

CHAPTER 5

Mortality

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Keats arrived in Rome with the artist Joseph Severn in November 1820, dangerously ill and bleak-hearted. Funded by donations from his friends and advances from his publisher, the trip was undertaken in the last hope that a warm climate might offer respite from the pulmonary tuberculosis that had so fiercely gripped him for much of the last year. He died only a few months later, in the February of 1821, in a room on the second floor of a four-storey house positioned at the base of the Spanish Steps and east of the Piazza di Spagna. The building, now beloved as the Keats–Shelley Memorial house, sits beneath the church of the Santissima Trinità dei Monti and faces out to Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s boat-shaped Fontana della Barcaccia. With its aprico-coloured façade, baroque pediments and cornices, the house absorbs the warmth of its continental aspect and exudes the romance of its Roman history. Not all of this was lost on Keats who arrived in Rome wasted in body and broken in spirit but nonetheless conscious of the vivid world at his window and the injustice of his exclusion from it. Lying on his deathbed, gazing at the pale blue rosettes dotted between the ceiling rafters of his small room, the beautiful melancholia so characteristic of his work in life seemed available to him still even as he faced death, although deepened, now, into a grimly mordant certainty: ‘O! I can feel’, he exclaimed to Severn, ‘the cold earth upon me – the daisies growing over me – this quiet – it will be my first’ (*L* 2, 378).

Declaring himself ‘half in love with easeful Death’ (52) in the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, Keats thought of death as fanciful, romantic, almost a seduction, and yet it was for him also anchored in the reality of personal knowledge and a profound awareness of bodily frailty – the former gathered from the terrible accumulation of family deaths (father, mother, grandmother and brother) over a period of fourteen years, and the latter learned from his early training as an apothecary and then work as a dresser at Guy’s Hospital

between 1815 and 1817. If the absentminded scribbles recorded in his anatomical notebooks suggested a certain disengagement from his academic studies, there can be no doubt that, aside from the theory, Keats knew in practice and felt keenly the vulnerability of human life. His father, Thomas Keates, had died in April 1804, falling from his horse after visiting his sons at their school in Enfield. In his recent biography, Nicholas Roe narrates how this death dramatically disrupted the Keatses's peaceable domesticity, fragmenting the family and plunging them into the financial and emotional tumult that would overshadow the rest of their lives. 'How this took hold of Keats's imagination emerged only gradually', Roe observes, suggesting that 'the numerous valedictions, farewells and adieus in his poems and letters may touch upon their last parting'.¹ Richard Monckton Milnes in his reverential early biography similarly notes Keats's distress at the death of his mother in 1810.² These early experiences of domestic tragedy seemed to forge the melancholic pathways that would be re-trod in the poetry in later life. In both cases, the biographers speculate about the impact of such catastrophes on the formation of a young poetic mind. The overwhelming devastation of Tom Keats's death, though, succumbing to tuberculosis in 1818 after several months in Keats's care, is incontrovertible. Its effect on Keats was noted by many of his friends, including the painter, Benjamin Robert Haydon, who wrote with a palpable pity that Tom's death had 'wounded him [Keats] deeply'.³ The effect on Keats was visible and profound. Keats himself reflected bitterly, 'I have never known any unalloy'd Happiness for many days together: the death or sickness of some one has always spoilt my hours' (*L* 2, 123).

Keats understood the fact of mortality in complex ways: personally in life, professionally as a medic and poetically as a fantasy that must inevitably turn real beauty become the ultimate truth. Yet private and professional experiences did not simply inform his work. Rather, Keats understood how poetry could function variously as a mirror, a testing ground and a sounding board. In poetry, he carved out a space for his deepening reflections on the brevity of a life always shaded by death, thinking through the fact of mortality, variously taunting it, toying with it, romanticising it and railing against it. Debilitating grief and desperate agitation at the inevitable coming of death all feature in his work, painfully considered and expressed. Yet death surfaces in his poetry not simply as a theme or a motif, but as the utterly absorbing subject of his investigation, equal to, if not surpassing, his concerns for love and beauty. It is perhaps in the letters that this relay between life and work was made explicit. Writing in September 1818, after a particularly gruelling time nursing his

brother, Keats concedes the profound consequences of the experience on his poetic practice:

I wish I could say Tom was any better. His identity presses upon me so all day that I am obliged to go out – and although I intended to have given some time to study alone, I am obliged to write and plunge into abstract images to ease myself of his countenance, his voice, and feebleness – so that I live now in a continual fever. It must be poisonous to life, although I feel well. Imagine ‘the hateful siege of contraries’ – if I think of fame, of poetry, it seems a crime to me, and yet I must do so or suffer. I am sorry to give you pain – I am almost resolved to burn this – but I really have not self-possession and magnanimity enough to manage the thing otherwise.

(L 1, 368–9)

In such intimate proximity to death, Keats writes for relief, almost to keep death at bay, but writing then also asserts one’s survival, becoming an activity freighted with guilt so unbearable that it almost compels its own destruction. The fragment poem ‘This Living Hand’, dated 1819, seems to articulate that commingled horror and guilt when it imagines the chilling grasp extended by a figure from the grave and the fraught conscience of those that survive the dead. In the poem, the dead are a presence on the border of life, coolly menacing, but the living are plagued both by the guilt of their survival and the imperative to write, as though writing were a talisman, warding off death. For Keats, the living hand is a scribe, ‘warm and capable’ (2) of attesting to a rude bodily presence in defiance of death.⁴

Death and writing are then deeply imbricated practices, as oppositional as they are coextensive for Keats. Stuart Sperry argues that this ambivalence is visible in the entire body of poetic work: ‘One senses that, if Apollo represents an emotional and poetic ideal Keats was struggling to achieve, *Hyperion* conveys the nervous intensity and distraction to which the poet was actually a prey. [...] He had returned from the walking tour in ill-health to find Tom desperately unwell.’⁵ Sperry consequently reads the opening lines of the third part of *Hyperion* as a kind of threnody, not for fallen gods, but expressive of a more singular grief, like that felt by the poet for his dead brother.

O leave them, Muse! O leave them to their woes;
For thou art weak to sing such tumults dire:
A solitary sorrow best befits
Thy lips, and antheming a lonely grief.

(*Hyperion*, 2. 3–6)

The muse that the narrating poet–dreamer addresses is better fitted, Keats oddly notes, for the expression of a ‘solitary sorrow’, a lonelier grief

than that of the many gods. Writing to George and Georgiana Keats on December 18 1819, he informs them despondently, 'I went on a little with [Hyperion] last night – but it will take some time to get into the vein again' (*L* 2, 12), conceding both the difficulty of writing after Tom's death, but also that he is writing. Indeed, the fact of Tom's death makes itself felt in *Hyperion*. When Apollo gazes into the eyes of Mnemosyne, he convulses and Keats describes it with the precision of a witness, not as flight of fancy:

Soon wild commotions shook him, and made flush
 All the immortal fairness of his limbs;
 Most like the struggle at the gate of death;
 Or liker still to one who should take leave
 Of pale immortal death, and with a pang
 As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse
 Die into life: so young Apollo anguish'd;
 (*Hyperion*, 3. 124–30)

Keats's work centres around this question of what it might mean to 'die into life', a curiously upended and yet suggestive formulation. This dying life is an evocative construction that echoes the similarly seductive 'embalmed darkness' (43) of the 'Ode to a Nightingale'. The phrase, Stuart Ende thinks, suggests 'both death and a rich distilled perfume of his own making', an idea of a life shot through with death like a fragrance permeating air.⁶ For Keats, death is not stumbled upon as an event in life or even an awakening; rather, it takes the form of an apprehension of the constant presence of death, a recognition that death has been there all along, the ever present companion to all his experiences.

This apprehension is as apparent in the odes as it is in the apocalyptic final poems. Helen Vendler reads the 'Ode to a Nightingale' as a 'tryst' with death, observing how Keats's language is studded with the suicidal seductions of Hamlet's soliloquy: 'To die, to sleep'. She notes

Hamlet's wish that his flesh might 'melt/ Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew' reappears in Keats's wish to 'fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget'; as the Ghost in Hamlet 'fades', so Keats wishes to 'fade away' and so the nightingale's anthem 'fades'; and we hear the Ghost's 'Adieu! Adieu!'⁷

Despite its soaring beauty, the birdsong is weighed down by Keats's pain since that which the nightingale abandons him to is the 'weariness, the fever, and the fret' (23) of human life. The nightingale flees a world where 'youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies' (26), an image impossible not to attach to the memory of Tom Keats. And yet, it is not death itself that causes pain to Keats here, since 'to think is to be full of sorrow' (27).

Consciousness, not death *per se*, is the cause of grief, and this allows Keats to establish the ode's astonishing contradiction, or what Vendler summarises as the choice between an 'unhappy consciousness and the unconsciousness of death'.⁸ For Vendler, the ode turns on this false choice, and the choice itself is posed as though it could deny their necessary conjunction – the sorrow of life *and* the inevitability of death.

It is, however, birdsong, and by association, poetry itself, that seems able to provide some sort of redemption in the ode. Vendler attends to how pleasingly 'the murmurousness of the flies modulates into Keats's own murmur to Death' when he calls death 'soft names in many a mused rhyme' (53).⁹ Keats imagines a language capable of coaxing and taming death that could be turned object of seduction, not terror. Ende writes that 'As the bird continues to sing, the poet's listening regard begins to assume a deathly quietude', but it is from such quietude that the poem itself springs.¹⁰ The nightingale's song is immortalised by the poem, imagined like the unfading lovers on a Grecian urn who are permanently poised on the cusp of gratification and never yet gratified.

Yet the ode itself is perhaps more ambiguous than the birdsong upon which it reflects. If, in the poem's movement, the bird that is 'not born for death' (61) alerts Keats to his opposite status as a man who lives to die, its song provides succour, permitting Keats to imagine a beautiful oblivion, removed from the realities of physical infirmity or disease. When this alertness to life itself turns painful, the poem poses a dilemma between death that is figured in the unfeeling non-existence of 'sod' or dirt, and a life characterised by fever and fret, and redeemed only by the nightingale song it might contain too. By the process of Keats's meditation, though, the fact of death becomes eclipsed by the possibility of death instead, transformed so that to think upon one's death is to immerse oneself in a luxurious melancholia: 'Now more than ever seems it rich to die' (55), he muses.

This notion of a transfigured, luxurious, triumphant death emerges in the sonnets too. At the close of 'Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell', Keats declares 'Verse, fame, and beauty are intense indeed / But death intenser – death is life's high meed' (13–14). The closing couplet allots to death the summit of life and seems to end with a disavowal of art in favour of a transcendental mortality. Yet death here does not discharge the service of art; rather, art dedicates itself to death and it, in turn, compels the poet's creation. John Jones notes that the couplet 'rings hard, sententious, uncomfortable because it is not quite true'.¹¹ Perhaps Keats does deploy the drama of death for the sense of an ending, and our discomfort with the theatricality of the gesture betrays the seduction of mortality, to which

both Keats and his readers are subject. Yet death for Keats here is also complex: not an absolute end, death is 'life's high meed' and so the possibility that realises life most profoundly. Death is almost alive, as Keats figures it in this and other sonnets. The voluptuous death at the close of 'Bright star' is even sexualised in the narrator who longs to lie 'Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast' (10) and there 'live ever – or else swoon to death' (14). Jones notes that to Keats's mind 'life and death weigh equal; two comparably intense alternatives are being asserted'.¹² Death has a theatrical sensuality here, oddly equal to the body of the imagined lover, and either outcome, the pillowed breast or the swooning death, seems satisfactory. Writing to Fanny Brawne in 1819, Keats acknowledged this curious coupling of sex and death: 'I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute' (*L* 2, 133).

The Keats of the 'Ode to a Nightingale' is in love with death, but death is a powerful component of the poet's depictions of love too. Desire and death are certainly entwined in the letters to Fanny Brawne: 'You cannot conceive how I ache to be with you: how I would die for one hour' (*L* 2, 132). These real life romantic professions possess a dark richness that is already apparent in the poetry. In 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', the sexual tension kindled between knight and belle dame ultimately fizzles out. The curiously etiolated and yet desirous knight exists in a hinterland where 'no birds sing' (4), bound to a woman who stanza by stanza depletes him even as she seduces him. In *Isabella*, too, Lorenzo, is diminished by love, not only in his decapitation, but also in the pared down, disembodied voice to which he is reduced in the poem. *Isabella* tends to the severed head as though it were a relic, her love ironically flowering alongside the rites she performs in memory of her dead lover. Deborah Lutz cites Keats as a poet for whom the body itself becomes a relic: his own death imagined and refigured in his poetry, the poems becoming 'monuments to the enlivening principle of death: little objects themselves that spark an endlessness'.¹³

Certainly, the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and the sonnets to the Elgin Marbles indicate the funereal weight with which Keats could imbue objects. Mortality 'weighs heavily' (2) in the Elgin Marbles, as though the burden of coming death were equal to the vast load and magnitude of the object itself – indeed, the object is transfigured under Keats's gaze and understanding so as to bear such a thing.¹⁴ Relics like the marbles and the urn are emblems of mortality that are, in turn, immortalised in Keats's poems. The poems are the remains too, in some form, of the poet from whom they come. This idea spirals vertiginously in the case of the

urn, since it is itself an object intended to contain remains, amplifying the death-defying impulse of the ode devoted to it. In this way, it is not unlike Keats's own paradoxical epitaph, 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water', whose very ephemerality is reversed by its permanent inscription. The immortalising impulse of this aestheticisation is itself only a conjuring trick and one of which Keats is only too aware. The urn that represents eternity is resolutely inhuman. There is, writes Martin Aske, a 'tone of rebuke' that is betrayed in the declaration 'Cold Pastoral!' (45), and so paltry comfort to be drawn from Keats's claim that

When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st
 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', – that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
 (46–50)¹⁵

T. S. Eliot famously damned the poem's closing apothegm as 'a serious blemish on a beautiful poem'.¹⁶ But Aske redeems this, arguing that this very sententiousness exposes the urn's betrayal: 'No matter how ornate and embellished the urn appears, it cannot defraud the reality of death.'¹⁷ Sperry endorses this with his meditation that '[I]t is the expression of our desire to invest the intimations art affords with the permanence of certainty. It is as if the poet, frustrated by the silence of the urn in the face of his human questioning, had forced it to speak beyond the power of its means.'¹⁸

Perhaps what distinguishes Keats in this immortalising aesthetic impulse is the self-conscious casting of his entire body of work as a kind of future riposte to his death. For Andrew Bennett, the impulse to survive in his writing makes Keats eminently Romantic insofar as one of the key motivations of the literary 'is the possibility of the future, posthumous recognition or canonization'.¹⁹ The idea of posterity as 'the necessary ground of artistic production' could not have been alien to a poet who wrote quietly to his brother in 1818, 'I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death' (*L* 1, 394).²⁰ The important sentiment here is not the confidence of future greatness, but the understanding that such a thing could come only at the expense of life.

Writing 'lives on' after the death of the author, a posthumous supplement. For Bennett, Keats fends off death in a poetics of posterity that promises for itself an afterlife of repetition. That very word, 'posthumous', seems to haunt him at the end. In the final, eerie letter to his friend, Charles

Armitage Brown, he concedes to ‘an habitual feeling of my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence. God knows how it would have been – but it appears to me –’ (*L* 2, 359), trailing off. Severn, too, notes how at the last, ‘Each day he would look up in the doctor’s face to discover how long he should live – he would say – “how long will this posthumous life of mine last” – that look was more than we could ever bear – the extreme brightness of his eyes – with his poor pallid face – were not earthly...’ (*KC* 1, 224).

Nearly 200 years later, that face is itself immortalised in a plaster mask that was cast in Rome just days after Keats’s death, ‘very possibly’, Gittings notes, ‘by Ghirardi, the mask-master to Canova’.²¹ Encased in a glass box, the face is enigmatic, with eyes so heavy-lidded that the print of downcast lashes are faintly discernible; the lips are pressed shut, the deathly body as taciturn as the ‘masque-like figures on the dreary urn’ that Keats himself once interrogated (‘Ode to Indolence’, 61). Thomas McFarland compares the death mask to the life mask which had been cast by Haydon four years earlier in December 1816, noting that dying so young, Keats ‘had a life mask and a death mask that constitute virtually a Janus head of simultaneity’.²² They are, for McFarland, inseparable and indicative of something peculiar to Keats: ‘Keats and death, death and Keats: the two cannot be separated.’²³

The mask, alongside a lock of auburn hair, is now on permanent display at the Keats–Shelley Memorial House, not far from Keats’s grave in the English Cemetery. McFarland reads the mask as a ‘reminder that in the midst of life we are in death’. That understanding of a commingled life and death was for Keats both a seductive fantasy and a sobering truth. The romance of an ‘easeful death’ was countered by the reality of mortality. His brief writing career was dogged by the anxiety of dying before a pen could glean the substance of his ‘rich teaming brain’ (‘When I have fears that I may cease to be’, 2). Death snaps at the heels of the poet dreamer climbing the immortal stairs in *Hyperion*, but it is an impossible foe for Keats to outrun too. Severn, at his bedside in Rome, wrote to Keats’s publisher, James Taylor, bewildered by the desperate circumstances unfolding before him: ‘Keats is desiring his death with dreadful earnestness – the idea of death seems his only comfort – the only prospect of ease – he talks of it with delight – it soothes his present torture – The strangeness of his mind every day surprises us’ (*KC* 1, 205). Severn’s harrowing record of Keats’s final days closes the story of his mortal life, but it also begins an extraordinary poetic afterlife. In his 1821 elegy to Keats, *Adonais*, Shelley insists that ‘He lives, he wakes – ‘tis Death is dead, not he;/ Mourn not for

Adonais' (361–2). In a curious way the extended memorialisation of Keats has itself now become a crucial aspect of our understanding of the poet, an acknowledgement both of his tragic death and the profound ways in which his meditations on mortality shaped his work.

Notes

- 1 Nicholas Roe, *John Keats* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 24.
- 2 Richard Monckton Milnes, *Life and Letters of John Keats* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 3.
- 3 *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. Willard Bissell Pope, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960–3), vol. 2, p. 317.
- 4 Shahidha Bari, *Keats and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 6–9.
- 5 Stuart Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 189.
- 6 Stuart Ende, *Keats and the Sublime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 137.
- 7 Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 85.
- 8 Vendler, *Odes*, p. 88.
- 9 Vendler, *Odes*, pp. 92–3.
- 10 Ende, *Keats and the Sublime*, p. 139.
- 11 John Jones, *John Keats's Dream of Truth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), pp. 202–3.
- 12 Jones, *Keats's Dream of Truth*, p. 203.
- 13 Deborah Lutz, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 26.
- 14 Bari, *Keats and Philosophy*, pp. 12–21.
- 15 Martin Aske, *Keats and Hellenism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 126.
- 16 T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1950), p. 231.
- 17 Aske, *Keats and Hellenism*, p. 127.
- 18 Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, p. 276.
- 19 Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 200.
- 20 Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 9.
- 21 Robert Gittings, *The Mask of Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1956), p. 1.
- 22 Thomas McFarland, *The Masks of Keats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 59.
- 23 McFarland, *Masks of Keats*, p. 64.