sublime— (154)

This is a far cry from Shelley's prophecy for America in *The Revolt of Islam*: "Great People! as the sands shalt thou become; / Thy growth is swift as morn when night must fade; / The multitudinous Earth shall sleep beneath thy shade" (11.205-7).<sup>2</sup> Keats's attitude in this aside is contrarian, and delightfully so, but it is also definite; and nothing Keats wrote on the subject afterward suggests that he deviated from this stance.

The solitary allusion to America in Keats's poetry, while cryptic and—at least in the earliest Keats biographies (Briggs 184-5)—open to question, is nevertheless far more hostile than any of the direct references or commentary in the letters. In fourteen lines near the end of one of his odes to Fanny Brawne, "What can I do to drive away," Keats conjures a dystopic image of America, giving full vent to an othering impulse that is much less vehement in the letters:

Where shall I learn to get my peace again?

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<sup>2</sup> As Gigante notes, Shelley's expectation was more correct, "if not quite in the way [he] expected" (114).

To banish thoughts of that most hateful land,  
Dungeoner of my friends, that wicked strand  
Where they were wreck'd and live a wretched life;  
That monstrous region, whose dull rivers pour  
Ever from their sordid urns unto the shore,  
Unown'd of any weedy-haired gods;  
Whose winds, all zephyrless, hold scourging rods,  
Iced in the great lakes, to afflict mankind;  
Whose rank-grown forests, frosted, black, and blind,  
Would fright a Dryad; whose harsh herbaged meads  
Make lean and lank the starv'd fox while he feeds;  
There flowers have no scent, birds no sweet song,  
And great unerring Nature once seems wrong. (30-43)

In this passage—which was most likely written in October 1819,<sup>3</sup> two months after Keats heard of Kean's planned departure for America and only a month after he learned of George and Georgiana's misfortunes—the letters' instinctive antipathy toward America is writ large, in the language of the colonizer. There is no subtlety or complexity of meaning in these lines, which doubtlessly accounts for the sparse critical commentary they have attracted. “[H]ateful,” “[d]ungeoner,” “wicked,” “wretched,” “monstrous,” “sordid,” “scourging,” “harsh,” “wrong”: these words are sledgehammers. The most disparaging of the remarks Keats makes about America or Americans in the letters up to the writing of this poem—“the humanity of the United

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<sup>3</sup> In the *Complete Poems*, Stillinger merely notes that it was “written probably in 1819” (479). Bate is more definitive, dating it in October of that year (617). In “Keats, Robertson, and That Most Hateful Land,” (*PMLA* 59.1, 1944: 184-99), H.E. Briggs argues convincingly for an October dating.

States can never reach the sublime” (154)—is comparatively benign. In the context of that letter to George and Georgiana, written in October 1818 (a year before “What can I do to drive away”), Keats is unimpressed by the stock of American intellectuals and statesmen as represented by Franklin and Washington; yet he ends the tangent on an expectant, if wistful, note that one of George and Georgiana’s children might become “the first American poet” (155),<sup>4</sup> followed by some charming extemporaneous lines addressed to the “Little Child / O’ the western wild” (155-6). The contrast between this version of America as Keats perceived it—not tending to sublimity, certainly, but a place where poetry might take hold and blossom, at least—and the one in “What can I do to drive away” is startling. It is impossible to imagine the growth of a poet’s mind in Keats’s October 1819 vision of America, where nature itself—although it has been “unerring” elsewhere—grows perverse and squalid. Where the rivers are “dull,” the winds are “zephyrless,” the forests grow “rank... frosted, black, and blind,” the flowers “have no scent,” and no birds sing, there can be no Keatsian poetic inspiration. Compare this sonnet-length extract to any stanza of “To Autumn” (written the month before), and the polarity might be the model for a poetry-writing exercise.

Perhaps the most damning images are ones of negation, as the American landscape is either toxic toward or entirely lacking in the emblems and mythological spirit of Greece—a condemnation that is especially censorious coming from Keats, to whom Greek symbolism and imagination were obviously inextricable from poetry as an art form. The urn—perhaps the most highly charged image in the passage—is turned “sordid” by the corrupting American

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<sup>4</sup> After offering his prayer for George and Georgiana’s child, Keats writes, “I have a great mind to make a prophecy and they say prophecies work out their own fulfillment” (155). George and Georgiana’s first child, Georgiana Emily Keats, was born in early 1819—the same year as Walt Whitman, who might be considered “the first American poet” in the sense Keats means. As Gigante notes, the American poet John Howard Payne took exception to Keats’s “prophecy” when George shared the letter with him. Payne wrote that Keats’s remark was “obnoxious,” adding, “The writer does not seem to have known that we have had, and then possessed, many poets in America” (qtd. in Gigante, 145).



environment; Dryads are frightened by the sinister terrain of its forests; and the landscape as a whole has been shunned by deities. It is a contaminating and godless place which turns itself against its inhabitants, “afflict[ing] mankind” with its punitive and corrosive climate. None of the odes could have been written in this rendering of America: it is inhabitable for a goddess like Psyche; birds do not sing; urns are muddied by the dull river water; and the unerring nature of “Melancholy” and “Autumn” is made aberrant. The America of “What can I do to drive away” is the most extreme interpretation of Keats’s feeling that the country was inhospitable for poets and poetry. In the September 1819 letter he had written it was not in his interest as a poet to go there, “[o]ut of the reach of Libraries” (301), but at the time of the composition of “What can I do to drive away”—which was, it must be noted, likely written impulsively and hurriedly, as were many of the poems addressed to Brawne—Keats imagined an America that was not merely remote and underdeveloped, but uncivilized, unholy, and unnatural.

Gigante’s observation that Keats had never been captured by the idea of America as his brother had (143)—or for that matter, as most of the other Romantic poets had—seems a gross understatement when considered alongside “What can I do to drive away,” but it highlights the impact the events of 1819 (George’s financial disaster, possibly Kean’s departure) had on the poet’s thoughts about the United States. The shift from its status as an entity he could not portray with any of his characteristic empathy to a place he envisioned and depicted as actively malevolent is remarkable for its anomalous quality; there is nothing else quite like it in Keats’s writings. It is also striking given Keats’s standing in America from the period shortly after his death—especially as compared to his contemporaneous reputation in England—and throughout the twentieth century.

## CHAPTER 3

### “ALWAYS A SOLID FAME:” AMERICA AND KEATS

If Keats’s poetry were more “American” in terms of either content or setting—if the one definitive poetic engagement Keats made with America were not blisteringly negative—more studies of Keats and America would seem like a foregone conclusion, given the consistency and force of the positive reaction American reviewers, artists, and scholars have had to his poetry since the nineteenth century. Hyder E. Rollins’s 1946 overview of the Keats-America relationship covers roughly the first half of the nineteenth century, up to 1848. Denise Gigante’s *The Keats Brothers*, published in 2011, is a more comprehensive analysis of how George’s emigration helped to establish a transatlantic component to Keats studies; but Gigante is equally concerned with the legacies of John *and* George, and the disparity between the brothers’ life spans necessitates that her book devote far more pages to George’s life in America than the afterlife of Keats’s work there. *The Keats Brothers* also ends with George’s death in 1841, although a coda to the final chapter addresses Oscar Wilde’s 1882 visit with George’s daughter Emma. Stanley Plumly’s *Posthumous Keats* does touch upon American contributions to the Keats legacy since 1900—such as the group of American writers in residence in Rome who worked to establish the Keats-Shelley Memorial House (323) and the anonymous Americans who twice (and separately) restored the foundation of Keats’s headstone when it began to sink (361)—but since the book covers Keats’s posthumous reputation since his death, much of the material is focused on the nineteenth century.

All of this is to say that there has been no in-depth, book-length examination of Keats’s influence on American literature in the twentieth century, although there have been studies and articles on individual writers, such as Stevens. This is perhaps due as much to the solidity of

Keats's overall reputation as a poet, beginning in the late 1840s, as to his lack of interest in America. As Stillinger writes, "In the history of his reputation, 1848 is the year after which Keats has always been 'among the English poets'" (117). 1848—the year Rollins's coverage ends—saw the publication of the first serious Keats biography, Richard Monckton Milnes's *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats*. Before that, Rollins argues, Keats might have been better described as being among the American poets; quoting Sidney Colvin's assertion that "[Keats] has counted for the last sixty years and more, alike in England and in America, as an uncontested great poet" (qtd. in Rollins 1), he adds, "But these words give an inaccurate outline of the situation in America, where long before the mid-century Keats was widely talked about and written about as a great poet" (1). Both Rollins and Gigante emphasize the favorable reviews Keats's 1820 volume received in America around the time of its publication. A *New York Literary Journal* piece in November 1820, for instance, proclaimed that "Mr. Keats now happily has attained the vantage-ground whence he may defy criticism" (qtd. in Gigante, 343); less than two months before Keats died, another New York reviewer wrote, "Keats, whose *Endymion* was so cruelly treated by the critics, has just put forth a volume of poems which must effectually silence his deriders" (qtd. in Gigante 343).

Naturally, no poet may completely "defy criticism," but Keats has come close. Bate, Stillinger, and Plumly have all theorized that the very ambiguity—the negative capability—inherent in Keats's best poetry has ensured its endurance throughout varying critical standards and movements over the course of the late nineteenth century and the whole of the twentieth. Plumly draws attention to the American-based New Critical movement's particular affinity for Keats: "[I]t [would] be the New Critics who comprehend in Keats—especially in the odes—the crucial distinction of the lyric poem as an ongoing contemporary experience, the experience of

dynamic poetic form... form as content, structure as texture, beauty as truth” (340). The “modernness” of Keats’s poetry, which has been discussed extensively by Bate and Plumly, alongside the familiar beats of his biography, is certainly one of the reasons his work, ideas, and life have become ripe for appropriation—even, or especially, in American literature, despite Keats’s documented aversion for America. Negative capability is an eminently translatable concept, as Keats himself noted when he defined it as the “quality [that] went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously” (41). He was correct about Shakespeare, obviously; it is impossible to think of a more adaptable or adapted figure in literary history. Keats himself became one of these “men of achievement, especially in literature” as well; it is that quality more than any other that becomes most prominent when appropriations of his life—even those that incorporate highly specific details from his biography—and work are examined closely.

## CHAPTER 4

### KEATS APPROPRIATIONS AND AMERICAN MYTHOS

#### “His mind’s America:” Amy Clampitt’s Keats

Amy Clampitt’s 1984 eight-poem sequence *Voyages: A Homage to John Keats* is the most self-consciously literary of the appropriations considered in this chapter, by far the most intertextual and, in spite of a narrative structure that retells the Keats story more or less chronologically, the most esoteric. At times Clampitt would seem to be composing with Bate’s *John Keats* open beside her as she rewrites the biography in verse—sometimes pointedly applying the same language, such as when she uses Bate’s word “primeval” in describing the composition of “On Visiting the Tomb of Burns” in her poem “The Elgin Marbles,” for instance. At other moments, however, Clampitt’s textual references shift to poets removed from Keats by space, time, and/or subject matter, such as Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, and Osip Mandelstam, in addition to writers more immediately connected to Keats by his discipleship or theirs, like Shakespeare and Stevens. In her 1994 article, “Starving before the actual,” Karen A Weisman names echo and pastiche as the dominant mode of discourse in the intertextuality of *Voyages* (Weisman), postmodern techniques which are best demonstrated in Clampitt’s approach to and stylistic impression of Keats, Bate, Stevens, Crane, and the other writers she invokes. All the while, the landscape of the sequence is also variable, shifting from highly specific English towns Keats visited, to the American frontier, to Rome, to the Ohio of Hart Crane’s adolescence, to Leningrad; the effect is reminiscent of the manner in which the Unreal City and the literal wasteland dissolve in and out of each other in *The Waste Land*. In a 1988 article in *The Keats-Shelley Review*, Michael O’Neill characterizes *Voyages* as a suite of poems devoted to “the edgy intimacy between imagination and reality” (48). By existing within that space, where so much of

Keats's poetry was also created, *Voyages* merges several realities to tell an American variant of the Keats story.

The *Voyages* poems most concerned with Keats's attitude toward and relationship with America are "Margate," which is set in summer 1816, during Keats's first serious poetic retreat; "The Elgin Marbles," set in the summer of 1818, the season of George's departure for the United States and Keats's walking tour through Scotland; and "Winchester: The Autumn Equinox," set in September 1819, the month of *The Fall of Hyperion* and "To Autumn."<sup>5</sup> (By dating and contextualizing the poems, I refer to their setting in the present; Clappitt's speaker moves in and out of time and space at will, referencing past and future. This is most obvious in "The Elgin Marbles," as Keats's sonnets about the Elgin Marbles were written in 1817.) All eight poems are replete with significance and allusions worth unpacking as Keatsian metahistory, but given the narrower scope of this chapter, the three aforementioned poems will be my focus.

"Margate" is the opening poem in *Voyages*—which, it should be pointed out, is dedicated to Helen Vendler, another twentieth-century American Keats scholar, and one of the few women in that category—following epigraphs from Crane's *The Bridge*, Whitman's *Sea Drift*, Mandelstam's letters, and Stevens's *The Auroras of Autumn*. The motifs of sea and autumn, which these epigraphs introduce, recur throughout *Voyages*. "Margate," named after a seaside town Keats visited in summer 1816 and at which he wrote the verse letter to George, coalesces many of Keats's own references and descriptions of the sea, culminating in a blend of images that is characteristic of *Voyages*: an "inland sea" of grain in Hampstead, the samphire growing on the cliffs at Margate, and the "alien corn" of "Ode to a Nightingale." The poem also merges

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<sup>5</sup> These poems correspond neatly to chapters in Bate's biography: "Margate"/chapter four, "An Adventure in Hope"; "The Elgin Marbles"/chapter fourteen, "The Departure of George Keats and the Scottish Tour"; and "Winchester: The Autumn Equinox"/chapter twenty-one, "The Close of the Fertile Year: 'To Autumn' and *The Fall of Hyperion*."

landscapes associated with Keats and Whitman, as Clampitt's Keats reflects on the samphire-gathering trade (as Keats did in a letter to his brothers) and the art of poetry:

How clannish  
the whole hand-to-hand, cliffhanging trade,  
the gradual letdown, the hempen slither,  
precarious basketloads of sea drift  
gathered at Margate or at Barnegat:  
along Paumanok's liquid rim[.] (13-18)

Allusions to Whitman come rapidly in these lines: *Sea Drift* is a subsection of *Leaves of Grass*; Barnegat, a town in New Jersey, is the setting of Whitman's sonnet "Patrolling Barnegat"; and Paumanok is a Native American name for Long Island, Whitman's birthplace, and the point of departure in his manifesto "Starting from Paumanok." On the surface, Keats and Whitman appear to have very little to do with one another, in terms of either biography or poetry, apart from thematic and situational comparisons that could, and have, been made between "Nightingale" and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" or "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Whitman's only comment on Keats is not exactly favorable:

Keats' poetry is ornamental, elaborated, rich in wrought imagery, it is imbued with the sentiment, at second-hand, of the gods and goddesses of twenty-five hundred years ago. Its feeling is the feeling of a gentlemanly person lately at college, accepting what was commanded him there, who moves and would only move in elegant society, reading classical books in libraries. Of life in the nineteenth century it has none any more than the statues have. It does not come home at all to the direct wants of the bodies and souls of the century. (120)

The crux of Whitman's critique is that Keats's poetry does not do what Whitman's does; the irony is that Keats never went to college, and did not "move in elegant society" any more than Whitman did. Keats obviously never read Whitman, and Whitman misread Keats in a Bloomian sense; yet Clampitt, as does Plumly after her, yokes the two poets together from the very beginning of her progression of poems. In the case of Clampitt's linking of Keats and Whitman in "Margate," the history between the poets is far less important than what Whitman represents. There is no more distinctly American poet to reference, and one of the major themes of *Voyages* is integrating Keats into the American poetic tradition. Weisman notes that Clampitt's primary object in *Voyages* is the "superimposition of [the] Keatsian lyric onto modern American poetry" (Weisman). One cannot reach modern American poetry without going through Whitman. By invoking him early on, Clampitt begins to merge literary traditions, relying on the analogous themes of sea and tide and the poetic vocation (an often "clannish" one). O'Neill calls attention to the "anxiety and hubris [that] lurk behind Clampitt's concern to link Keats with other poets that she claims implicitly as forebears" (51-2), which seems most discernible in the unexpected use of Whitman in "Margate."<sup>6</sup>

"The Elgin Marbles" and "Winchester: The Autumn Equinox" are more directly focused on Keats's attitude toward "the still unimagined West" ("Elgin Marbles"). As O'Neill writes, "Subtly woven as her allusive tapestry is, Clampitt's own self-concern comes more fully to the surface here [in addressing Keats's relationship to America] than anywhere else in 'Voyages'. It is not that she sentimentalizes America; to the contrary she makes a point of voicing Keats's

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<sup>6</sup> Her description of Keats as having a "shut-in's hunger" for vigorous sea life is also criticized by O'Neill, who writes, "Clampitt's notion of Keats's affinities with American poetry grows indiscriminating. Keats as a 'shut-in' is uncomfortably close to Yeats's simplified caricature of the poet... in 'Ego Dominus Tuus'" (53). This is a brand of what Plumly calls "Keats clichés," discussed in detail below, in a passage he begins with a quote from the same poem by Yeats.



most ‘anti-American’ feelings” (57). Indeed, Clampitt incorporates “What can I do to drive away” and the most negative comments on the subject from Keats’s letters in both poems, facing his imaginative failing in this aspect head on even as the project of *Voyages* as a whole is to assimilate Keats into American poetry.

“The Elgin Marbles” begins with Keats’s remembrance of George and Georgiana’s last evening in England, spent with Keats and Charles Brown at an inn in Liverpool; this leads to a rumination on what the poem later calls “[h]is mind’s America” (50):

[I]magination failed

—and still fails: what can John Keats  
have had to do with a hacked clearing  
in the Kentucky underbrush? How could  
Mnemosyne herself, the mother of the Muse,  
have coped with that uncultivated tangle,  
catbrier and poison ivy, chiggers,  
tent caterpillars, cottonmouths,  
the awful gurglings and chirrings  
of the dark? (4-13)

Here Clampitt uses some of the othering techniques Keats himself employs in “What can I do to drive away”: “uncultivated,” “poison,” “awful,” “dark”; and as in Keats’s poem, gods and muse are absent on the American continent. The failure of Keats’s sympathetic imagination—which was so capacious, to use Bate’s word, in every other facet—when it came to America is the

thrust of “The Elgin Marbles,” but Clampitt attributes a lack of imagination to the country as well, particularly in its own appropriation of the architecture and names of Greece:

—Behold,

in the back settlements, the rise  
of Doric porticos. Courthouse  
spittoons. The glimmer of a classic  
colonnade through live oaks. Slave  
cabins. Mud. New Athenses, Corinths,  
Spartas among the Ossabaws and  
Tuscaloosas[.] (98-105)

This passage follows one in which Clampitt paraphrases one of Keats’s letters, written in Scotland:

Scotland

seemed—the epithet broke from him—  
*anti-Grecian*. Admitting prejudice,  
he repented[.] (74-7)

After describing the Scottish landscape as “anti-Grecian” in a letter to his brother Tom, Keats backtracks to “endeavour to get rid of [his] prejudices, & tell [Tom] fairly about the Scotch” (103). He never made any such “repentance” in his writings on America, and following this paraphrase with a list of the ways in which America is *not* “anti-Grecian” is an example of Clampitt’s “sense of ‘contention’ as well as ‘homage,’ [which] is discreetly present in ‘Voyages’” (O’Neill 50). Keats’s antipathy for America is a *failure* of imagination in Clampitt’s view, and in order to conceive of an American literary history in which Keats is fully integrated,

this failure must be identified and, in a manner of speaking, refuted. Thus the poem turns to the hybrid character of America, its ability to be more “Grecian” than Scotland, as well as George and Georgiana’s American child, “another Keats, to be the bard of what / John Keats himself could never quite / imagine” (129-31). George and Georgiana did not raise any notable American poets, but as *Voyages* points out repeatedly, there are many American bards, from Whitman to Stevens to Crane, and there is of course Clampitt, who is able to imagine how those poets of the unimagined West came out of the same tradition as Keats, who found such an idea unfeasible.

“Winchester: The Autumn Equinox” takes a slightly different tack from the other poems in *Voyages*, as it reads Keats’s distaste for America and American history itself into a passage from *The Fall of Hyperion*, repurposing the following lines from the poem to place emphasis on the single word “west”:

[O]nce more I rais’d

My eyes to fathom from the space every way;  
The embossed roof, the silent massy range  
Of columns north and south, ending in mist  
Of nothing, then to eastward, where black gates  
Were shut against the sunrise evermore.  
Then to the west I look’d, and saw far off  
An image, huge of feature as a cloud[.] (l.81-8)

The “image” is the altar to the fallen Saturn, presided over by the goddess Moneta. Clampitt’s poem rewrites this passage, describing the *Hyperion* speaker—which Clampitt’s speaker clearly conflates with Keats—as standing with “all twilit Europe at his back, / toward the threshold of the west” (16-17). The fathomless spaces of *The Fall of Hyperion* are thus transformed to the

frontier of America, as the poem stresses yet again, “[T]he opening was to the west” (22).

Clampitt negates the indulgence of this revision by immediately following it with a paraphrase of “What can I do to drive away”:

The opening of the West: what Miltonic  
rocketry of epithet, what paradigm  
of splendor in decline, could travel,  
and survive, that monstrous region (as he’d  
later depict it) of dull rivers poured  
from sordid urns, rank tracts unowned  
by any weed-haired god he’d ever heard of,  
that had fleeced his brother George? (23-30)

Imagination failed, and still fails. What kind of poetry could be translated to or nurtured in such an unnatural, unknowable land? The answer to this question lies in Clampitt’s poem, as O’Neill suggests: “Though heavily indebted to Keats’s ‘What can I do to drive away’, these lines are made Clampitt’s own by ‘rocketry of epithet’ and ‘paradigm / of splendor in decline’, both phrases that sympathetically refract Keats’s achievement through the style of latter-day American Romanticism” (58). American Romanticism: not likely a thing the Keats of *Voyages* could have imagined. Even as Clampitt presents Keats’s view of America in what are essentially his own words, she continues to contend with those views through her insistence on a connection between Keats and American poetry and the American landscape.

The landscape—its space and wildness—is underscored once again near the poem’s end, as Keats ruminates that John James Audubon, the future naturalist who entangled George in the investment that brought about his financial ruin, might be able to cultivate such an “unfenced

paradise” (43) and carve something wonderful out of the wilderness. Audubon is scarcely a figure to be admired in Keats’s estimation, however; he is either a “swindler or merely incorrigibly careless” (39). That is the kind of man who might be able to make something out of the American landscape. A man like John Milton, on the other hand, a great English poet: what business would he have in such a place?

But what could Milton,  
from whom he’d set himself to learn, have done  
to clear a path either for grandeur or  
for simple ruth to enter? Look homeward—  
where? What images, what language, fossil  
child of all the dislocations of antiquity,  
could clear that threshold? (43-9)

This echoes Keats’s letter that asserts that “the humanity of the United States can never reach the sublime” (154), using Milton as an example of sublime humanity. Neither Grecian grandeur nor the sublimity of Milton can cross the threshold of the Atlantic. This is true enough, in a way; if *Song of Myself* is the American epic, there is nothing Grecian or Miltonic about it. Yet in *Voyages*, a “fossil child of all the dislocations of antiquity” does clear the American threshold: Keats’s own poetry, which flows in a current from Whitman to Stevens to Crane to Clampitt herself. Clampitt’s use of Keats is subversive, as she writes not only in her capacity as an American poet but as a female poet in a predominantly male tradition, and writes herself as a part of that tradition. These subversions, intertextual crossings, and liminal spaces are entwined with one another in *Voyages*, a space in which, as Weisman writes, “Clampitt marries her Romantic obsessions to her equally obsessive... hypersensitivity to the extra-textual, especially where that

conception of the extratextual is show to share a necessary co-existence with the very quest to write about it” (Weisman).

The Keats of *Voyages* has the same outlook on America as the actual Keats, which is unsurprising given Clampitt’s reliance on the letters and poetry. What marks Clampitt’s appropriations of these documents as well as elements from Keats’s biography is her use of a kind of dramatic irony, a device that allows her speaker to contradict the Keats of her sequence. Keats could not imagine poetry—at least not the kind of poetry he wrote—flourishing in America, but of course America received his work with enthusiasm and continues to do so, with *Voyages* itself representing the type of engagement American poets have with Keats. In Clampitt’s poems, Keats’s imaginative failure is an obstacle he could not surmount, almost tragically so. The history of American poetry as Clampitt writes it recovers some of this tragedy, however, as she places Keats in a lineage of poets who would carry on his legacy in the unimagined West, making him a symbolic American poet of sorts.

“Gold conglomerate of detail:” Stanley Plumly’s Keats

In considering “the element of poetry” (1551) in history, as Hayden White phrases it in “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” it is impossible to ignore the role that poetry itself plays as an agent of metahistory—particularly poetry that engages with or attempts to revise an historical record. Plumly’s “Posthumous Keats” is a noteworthy instance of this type of poetry, expanding as it did from poem to actual biography over the course of twenty-five years. (“Posthumous Keats” was first published in 1983, *Posthumous Keats: A Personal Biography* in 2008.) In coalescing key moments from Keats’s biography, he performs a remarkable feat of reclamation and catharsis, and in the process implements his own Keatsian metahistory. “Posthumous Keats” is simply the earliest in a series of elegies Plumly has written for Keats,

although it is the best known and most expanded upon by Plumly himself, who has written and spoken about the poem many times. In a 2007 interview published in the *Kenyon Review*, Plumly describes the poem as the inception of his larger Keats project:

This “project” all started with the “Posthumous Keats” poem, and my realization that certain connections in his story had not been made, and that the story itself was overwhelming in its richness, its “light and shade.” My other Keatsian poems are responses to moments and details in the life, as if, perhaps, they were my own experience. (“A Conversation with Stanley Plumly”)

Plumly’s other Keatsian poems are indeed highly specific snapshots of moments in Keats’s life, as is “Posthumous Keats.” While Plumly has written several of these Keatsian poems, this chapter will focus on “Posthumous Keats” as the corrective (American) elegy Plumly clearly intends it to be, and “Reading with the Poets,” a poem which, like Clampitt’s “Margate,” links the histories of Keats and Whitman.

Although “Posthumous Keats” is focused on the land journey Keats and Severn made from Naples to Rome in November 1820, four months prior to Keats’s death, the poem connects several different incidents: the death of Tom Keats, the fraught and stormy voyage to Italy, Keats’s invalid existence in Rome, and, most importantly, the composition of “To Autumn.” Plumly acknowledges this progression himself in the biography *Posthumous Keats*: “Certain connections and crossovers in the John Keats story had not fit the profile of strict biographical narrative” (15). Accordingly, he highlights—and thus forges in the reader’s mind—an association between the day “To Autumn” was written and the day Keats boarded the ship for Italy, noting that it was “a chill gray September dawn, almost to the day of the year before when Keats [wrote] ‘To Autumn’” (249). These two dates have no intrinsic connection to each other,

but the coincidence is clearly significant to Plumly. It is a detail vital to the structure of “Posthumous Keats,” not only in terms of narrative but of image.

In the poem’s first three stanzas, Plumly paints a glowing landscape of the Italian countryside: it is “like summer, / honey and wheat in the last of the / daylight” (8-10), the road bordered by wildflowers that are “rust, magenta, / marigold, and...china white” (13-4). In the poem, this panorama calls to Keats’s mind a scene of the year before, on the day he wrote “To Autumn.” He recollects “the taste in the air of apples” (32) in Winchester, “the light a gold conglomerate / of detail” (36-7), and, most notably, a phrase from the letter describing the landscape that inspired “To Autumn,” which was warm ““in the same way that some pictures / look warm”” (Plumly 37-8; Keats 271). The climax of this connection is encompassed in the following line, “And he is going to let the day close down” (39). “To Autumn” can be regarded as an acceptance of natural processes, including death, and by implicitly referring to the “soft-dying day” (25) that Keats describes in his final ode, Plumly suggests that the same acceptance of “To Autumn” is stealing over the poet in the emphatically different setting and circumstances of Plumly’s poem. In establishing a scene of luminous warmth early on in “Posthumous Keats,” Plumly links the English and Italian landscapes and, consequently, the two disparate occasions, in a technique identical to the one Clampitt employs throughout *Voyages*. Plumly accomplishes a similar amalgamation with the images of Keats in the carriage on the road and in the ship on the miserable passage to Italy. In his book he writes, “[T]he image, then, is of Keats alone in the close carriage, tossed and turned as if he were caught in a small boat at sea” (263). This correspondence of impressions is also found in the poem, as Keats reflects that “he might as well be back at Gravesend / with the smell of the sea and cold sea rain / waiting out the weather and the tide” (24-6). Once again, by conjoining distinct moments in Keats’s life, Plumly brings a



narrative into being. These moments would likely never have become interlinked in the metahistory of Keats without Plumly's intercession as poet-biographer. "Posthumous Keats" is the product of the marriage of historical record and literary imagination.

It is difficult not to view "Posthumous Keats" as something of a negation of the emplotment of *Adonais*, Shelley's pastoral elegy for Keats, given the emphasis Plumly places on refuting it in his book. He refers to Shelley's presentation of Keats as "didactic, distorted" (53), "genericiz[ing]" (81), "left-handed" (85), and formed with "condescension... [and] misguided attitude" (85). Plumly pays special attention to Shelley's characterization of the poet as an ethereal victim of a vitriolic press, particularly his reduction of Keats's illness to an essentially psychosomatic surrender to critical persecution (81-2). Pointedly, the first image of Keats in Plumly's poem is decidedly unromantic and immediately descriptive of the harsh physical reality of tuberculosis: "Keats is in the carriage / swallowing blood and the best of the bad food" (6-7). Regarding Keats's disease, Plumly is able to be far more exact and knowledgeable than Shelley, writing in his own historical moment, could have ever been. With regard to Keats's train of thought, however, Plumly can claim no historical precision; but his choice of emplotment—tending tragic and ironic over romantic—allows the full weight of contrast to fall upon the poem. The juxtaposition of Keats's sickness and impending death with the poetic beauty of his surroundings—which of course Keats will never write poetry about—can have no effect but a tragic one.

Plumly also refers to *Adonais* as "a poem as much about its author as it is about its stated subject" (323); with this in mind, it is interesting to note that "Posthumous Keats" makes reference to "the biographer" (16), a role Plumly would eventually take on himself. In the *Kenyon Review*, Plumly acknowledges the complex biographer-subject relationship, especially in

regard to himself and Keats: “I have written this book [*Posthumous Keats*] because I said I would: and why did I—so many years ago—say I would? Because, I guess, the book is about me too” (“A Conversation”). The poem “Posthumous Keats” is certainly not “about” Plumly, but reading it after the publication of the book, it is evident that project as a whole—from poem to biography—is a type of course correction intended to pull the reader’s attention to the ironic correspondences between Keats’s last journey and other significant moments in his history—once again, in a way most similar to Clappitt—as well as to the tragic contrast between the poet’s ill health and his environment. Thus Plumly directs his readers’ notice by merging and highlighting those “connections and crossovers” (15), as he identifies them. In the poem, he writes that “the biographer sees no glory in this, / how the living, by increments, are dead, / how they celebrate their passing half in love” (16-8). Yet Plumly the poet-biographer does, as he revises Keatsian metahistory so that the poet’s death is given artistic meaning, a kind of poetic last rites. Plumly has described the scene in which Severn fills the carriage with flowers as Keats being “witness to his own funeral” (“A Commentary” 193-4), an association that he points out has been lost on “[a]ll the biographers, from Lowell to Hewlett to Ward to Bate to Gittings... I thought the connection overwhelming” (194). In *Posthumous Keats*, Plumly views most attempts at elegizing or commemorating Keats as distortions of memory and desire: “[M]ost of the details, verbal portraitures, notational accounts, and romantic depictions of Keats, are remembered representations... in that posthumously open time when the scales of immortality are being weighed” (32). By this logic, it is only in the twentieth century, long after the question of immortality has been decided, that we can see the whole Keats story for everything it is. “Posthumous Keats” is result of those scales tipping toward immortality, not history but metahistory.

“Reading with the Poets” is a much more distinctly American appropriation of Keats, as it begins with Whitman’s time among the Civil War wounded, joining the American poet and Keats as poet-physicians and would-be healers. The poem captures two of those spots of time in both poets’ histories that Plumly is wont to examine: Whitman at the bedsides of young, wounded soldiers, writing their letters home, sometimes helping with small medical tasks; and Keats, doodling flowers during medical lectures at Guy’s Hospital, where he trained to be a surgeon. Clappitt draws a connection between these two poets for what that connection can represent—a joining of poetic traditions, across ocean, time, and misunderstanding. Plumly connects them for what “Reading with the Poets” portrays as comparable dispositions and an equal capacity for empathy.

The poem begins with Whitman, tending to the wounded, “saying, sometimes, the white prayers, helping, / sometimes, with the bodies or holding the bodies / down” (4-6). The horrors of the nineteenth century hospital, especially a makeshift one, are emphasized: “[M]en would gangrene first before the shock of / the saw and scalpel” (14-15). The shift to Keats occurs in the middle of the second stanza, suddenly, but with reference to the word “wounded,” which recurs throughout the poem:

Keats all his wounded life wanted to be a healer,  
which he was, once at his mother’s bedside, failed,  
once at his brother’s, failed. Whitman in Washington  
failed: how many nights on the watch and it broke  
him, all those broken boys[.] (19-23)

Keats is “wounded,” like the boys Whitman tends to in the hospital, but also a failed healer like Whitman, who the poem twice describes as “the oldest surviving poet of the war” (26, 47).

Keats, ever negatively capable, is identified with the young, suffering, and soon to die, but also with the most American of poets, who lived nearly three times as long as he did in a country he could not imagine. The poem's title, however, referencing the *poets*, affirms that Keats is more definitively associated with Whitman than the dying young men, a less expected choice that is characteristic of the way Plumly writes Keats. In *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats's poet-speaker remarks, "[S]ure a poet is a sage; / A humanist, physician to all men. / That I feel I am none" (I.189-91). In "Reading with the Poets," those lines could be spoken by either of these broken healers, although one would be hard pressed to find two more humanist poets than Keats and Whitman.

The final stanza relates the anecdote recounted in every Keats biography: "Keats at his medical lectures drew flowers" (37). Plumly, unsurprisingly, finds a new angle on this story, contextualizing it in an entirely different way from the usual characterization of the dreamy poet: "Not from indifference, not from his elegance: / his interest couldn't bear the remarkable / screams of the demonstrations" (39-41). Keats, who is unusually, expansively empathetic, cannot bear the screams of pain from the patients in the operating theater and focuses his energies on simple escapism; this is the conflict dramatized in *The Fall of Hyperion*, the dichotomy drawn between mere fancy and the visionary imagination, the latter of which is accessible only to "those to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery, and will not let them rest" (I.147-9). This was the kind of poet Keats was becoming, the kind Whitman lived long enough and saw enough to become. The final lines of "Reading with the Poets" shift from Keats to Whitman as quickly as the first move from Whitman to Keats, from the horrors of the operating theater to the horrors of a field hospital:

[Keats] sat there, still

a boy, already broken, looking into the living  
body, listening to the arias of the spirit  
climbing. So the boy at the graves of the Union  
singing, saying his vision, seeing the bodies  
broken into the ground. Now the poem for Lincoln.  
Now the oldest surviving poet still alive  
weaving with the audience that gossamer,  
that thread of the thing we find in the voice again.  
Now in the night our faces kissed by the healer. (41-50)

The repetition of “now” casts these events in an inextricable, perpetual present, joining the two poet-healers through their capacities for imaginative sympathy and access to a visionary realm. Separate in so many other ways, Keats and Whitman are united in this poem by their broken, human desires to cure.

Plumly demonstrates his own need to be curative in his Keats project, as he attempts to sort through and “correct” the countless representations and portrayals of the poet in his “posthumous life,” an expression Plumly uses “to refer to his after-life ‘existence,’ in which the story of his immortality is played out” (“A Conversation”). Unlike Clampitt and Fairchild, Plumly rarely appropriates Keats to tell anyone else’s story; he is absorbed with the Keats narrative, as it can only now be read and retold. “Reading with the Poets” is an exception, as Whitman’s Civil War experiences are interlaced with Keats’s history as a medical student, and an American narrative is augmented by the Keats biography, and vice versa. Plumly’s chosen role as biographer-elegist for Keats is one that is particularly complex, as the metahistory Plumly writes in poems such as “Posthumous Keats” inevitably recurs in his biography, but it is always

the case with metahistory: it is emplotted, rewritten for different emphases, emplotted again. It is an ongoing narrative, as Plumly contends: “My own ultimate interest, however, is in the texture of Keats’s long posthumous story. A story still continuing” (“A Conversation”).

“His hands are what I can’t forget:” B.H. Fairchild’s Keats

In his February-May 1819 journal letter to George and Georgiana, Keats writes, “A Man’s life of any worth is a continual allegory—and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life—a life like the scriptures, figurative” (203). No one has described the allegorical quality of Keats’s own life more concisely or completely than Bate in the first pages of *John Keats*: “[T]he life of Keats—even at first reading—has always seemed haunted by a feeling of familiarity. It reads like something we have read before, and are eager to hear again” (2). The emblematic, familiar nature of Keats’s biography is a significant factor in appropriations of that biography: many elements of the Keats narrative—his orphaned status, economic limitations, literary aspirations and love affair both terminated by chronic illness—are almost archetypal. This aspect of appropriations of the Keats story is most clearly represented in two poems by B.H. Fairchild. Fairchild places particular emphasis on Keats’s socioeconomic station as well as the labor he would have performed as an apprentice surgeon and apothecary, especially in conjunction with Keats’s preternatural talent and ambition. One of the major themes of Fairchild’s poetry is the resolve and desires that preoccupy the working class poet, and Keats’s biography and character offer abundant amplifiers for such a motif.

Class is an important factor in the American perception and use of Keats, particularly for a poet like Fairchild, who dwells extensively on the idea of the poet who must keep a day job. Keats has been described as or considered working or lower class by many in the past century, and compared to his contemporaries, such as Byron and Shelley, his socioeconomic status *was*

relatively low. Keats had an inheritance from his maternal grandfather, but it was tied up in chancery court until long after his death; consequently, he was obliged to train to be an apothecary and surgeon. These were details used against him in the notorious *Blackwood's* review by John Gibson Lockhart, which attacked Keats as a member of the "Cockney School" of poetry. Perhaps the most infamous passages in the review are Lockhart's many sneers at Keats's social position: "It is a better and a wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to the shop, Mr. John, back to the 'plasters, pills, and ointment boxes,' &c. But, for Heaven's sake... be a little more sparing of extenuatives and soporifics in your practice than you have been in your poetry" (qtd. in Bate 367). This awareness of Keats's class persisted among his contemporaries after his death. Coleridge, although well-meaning and sympathetic, defaulted to class as an explanation for why Keats might have been more susceptible to criticism:

It is very well for those who have a place in the world and are independent to talk of these things; they can bear such a blow.... but all men are not born Philosophers, and all men have not those advantages of birth and education. Poor Keats had not, and it is impossible I say to conceive the effect which such a Review must have had upon him, knowing as he did that he had his way to make in the world by his own exertions. (325)

It is a kindly, if condescending, sentiment Coleridge expresses, and the assumption is often treated as fact by biographers and scholars; for example, Gigante writes, "[C]ritical reviews of *Endymion*, which focused more on the poet's social status than on his poetry, heightened any existing social sensitivity" (198).

In *Lord Byron and Some of his Contemporaries*, published in 1828, Leigh Hunt designates Keats as a poet whose "origin was of the humblest description" (217). Just over one

hundred years later, in her landmark essay *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes, “What are the great poetical names of the last hundred years or so? ... Keats... was the only one not fairly well to do” (52). The distinctions between these understandings of Keats’s socioeconomic status have been debated by Keats scholars in recent years; the space between “of the humblest description” and “not fairly well to do” can be a wide one, especially in representations of Keats in literature that retells or reshapes his biography. Stillinger calls Keats’s supposedly working class background a “fable of literary history,” adding that “the poet’s ‘low’ origins were actually soundly middle class, as we reckon these things today” (113). Gigante more or less agrees, writing that Keats was “precariously perched in the middle ranks of society” (198). Plumly dismisses the need to definitively categorize Keats based on class, and instead focuses squarely on his actual circumstances: “Whether we think of Keats as working class or emerging middle class, he knew better than anyone, once he realized the limitations of his inheritance, that he would also have to join the workaday world” (138). It is this understanding of Keats—the one that lives in cultural memory—that Fairchild’s appropriations are based upon. For these poems to work, whether Keats was working or middle class is irrelevant; it is the reader’s assumptions and knowledge—half-knowledge, Keats might call it—that are significant.

Fairchild’s 1998 book *The Art of the Lathe* is easily his most Keatsian collection in terms of both allusions and appropriations, which are epitomized by the extended meditation on “Beauty” that opens the volume, an ironic, “Grecian Urn”-esque ode to a feed store calendar in “At the Excavation of Liberal, Kansas,” and the “Nightingale”-like journey music leads the speaker through in the closing title poem. The most obvious example, of course, is a poem called “Keats,” which draws on the most commonly known elements of Keats’s biography in its depiction of a young and gifted lathe machinist. Much of Fairchild’s poetry—and particularly



*The Art of the Lathe*, as the title indicates—explores his relationship to his father’s lathe machine shop as a child and then as a young man working in the shop himself; accordingly, the phrase from Lockhart’s review, “[B]ack to the shop, Mr. John,” holds special resonance in Fairchild’s appropriations of Keats. He also frequently draws a comparison between lathework and writing poetry, perhaps best exemplified in his long poem *The Blue Buick* from his collection *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest*, whose protagonist Roy Eldridge Garcia affirms equal allegiance to “[p]oetry and lathework, / both arts of precision” (75-6).<sup>7</sup> “Keats” is quintessential Fairchild in both of these respects, and his approach in the poem necessitates references to a poet whose life story is at once mythic, tragic, and yet easily appropriated—requirements the life of Keats is uniquely able to meet.

The poem’s first line is a startling one when paired with the title “Keats”: “I knew him. He ran the lathe next to mine” (1). From this beginning, the use of Keats as symbol, of the life as allegory, is clear. The poem is not “about” Keats, but instead portrays a gifted, hotheaded lathe machinist who falls in love with a tavern waitress; he eventually dies of an unspecified lung condition. Many of the Keats parallels are immediately evident: obsessive artistic brilliance (the speaker tells us the lathe machinist is a “[p]erfectionist, a madman” [2]); doomed, young love; death from a disease of the lungs; the man even looks like Keats (he is short [9] with red hair [21]).

Fairchild also draws on more common conceptions of Keats’s poetry and character—the kind Plumly might take exception to—in the poem, particularly in his description of the Keatsian figure’s artistic process:

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<sup>7</sup> The affirmation directly follows the speaker’s account of Eldridge Garcia’s reverence for Keats, in fact: “Roy worshiped [absence and mystery], called it *negative capability* / and quoted Keats, said in poetry and lathework, / both arts of precision, it was what lay beyond / the *mot juste*, the closest tolerance, the finest cut[.]” (74-7).

he would lean  
into the lathe and make a little song  
with the honing cloth, rubbing the edges,  
smiling like a man asleep, dreaming. (5-9)

This is an unquestionably romantic—and Romantic—image of an artist, and Keats has often been made into a kind of template for young, precocious artists, a phenomenon Plumly explores throughout *Posthumous Keats*. Plumly begins his survey of twentieth-century portrayals and conceptions of Keats with Yeats's depiction of "happy Keats" in "Ego Dominus Tuus," and follows it with a litany of stereotypical Keatses, nineteenth-century reductions that continue to reverberate in the twentieth century:

Here at the true beginning of the twentieth century, almost every cliché associated with John Keats of a century before is invoked. The sybaritic, leafy, Huntian, pre-Raphaelite bower poet; the mere dreamer, the Endymion, who thinks through his senses; the gorgeous boy-poet, 'a little western flower' (Hazlitt), unable to stand up to the winds of Tory criticism. Pretty Keats, happy Keats, luxuriant Keats. Also, on the personal side, little Keats, poor Keats, 'ailing and ignorant ... coarse-bred ...,' [...] And also the broken promise of Keats [...] his achievement unfulfilled. (338-9)

Certainly, Fairchild does not employ all or even most of these "Keats clichés" in "Keats," but the resemblance of the poem's protagonist to the pre-Raphaelite conception of a dreaming Keats "who thinks through his senses" is marked, as he leans into his artistry "like a man asleep." Likewise, the man's relationship with Margie the tavern waitress smacks of both "happy Keats"

and “luxuriant Keats,” as the poem’s speaker presents it in a slightly ridiculous manner, first describing Margie as

a loud,  
dirty girl with booze breath and bad manners.  
He loved her. One night late I saw them in  
the kitchen dancing something like a rhumba  
to the radio, dishtowels wrapped around their  
heads like swamis. (13-18)

These shades of what are, to use Plumly’s term, “clichés” in Fairchild’s Keats appropriations<sup>8</sup> highlight the very different goals the two poets have in their use of Keats’s biography in their work. Plumly is always most concerned with exhuming the “real” Keats—the vital, complex, vigorous, philosophical Keats—from the ruins of *Adonais* and its like; Fairchild, on the other hand, is interested in what Keats can be made to represent, and the force and weight that representation carries. Accordingly, Fairchild’s appropriations of the Keats story are the most purely appropriative of those considered in this chapter. For “Keats” the poem to work, it needs the echoes of Keats’s life and death in the lathe machinist’s story: his sheer skill, the implications of class, and of course the tragedy of a life cut short by circumstance.

However less than dignified the image of the Keatsian figure in Fairchild’s poem dancing the rhumba with his head wrapped in a dishtowel might be, the turn that immediately succeeds this image—“But it was the work that kept him out of fights” (20)—signals a shift to a more tragic emplotment. The speaker returns to description of the man’s “perfectionist” tendencies:

It was the iron, cut to a perfect fit, smooth

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<sup>8</sup> Fairchild’s other poem that utilizes the Keats biography, “The Student Assistant”—discussed below—actually uses the phrase “little Keats.”

as bone china and gleaming under lamplight  
that made him stand back, take out a smoke,  
and sing. (25-8)

The singing and song metaphors in “Keats,” of which the one in this passage is the second, are used in other poems in *The Art of the Lathe* (“Song” and the titular poem, for example) for both lathework and the writing of poetry. Poetry and lathework, both arts of precision. Fairchild’s use of Keats in this poem is not only shorthand that fills in any narrative gaps, but the influence—or what readers might see as the consequence—of Keats’s story acts upon the narrative of the lathe machinist, the poem suggesting his artistry and ultimate tragedy are equal to the poet’s. This implied equivalence is entirely in accordance with the spirit of Fairchild’s poetry taken as a whole; as the very title of *The Art of the Lathe* suggests, Fairchild’s focus on craftsmanship in labor as well as in high art is fundamental. The use of Keats as one of the primary touchstones for this theme is effectual on two levels: as allegory and as equalizer. The dispassionate manner in which the speaker of “Keats” reports the death of the lathe machinist at the end of the poem relies on both of these elements, by means of both appropriation and allusion: “It was the dust that got him, his lungs / collapsed from breathing in a life of work. / Lying there, his hands are what I can’t forget” (28-30). The linking of a death from a lung disease, one of the most unambiguous Keats appropriations in the poem, with the work itself might be another of those Keats clichés Plumly describes—the old chestnut that negative reviews of the 1817 volume and *Endymion* sent Keats to an early grave. It is a cliché that works for Fairchild’s poem, however; the lathe machinist’s art is what, although indirectly, kills him, as reception of Keats’s art was long assumed to have killed him. In “Keats,” the emphasis remains solidly upon the man’s commitment to and skill at his craft, however. His hands, the repositories of that skill, are what

haunt the speaker's imagination, more than his propensity for fighting on the job, his terminated love affair with Margie, or his cause of death. This detail immediately calls to mind "the last serious lines [Keats] was ever to write" (Bate 626), the fragment "This living hand, now warm and capable." It is a potent reference, as any allusion to a poem as chilling and unsettling as "This living hand" must be; as Keats's fragment acts as threat and accusation, so Fairchild's poem ends on a note of what might be read as recrimination. The reverberation of one of Keats's final writings at the end of "Keats" is perhaps the most evocative one in the poem, for everything Fairchild makes it contain: the injuries of class, the reality of wasted potential, and a most American appropriation of Keats into the Midwestern landscape of Fairchild's own adolescence.

Fairchild's 2014 poem "The Student Assistant," collected in his *New and Selected Poems*, also draws from Keats's biography in a pointed way, although the appropriation is for the most part more straightforward than that in "Keats." The poem's speaker describes taking a walk around Southwark Cathedral in London, which eventually carries him down "the path a certain medical student / might have taken to Guy's Hospital in 1812" (5-6).<sup>9</sup> Fairchild's speaker imagines Keats in an almost gothic scene: "[H]e was buying cadavers from the grave digger / at four in the morning as the heavy south bank fog / settled upon the shoulders of the Thames" (7-9). The "grave digger" is likely a reference to the "resurrection men" who robbed local graves for cadavers the medical school could utilize for dissection in anatomy classes; since the use of bodies in such classes was illegal at the time, the transactions had to take place at night

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<sup>9</sup> While Keats did not register as a student at Guy's Hospital until October 1, 1815 (Bate 43), Fairchild seems to be referencing Keats's time as an apprentice—or "student assistant"—to the surgeon and apothecary Thomas Hammond, which lasted from 1811-15. (Of course, it could also simply be a mistake.)

(Goellnicht 29).<sup>10</sup> Fairchild portrays this task of collecting and transporting the bodies as both disagreeable and tedious, particularly for this student, who has another vocation entirely in mind:

This student assistant, a promising young man  
with a brittle future and quick wit trudging through  
the dingy film of the London night also wrote poems  
about melancholy and the sweet, throbbing agony  
of desire and beauty, but there he trod, pulling  
his burlap sack over stone and muck and stair[.] (14-19)

The Keats of “The Student Assistant” is a poet mired by necessity in a night job that has nothing to do with his poetic ambitions; even the more distasteful aspects of his work have become ploddingly commonplace. Again, the use of Keats is essential; for readers who know anything about his history as an apothecary/surgeon in training or as a dresser at Guy’s Hospital—or even those who do not, as the poem sketches a clear enough picture of Fairchild’s vision of those years of Keats’s life—the sense of waste (of time and of talent) is palpable. Certainly there are other canonical poets who have supported themselves in professions that hardly seem to lend themselves to poetry—Wallace Stevens, for an (American) example who also wrote poems about melancholy, beauty, and desire—but Keats lived in a time when the idea of forsaking that vocation for a full-time career in poetry was still feasible, something to hope for, no matter how miserably Keats ended up failing at supporting himself solely through his art (this is only one aspect of the “brittle future” Fairchild’s speaker foretells). Fairchild has often described leaving

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<sup>10</sup> Whether or not Keats ever performed the task of meeting the resurrection men and collecting cadavers is unclear, but several Keats scholars have made conjectures. Robert Gittings suggests the resurrection men served as “indirect material for poetry” (50) in *Isabella*, while Plumly posits that it is “likely [Keats] ha[d] to serve on occasion as a liaison with local ‘body-snatchers’” (190) in *Posthumous Keats*. Charles W. Hagelman makes the most thorough argument that Keats performed this duty in his dissertation, *John Keats and the Medical Profession* (University of Texas, 1956, p. 218-34).

his own non-poetic vocation in his father's machine shop for, as he writes in his 2014 poem "Leaving," "a New World called *the life of the mind*" (38). Keats, who abandoned his plans to become a surgeon in late 1816 at the age of twenty-one (Bate 117), is once again the ideal analog for Fairchild's own experience.

In this poem, Keats—meditating on poetry as he drags cadavers through foggy streets at night—also serves as a representation for another of the major themes of Fairchild's poetry: the presence of the exceptional in a working class environment, which aligns with the juxtaposition of physical labor, high art, and philosophy in that same space. In a 2009 interview with Paul Mariani, Fairchild explains this type of concurrence:

One of the most important transitions for me, psychological or otherwise, was the gradual, halting movement out of the physical world of work into the world of art and literature and ideas. Very often, especially in my later teens and early twenties, I was existing in both worlds at the same time, watching a welder lay down a perfect seam while *Madame Bovary* was walking around in my head, or observing the gleam of a freshly shaped and honed piece of stock while remembering the arc of a Brancusi sculpture.

The Keats of "The Student Assistant" exists in two worlds simultaneously as well: the world of body snatchers, courses in anatomy, and grimy London streets, and the world of poetic desire and beauty. Yet the two realms intermingle and act upon each other. Several critics have remarked upon the influence Keats's medical training had on his poetry and most important poetic concepts; M.H. Abrams does so thoroughly and concisely in his essay "Keats' Poems: The Material Dimensions," which discusses the use of the vocabulary of chemistry and natural science in poems such as *Endymion*, "Dear Reynolds," and "Ode on Melancholy," as well as the

letters (38-41). Keats himself wrote about the potential value of his medical knowledge in May 1818 (in the “mansion of many apartments” letter to John Hamilton Reynolds): “Every department of knowledge we see excellent and calculated towards a great whole. I am so convinced of this, that I am glad at not having given away my medical Books, which I shall again look over to keep alive the little I know thitherwards” (86-7). In spite of his dissatisfaction with his medical apprenticeship and training, it marked him and his poetry—albeit not to the same extent—as lathework marks Fairchild and his poetry.

“The Student Assistant” ends by placing yet more emphasis on the unpleasantness of this Keats’s labor and surroundings, as he “pull[s] death into the purgatorial rooms, / the terrifying, lye-washed, stinking, candlelit rooms / of Guy’s Hospital” (21-3). Such a scene, coming after the speaker’s description of the student assistant’s “quick wit” and talent for verse, is particularly poignant, but it is rendered even more so by the direct acknowledgement of who the assistant is, finally, in the last line of the poem: “Little Keats. On his death trip” (23). While “Little Keats,” as Plumly considers it in his list of Keats clichés, could be read as condescension, in the context of Fairchild’s work it seems to refer to either Keats’s age in the world of the poem or Keats’s stature—which, as most biographers and Fairchild’s own poem “Keats” have noted, was small—or both. “On his death trip,” meanwhile, certainly carries the same connotation as the carriage ride Plumly reimagines in “Posthumous Keats.” Again, the question of whether or not the literal “death trip” Keats embarks upon in this poem ever truly took place is debatable, but it is also of secondary importance; the version of Keats Fairchild creates in this poem does, and does so with a practiced detachment that demonstrates the prosaic nature of the task for him, the physician-poet in training. Fairchild’s Keats is once again a working class artist who will come to an untimely, painful end—once again an emblem of the often bleak reality of possessing literary



ambition and ability while confined to a commonplace or even grim environment. Fairchild's poetry often deals with the hard truths that characterize a uniquely American experience of disillusionment and disappointment—"the litany of failure in America," he calls it in *The Blue Buick*—particularly those brought about by the bootstrap myth. Thus Keats, with his "brittle future" in spite of an outsize aptitude for and commitment to poetry, serves as an invaluable figure for appropriation in a very American narrative.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

In *John Keats*, which I consider the great American work of Keats scholarship, Bate writes, of Keats's expanding imagination once he began reading seriously,

[I]t brought the vital discovery... that we are not completely the creatures of the environment in which we are placed—that we need not be imprisoned by the room where we are, by the stock responses we pick up from those about us, but that there are openings to something more spacious through the large written record of the past that we call literature. (28)

This passage, like so much else in Bate's biography, is simultaneously highly specific to Keats and gratifyingly applicable to the lives of other writers and readers. It is also especially suitable in a discussion of Keats's attitude toward America and American appropriations of and variations on the Keats story. While Keats's empathy failed him when it came to the United States, his negatively capable "multiplicity," as Stillinger characterizes it, continues to create openings for appropriation and revision by American writers. Keats, like Whitman and yet so unlike Whitman, contains multitudes. American Keats is large, "spacious," able to be integrated into the history—national, geographical, and literary—of a country he cared nothing for, but is beloved by. He has never been completely the creature of the environment in which he was placed. "What could I do there?", Keats wondered about America. A great deal, as it happens.

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