

# Lives of the Great Romantics II

Keats

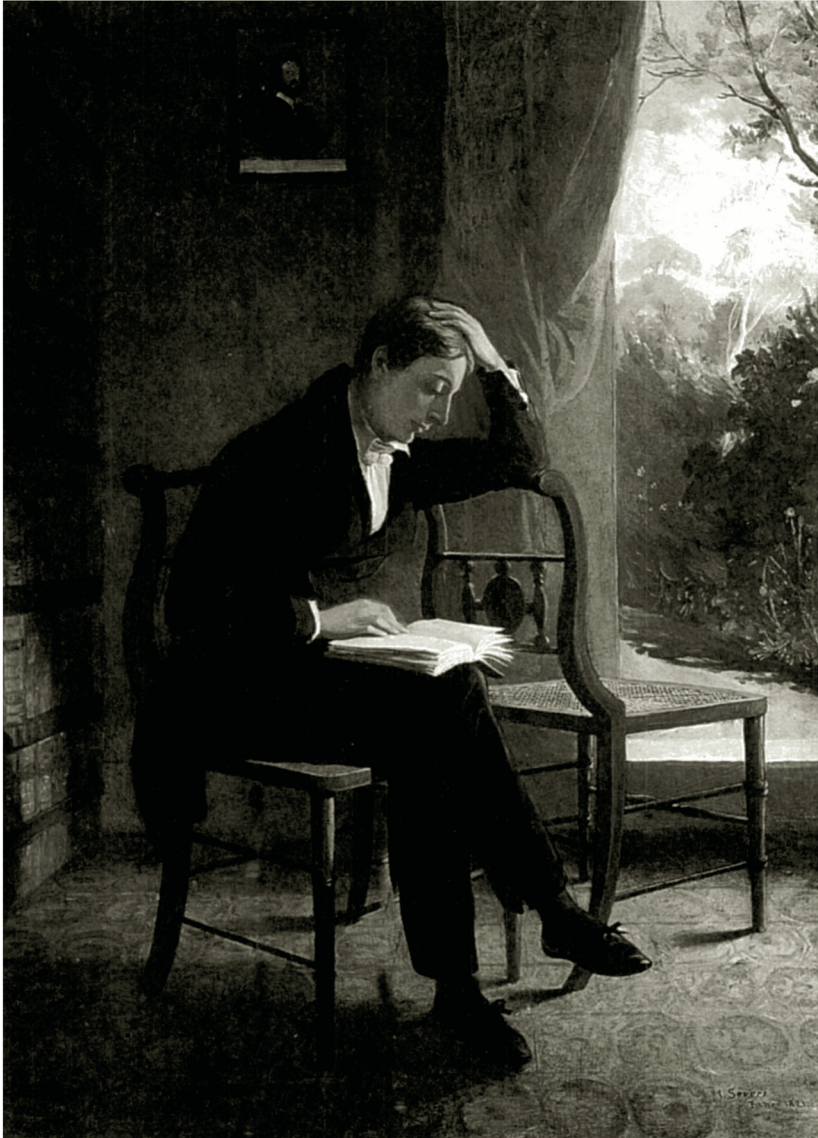
Edited by  
Jennifer Wallace



# **LIVES OF THE GREAT ROMANTICS II**

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Joseph Severn (1793–1879), portrait of John Keats  
*By courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London*

# LIVES OF THE GREAT ROMANTICS II

KEATS, COLERIDGE & SCOTT  
BY THEIR CONTEMPORARIES

VOLUME

1

# KEATS

EDITED BY  
JENNIFER WALLACE

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1997 by Pickering & Chatto (Publishers) Limited

Published 2016 by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

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BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Lives of the great romantics II

Keats, Coleridge and Scott

1. Keats, John, 1795–1821 – Biography 2. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 1772–1834 – Biography 3. Scott, Sir Walter, 1771–1832 – Biography 4. Poets, English – 19th century – Biography  
I. Wallace, Jennifer II. Pite, Ralph III. Robertson, Fiona  
821.7'09

Set ISBN 1–85196–373–1

ISBN 13: 978-1-13875-448-5 (hbk) (Vol-1)

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Lives of the great Romantics II by their contemporaries / series editor  
John Mullan.

p. cm.

Contents: v. 1. Keats / edited by Jennifer Wallace -- v.

2. Coleridge / edited by Ralph Pite -- v. 3. Scott / edited by Fiona Robertson.

ISBN 1–85196–373–1 (set : alk. paper). -- ISBN 1–85196–370–7 (vol.

1 : alk. paper). -- ISBN 1–85196–371–5 (vol. 2 : alk. paper). --

ISBN 1–85196–372–3 (vol. 3 : alk. paper)

1. Poets, English--19th century--Biography. 2. Keats, John, 1795–1821--Biography. 3. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 1772–1834--Biography. 4. Scott, Walter, Sir, 1771–1832--Biography.

5. Romanticism--Great Britain. I. Mullan, John. II. Wallace, Jennifer. III. Pite, Ralph. IV. Robertson, Fiona.

PR105.L583 1997

821'.7--dc21

[B]

97-1345

CIP

*To Simon*



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<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was researched over a hot summer in the Cambridge University Library and the British Library in the British Museum. I am particularly grateful for the assistance given by the photographic department of the Cambridge University Library in preparing facsimile copies of the texts. I would like to thank my enthusiastic General Editor, John Mullan, for his comments on earlier drafts and for the light touch with which he handled the whole project; and Bridget Frost, Rebecca Saraceno and all at Pickering & Chatto for their help and patience. Professor Ted Kenney gave some crucial assistance with the Latin at the last minute. My sister, Gillian Wallace, provided a healthy dose of scepticism and useful medical knowledge at an early stage of the book, while, as usual, my husband Simon Targett read every draft and became inevitably part of the Keats team.

## INTRODUCTION

A recent newspaper article about a former British government minister began with an anecdote to indicate his attitude to education:

George Walden is not a man given to compromises. He took his daughter away from Godolphin and Latymer, a London independent school with an excellent reputation, because her English lessons involved studying scripts of *Boys From the Black Stuff* [a television drama]. 'I told them: "I pay you to teach my daughter Keats"'. When they failed to do so, he sent her to Westminster.

(*Independent on Sunday*, 15 September 1996)

Walden's attitude, that 'Keats' represents – and is a by-word for – the highest form of literature which should be studied and which can be contrasted with so-called popular culture, is by no means unusual. Only a few years ago, Christopher Ricks, professor of English at Boston University, provocatively raised the question of the comparative merits of Keats and the folk-singer Bob Dylan, assuming that they were at opposite ends of the spectrum of established literary reputation. For Keats now is widely regarded as one of the greatest poets in the English canon. In 1995, when members of the British public were asked by the BBC to name their favourite poems, they actually nominated not one but two of Keats's poems – 'To Autumn' and 'Ode to a Nightingale' – in the list of the top ten poems (*Independent*, 13 October 1995). 'People seem to be voting for poems printed on their tea towels and the ones they learned at school', Daisy Goodwin, editor of the BBC's Bookworm programme commented (*The Guardian*, 11 October 1995). Beyond the classroom walls of Godolphin and Latymer, clearly, Keats's poems are frequently chosen for school study and lovingly remembered and quoted later in life. Reflecting this popular affection and familiarity, they tend to outnumber the poems of his contemporaries – Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley – in anthologies of English poetry. (Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* (1861) included eleven poems by Keats, twenty two by Shelley and forty four by Wordsworth, whereas John Wain's *Oxford Anthology of English Poetry* (1986) contains fifteen poems by Keats, eleven poems by Shelley and eleven poems by Wordsworth). Certainly, the houses with which Keats was most associated – Wentworth Place in Hampstead and 26, Piazza di Spagna, in Rome – are now much visited museums. As an indication of this national recognition, the

celebrations for the bicentenary of his birth in 1995 included a week-long Keats Festival in Hampstead, the laying of an honorary wreath on his monument in Westminster Abbey and a much discussed BBC television documentary about his life.

Keats's popularity is partly attributable to the fact that he seems to symbolise the archetypal poet. 'The life of Keats', according to Walter Jackson Bate, one of his greatest biographers, 'has always seemed haunted by a feeling of familiarity' (Bate, (1979), p. 2). He is frequently compared to Shakespeare, the national bard. Sidney Colvin points out that both Keats and Shakespeare fulfil our desire for the poet as 'untaught genius': 'From his case less even than from Shakespeare's can we draw up any argument as to the influence of heredity or environment on the birth and growth of genius' (Colvin (1920), p.2); while James Pope-Hennessy compares the iconic qualities of both poets: 'The taut and eager face of Keats, gazing with impassioned eyes from the engraved frontispiece of Milnes' first volume, is now as familiar to us, as much a part of our lives as the strange, egg-shell countenance of Shakespeare from the First Folio' (Pope-Hennessy, (1949) p. 292. The engraved picture also appears in the 'Esculapian Poet' article: see Benjamin Richardson extract). 'Keats has continued', Bate adds, 'to strike so many readers – and writers – as the most Shakespearean in character of all poets since Shakespeare himself' (Bate, (1979) p. 1). But if Keats has become the embodiment of our idea of the 'true poet' because of his Shakespearean qualities, he has also become representative of the tragic life, of the talented man who dies young. For Keats, the myth of the promising life cut tragically short was provided by Thomas Chatterton; for us now, it is provided by Keats. David Frith, for example, was simply drawing upon popular terminology when he chose to call his biography of Archie Jackson, the Australian test cricketer who died from TB aged 23, *Archie Jackson: The Keats of Cricket* (London, 1987).

Given the immense admiration and affection for Keats in the twentieth century, it comes as some surprise to learn that for nearly thirty years after his death virtually nothing was written about him. No major collection of his poetry was published, besides the Galignani unauthorised Paris edition of Shelley, Coleridge and Keats in 1829, which was sold only on the Continent and in America, and a *Standard Library* edition in 1840, reprinted from the Galignani edition and quickly remaindered. No major biographies appeared, besides Leigh Hunt's brief and idiosyncratic memoir in *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*. Keats had died virtually alone and penniless in Rome at the age of twenty five, and his 'whole story', according to Richard Monckton Milnes, author of what Andrew Bennett has called the 'inaugural Keats book' in 1848, could 'be summed up in the composition of three small volumes of verse, some earnest friendships, one passion, and a premature death' (Milnes, (1848), p.2; see Bennett, (1996), p. 11). There was consequently, in

the early nineteenth century, no guarantee that the 'story' or indeed the poems would survive at all. "I should like to print a complete Edition of Keats's poems", John Taylor, Keats's publisher, wrote in 1835, 'but the world cares nothing for him – I fear that even 250 copies would not sell' (Blunden, (1936), p. 199).

For a long time after Keats's death, there was even silence from his close friends. As a result, there were far fewer memoirs written about Keats by his contemporaries than there were about the other 'Great Romantics' in this series, and even the ones that did appear were fairly brief. But in the silence about the man, myths of the poet developed, beginning with a certain coterie and then later acquiring greater recognition. Stories and poems were circulated about Keats which did not worry about describing any real acquaintance with him or knowledge of his personal life (even if the author did in fact know Keats), but which were concerned to construct him as a certain type, the archetypal sensitive poet who dies young. The myth of Keats replaced the historical biography, precisely because there were no detailed facts available to disprove it. If we look at the early history of writing about Keats after 1821, we can begin to understand the important connection between the myth and the man – or the public and the private poet – which actually shapes and influences the Keats we think we know so well today.

## 1. The Long Silence

Ever since Keats's tragically early death in February 1821, his friends had been expecting a memoir or biography. Indeed, even before Keats's death, his friend Richard Woodhouse, a lawyer, had anticipated the scholarly research required for the writing of a biography by collecting and copying all of Keats's poems and letters that he could find; while William Haslam, another friend and lawyer, had recognised the need to record the daily detail of the poet's life for subsequent memoirs and urged Joseph Severn, who was looking after the dying Keats in Rome, to keep a journal. But when the moment arrived, after February 1821, to put pen to paper and send memoir to publisher, doubts set in. One of the reasons for the hesitation could have been the fact that Keats's friends, on the whole, were not literary people, and only Benjamin Bailey, amongst them all, had been educated at university. Several of Keats's friends – Woodhouse, Haslam, James Rice – were lawyers, who had gained their training by serving as clerks or apprentices for law firms. Other friends worked as clerks for trade companies. Charles Brown, who owned part of the present day Keats House museum in Hampstead and with whom Keats lived, worked for the East India company. Charles Wentworth Dilke, who owned the other half of the house, which he rented out to Fanny Brawne's family, worked for

the Navy Pay Office. Although Brown dabbled in a little writing as a hobby and Dilke later became editor of the *Athenaeum*, neither was practised in self expression nor came from an environment with expectations of publication. Several other close friends – Benjamin Robert Haydon, Joseph Severn, William Hilton – were artists who preferred to draw than to write. For this reason, there are almost more drawings and paintings of Keats than there are personal written memoirs, and several of the drawings and engravings from the paintings are included in this volume. The rest of Keats's friends were in the publishing and newspaper business. John Taylor, Keats's publisher, became a personal friend; Charles Cowden Clarke, whom Keats had known as a teacher in his early life, later took on a bookselling and publishing business. Only John Hamilton Reynolds and Leigh Hunt, neither of whom went to university, could be described as established writers and poets, accustomed to seeing their words in print, regulars on the literary scene.

A further reason for the friends' coyness in sending recollections to publishers was probably anxiety about the furore which simply the mention of Keats's name could create in the national press. The memory would not fade easily of Lockhart's ridicule in *Blackwood's Magazine*: '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" etc' (see *Critical Heritage*, pp. 109-110). Nor probably could they forget Croker's scorn in the *Quarterly Review*: '[Mr. Keats is] a disciple of the new school of what has been somewhere called Cockney poetry; which may be defined to consist of the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language ... This author is a copyist of Mr Hunt; but he is more unintelligible, almost as rugged, twice as diffuse, and ten times more tiresome and absurd than his prototype' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 111). Keats's poetry had been viciously attacked by the powerful Tory press during his lifetime, because he was perceived to mingle in the radical London circle of Leigh Hunt and William Hazlitt. He was considered to be socially inferior – an 'uneducated and flimsy stripling', according to Lockhart – and his verse seemed to include the experimentation and iconoclasm which were the hallmarks of Hunt's style (*Critical Heritage*, p. 101). Even after his death, the reviews continued to criticise and mock him, driven by political malice: '[Keats was] a foolish young man, who after writing some volumes of very weak, and, in the greater part, of very indecent poetry, died some time since of a consumption: the breaking down of an infirm constitution having, in all probability, been accelerated by the discarding his neckcloth, a practice of the cockney poets, who look upon it as essential to genius' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 245). Given these attitudes, simply to read Keats in the years between 1821 and 1848 was to stage a minor rebellion. The poet Arthur Hallam, a friend of Tennyson at Cambridge and the subject of Tennyson's poem *In Memoriam*, came back from Italy as a student with a copy of Shelley's *Adonais*

– unobtainable in Britain – and urged his friends to read Keats and Shelley. ‘We shall not hesitate to express our conviction’, he wrote in 1831, implying in his rhetoric the boldness of his step, ‘that the Cockney school contained more genuine inspiration, and adhered more speedily to that portion of truth which it embraced, than any *form* of art that has existed in this country since the day of Milton’ (*Critical Heritage*, p. 266). But he was writing against the grain, and it was not till the middle of the century, when Tennyson was installed as Poet Laureate and Pre-Raphealite poetry became popular, that the literary and political climate changed sufficiently for Keats’s poetry to be appreciated.

But the main reason why Keats’s friends did not publish their memoirs was a scandalous and bitter quarrel which broke out only months after the poet’s death and drove members of the close-knit Keats circle apart. The argument was partly over the ‘possession’ of Keats. Only someone who had known or understood Keats or could be called his main friend, it was felt, was sufficiently qualified to write an account of him. John Taylor, Keats’s publisher, decided, with almost indecent haste, that he should write the official biography of the poet and co-opted the help of the painstaking Richard Woodhouse, the publisher’s legal adviser, with his already prepared archive of papers. ‘I believe’, he wrote to his brother, ‘I shall try to write [Keats’s] Life – it is the Wish of his Friends, and was Keats’s Wish also’ (28 March 1821, Blunden (1936), p. 90), and by the following year he had announced the forthcoming ‘Memoirs of Keats’s life’ in the *London Magazine*, of which he was now the editor. John Hamilton Reynolds, another poet and fellow contributor to the *London Magazine*, offered his assistance in tracking down Keats’s letters and poems sent to various correspondents and later considered writing something himself. But crucial members of the Keats circle refused to co-operate. Joseph Severn sent his copies of Keats’s papers to Charles Brown rather than to John Taylor, while Brown, in his customary gruff manner, expressed his reservations about Taylor. ‘In my opinion’, he wrote, ‘Taylor neither comprehended him nor his poetry’ (Sharp (1892), p. 109) and he concluded that he would not ‘consent to be a party in a bookseller’s job’ (Bodurtha and Pope (1937), p. 8). With half the archive in one house and half in another, no account which claimed any kind of completeness could be published. There was stalemate.

The quarrel was also about money. There was some compunction about deriving commercial benefit from Keats’s death. Reynolds, for instance, nearly broke away from the Keats circle a second time in 1846, when he discovered that letters, which he had shown to Woodhouse privately, had been sold to the publisher Edward Moxon for Milnes’s biography. His private property, he felt, was becoming common property for commercial gain: ‘I was never consulted on the subject – never considered; – and he had no more right to receive a farthing than he had to abuse a violated confidence’ (Reynolds to Milnes, *Keats Circle*, II, p. 172). Similarly, rather than simply getting on with

publishing his recollections, Brown agonised over what other friends might think if he derived money from his memoir: 'Dilke urges me, as a proof to the world of my friendship for Keats, and as the only proof that I am not book-making, to declare, from the first, that I will not accept of one penny of the profits which may arise from the memoirs' (Brown to Severn, February 1830; Sharp (1892), p. 161).

However, the main focus of the quarrel was George Keats's treatment of his brother and his money. John Keats's last years had in fact been very difficult financially and his friends, especially Joseph Severn and William Haslam, had devoted much time to raising money for him and to managing his affairs without worrying him in his illness. The culprit for Keats's debts was thought to be Keats's brother George. In 1820 George came back from America, where he had emigrated, to collect his share of the estate of his younger brother, Tom, who had died from consumption. He also took a large share of Keats's inheritance, which, he argued, was due to him because of Keats's costly medical education funded by their joint estate. After George's visit, Keats was left virtually penniless. Charles Brown commented that 'his brother George left him for America, with more by £20 than Keats possessed, saying, which was repeated to me by himself: "You, John, have so many friends they will be sure to take care of you"' (*Keats Circle*, II, p. 169). But Charles Dilke, originally a great friend of Brown's and his neighbour, believed George Keats's protestations of innocence, and replied to George that Keats 'knew nothing of want either of Friends or money' (*Keats Circle*, I, p. 136). As a result of their differing views of George Keats, Brown and Dilke quarrelled irrevocably, and polarised the formerly close Keats circle between their two sides. William Haslam backed Brown against Dilke; John Taylor, already distrusted by the difficult Brown, took Dilke's side. This meant that George Keats's valuable collection of his brother's letters, not to mention his memories, were not available to Brown and others for their biographies. And worse, in 1835 George put an injunction upon the publication of any of his brother's poems in order to spite his enemies. Private rankling and public silence continued. (For a more detailed account of the quarrel, see the excellent introduction to Brown (1937)). The friends could only watch and exchange private correspondence as the myth surrounding the man they knew developed.

## 2. The Myth

It was the vacuum left by the diffident and squabbling friends that Shelley and Byron, more experienced and assertive writers, rushed to fill. They were by no means bosom companions of Keats. Byron had never met the poet. Shelley had met Keats a few times and was on friendly terms with him, but did not



know him well. 'I know personally but little of Keats', he admitted in a manuscript draft of his poem *Adonais* (see headnote to Shelley). What Byron and Shelley saw in Keats was a particular type of author, whose misfortunes confirmed their own concerns and grievances about any writer's relationship with society. And it was as an exemplary stereotype or caricature that they treated him, rather than as an individual man with personal idiosyncracies and a particular history. Within only a few months of Keats's death, they were discussing its wider implications, its causes and effects. 'Young Keats', Shelley wrote, breaking the news to Byron, 'whose "Hyperion" showed so great a promise died lately at Rome from the consequences of breaking a blood vessel, in paroxysms of despair at the contemptuous attack on his book in the Quarterly Review' (Shelley to Byron, Shelley, *Letters*, II, p. 284; 17 April 1821). Byron replied in typically mock serious fashion, apparently taking Shelley at his word: 'I am very sorry to hear what you say of Keats. – is it actually true? I did not think criticism had been so killing' (Byron to Shelley, *LJ*, 26 April 1821). The correspondence began to revolve around the extent to which Keats was literally killed by reviews, prompted partly by Byron's initial trivialising response. 'The account of Keats', Shelley replied, 'is, I fear, too true. Hunt tells me that in the first paroxysms of his disappointment he burst a blood vessel and thus laid the foundation of a rapid consumption' (Shelley to Byron, Shelley, *Letters*, II, p. 289; 4 May 1821).

What Shelley treated seriously and compassionately, Byron wrote about with flippancy. In his poem *Adonais*, Shelley elevated Keats's victimisation by critics into the classical myth of Actaeon, metamorphosed into a stag and hunted by the dogs and hunters' arrows of criticism. Byron preferred to ridicule Keats's predicament. He was not enamoured of Keats's poetry in any case, believing it to be self indulgent. '[His] writing is a sort of mental masturbation', he wrote to his publisher John Murray. 'He is always f-gg-g his Imagination. I don't mean that he is indecent, but viciously soliciting his own ideas into a state which is neither poetry nor anything else but a Bedlam vision produced by raw pork and opium' (*LJ*, VII, p. 225; 9 September 1820). So when Shelley insisted, in his letters to him, that Keats's death had been caused by harsh reviews, the opportunity for a joke was too good to miss. At the time Byron was composing *Don Juan*, a rambling mock epic in which the narrator continually digresses about other subjects and even about writing itself. It was easy to insert topical comment on Keats.

John Keats, who was killed off by one critique,  
 Just as he really promised something great,  
 If not intelligible, – without Greek  
 Contrived to talk about the gods of late  
 Much as they might have been supposed to speak.  
 Poor fellow! His was an untoward fate:-



Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,  
Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article.  
(*Don Juan*, XI.473–80)

The neatness of Byron's rhyme quickly lent currency to the sentiment. Hunt found that he had to dispute Byron's lines in his recollections of Keats, so well known had it become, while, in general, being 'snuffed out by an article' became a fashionable phrase to apply to any writer's bad press (see Wolfson, (1995), p. 30).

Shelley's and Byron's poems offered two different interpretations of Keats's death. In one version, Keats was an almost sacred figure, martyred by the insensitivity and ignorance of critics. In the other, he became a rather pathetic, weak character, unable to control his emotions. Both writers were agreed, though, that Keats had died early because he had suffered from bad reviews from unsympathetic magazine critics, and it was in propagating this myth about Keats that they exercised such an influence on his subsequent reputation. Besides the myth-making poems of Shelley and Byron, there was one seminal event which helped to fix the idea of all writers' victimisation by reviewers in the public imagination. This was the duel between magazine editors in February 1821 over the fate of Keats. John Scott, editor of the newly formed *London Magazine*, published a number of articles attacking *Blackwood's Magazine* for its harsh treatment of Keats (*London Magazine*, November and December 1820). What made the *Blackwood's* criticism of Keats and 'The Cockney School of Poetry' harder to take was the fact that, like much magazine journalism of the time, each article was written anonymously and signed simply 'Z', allowing for wild attacks which amused the disinterested reader but for which all the *Blackwood's* men could disclaim responsibility. 'A regular plan of fraud had been concocted, at the very outset of the magazine', Scott wrote, 'a plan to excite interest in the public mind, and realise profit to the unworthy perpetrators, by a series of cunning impositions – involving in their course the sacrifice of every feeling belonging to the writer of real principle, the violation of some of the most sacred rules of honourable intercourse in society, the disfigurement and disgrace of literature, by rendering it an accomplice in low remorseless outrages on reputation, and on truth' (*London Magazine*, 2 (November 1820), p. 510). If the attacks were to be so personal, he argued, the author also should take responsibility personally. Events came to a head when Scott challenged John Gibson Lockhart, whom he suspected to be the author, to admit that he was indeed 'Z' or to give him satisfaction in a duel. After much complicated correspondence and posturing, Scott ended up fighting Lockhart's friend, Jonathan Henry Christie, who had no connection with *Blackwood's* and no particular animosity against Keats. A duel against Lockhart could possibly have had awkward consequences for Scott's

case: if Scott were to lose the duel, it would mean that the victor Lockhart's name would be cleared. A duel against the hapless Christie, caught in the crossfire between the two editors, seemed to simplify matters.

Despite the fact that the early nineteenth century has been termed the 'heyday' of the duel, duels were, and have always been, technically illegal (Loose (1983), p. 6; Baldick (1965), pp. 98-101). Scott's duel, therefore, had to be conducted in secret. The duellists, with their seconds and surgeons, met at Chalk Farm, near Hampstead, 'by moonlight' at 9pm, February 16th ('A Graybeard's Gossip', p. 418). Duellists, by the early nineteenth century, usually aimed to wound rather than to kill, but fumbling in the darkness Christie missed his mark wide of his antagonist and actually shot Scott in the stomach. Scott was carried to Chalk Farm Tavern nearby, where for the next eleven days he lay dying in an upstairs bedroom. Indeed his lingering death and final end mirrored that of Keats in Rome almost exactly. Keats died on 23 February and was quickly autopsied; Scott died on 27 February, and within a few weeks an inquest into his death and the accompanying trial of Christie for murder began. (For more details of the duel, see L. M. Jones, 'The Scott-Christie Duel').

Inevitably the death of John Scott and the death of John Keats became linked. Benjamin Robert Haydon and Joseph Severn record them on the same page in their recollections, published in this volume. Severn, in fact refers to Scott's death as 'another scene in the tragedy', as if both Scott's and Keats's demise were stories dramatised for some wider purpose. For, with Scott's gruesome death in the duel, fought because of what he passionately believed about Keats and the critics, the connection between writing and life (or death), which Byron ridiculed, became closer. The ferocity of the magazine war, which Shelley had mythologised in *Adonais*, became evident in Scott's very real death. But in turn, his death in the farcical duel itself lent weight to the developing story about Keats, that his death had been brought on by reviewers. Myth and reality became combined in a powerful concoction.

It was this myth and ignorance which Richard Monckton Milnes, later Lord Houghton, aimed to dispel with his long awaited *Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats* in 1848. The work was dedicated to Francis Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, the first 'to rescue [Keats] from the alternative of obloquay and oblivion' – by a favourable review of *Endymion* – and implied that Milnes himself was the second to 'rescue' Keats. 'I saw how grievously', Milnes wrote, 'Keats was misapprehended even by many who wished to see in him only what was best'. In order to rid people of their misapprehensions about Keats, Milnes relied upon what we might today call primary evidence, the first-hand accounts of Keats from the people who knew him and the letters and papers of Keats himself. Rather than appearing to offer conjecture or criticism himself, he amalgamated the papers sent to him by Keats's

friends, by Charles Brown, Joseph Severn, John Hamilton Reynolds and George Keats's widow (see headnotes to Milnes). The memoirs, letters and journals, Milnes assumed, could speak for themselves, untainted by distortion. 'I came to the conclusion', he wrote in the preface, 'that it was best to act simply as the editor of the life which was, as it were, already written. I had not the right, which many men yet living might claim from personal knowledge, of analysing motives of action and explaining courses of conduct; I could tell no more than was told to me, and that I have done as faithfully as I was able'.

Milnes's book was praised for its lack of its distortion. 'We have read no book for many a day', wrote a Rev. Adams in the *Westminster Review*, 'that has excited such deep emotion; for again a man is brought before us, one whose every thought and trial, whose every strength and weakness we draw to our own bosoms, and enshrine him in our inmost heart'. Milnes was admired for the fact that he had stepped back from intruding comment and, by positioning himself simply as 'editor', had become, according to Adams, a 'reverential listener to the melody'. The book has rightly been described as 'the dividing-line between Keats's obscurity and his fame' (*Critical Heritage*, p. 31), but it could not constitute a 'dividing-line' between the 'myth' and the 'truth' of Keats. It was impossible, by 1848, to ignore entirely the image of Keats already established. Milnes could not act 'simply' as an 'editor'; some degree of selection and distortion of the evidence was inevitable (see headnotes to Milnes extracts for some examples of selection). Even more significantly, the friends of Keats who sent Milnes their recollections were, by now, inevitably affected by the constructions of Keats written by Byron and Shelley. They were compelled to contend with the notion of the weak Keats killed by reviews in their memoirs, even if, as Severn stressed, that meant refuting the notion that Keats was 'snuffed out by an article'. Seventeen years after his death, they could not help, when they tried to cast their minds back to the days of their friendship, thinking of Keats the mythologised poet before Keats the man.

If Milnes's book inadvertently perpetuated the notions of Keats first given currency by Shelley and Byron, it also propagated a new image of Keats which still has force today, and that is the image of Keats the letter writer. Much of the material which Milnes was sent by the Keats circle was not personal anecdote and recollection but a huge archive of correspondence. In the absence of many other facts about Keats's life, Milnes relied heavily upon his letters and in fact created the impression that Keats spent a large amount of his time writing to friends. He attempted to justify the inclusion of the letters on aesthetic grounds:

The journal-letters to his brother and sister in America are the best records of his outer existence. I give them in their simplicity, being assured that thus they

are best. They are full of a genial life which will be understood and valued by all to whom a book of this nature presents any interest whatever: and, when it is remembered how carelessly they are written, how little the writer ever dreamt of their being redeemed from the far West or exposed to any other eyes than those of the most familiar affection, they become a mirror in which the individual character is shown with indisputable truth, and from which the fairest judgement of his very self can be drawn.

(Milnes (1848), I, pp. 245-6)

Milnes's editorial decision, resulting in page after page of Keats's letters to his friends, has meant that Keats's letters are now considered to be an integral part of his oeuvre and are frequently studied as works of art alongside his poems. 'There is a case for arguing that Keats's letters are finer than his poetry', John Barnard wrote (Barnard (1987), p. 143), while Keats's latest biographer, Stephen Coote, describes the correspondence as 'at once intimate and literary' (Coote (1995), p. 39). Most forthright in his preference was W. H. Auden, who, according to *The Times Literary Supplement*, 'suggested that the day may come when Keats's letters – which he sees as Shakespearean in their vigour – will be more widely read and admired than his poetry itself' (*TLS*, 29 January 1954: see *Letters*, introduction, p. 8). While attempting to show the 'indisputable truth' of Keats, Milnes had, in effect, created the new myth that Keats's private letters were more aesthetically beautiful and interesting than his public poems. In other words, he had given currency to the idea that Keats was primarily the poet of spontaneity and privacy, rather than the poet skilled in the art of rhetoric and public expression.

### 3. The Poet

The discussion of Milnes's book has shown the problem of relying upon Keats's letters in order to reach the 'indisputable truth' of Keats. The letters, too, are now part of the myth and so the provenance and early published history of the letters in Milnes's first biography must be taken into account when they are cited. Yet, along with the few memoirs of his contemporaries, they provide the only source for any kind of knowledge of Keats. And what we discover from Keats's letters and his poems is that it is extremely difficult to form a vivid and detailed picture of Keats the historical man. There is no sense in the letters of a private Keats who was unknown to the memoir writers and actually quite different. This is because Keats himself was engaged in creating his own persona, the image of the poet, in his letters and, apparently, in his way of life. His letters are extremely self-conscious, debating with each correspondent the nature of a poet, the character he should display to the world and the way in which that should be inflected in his poetry. He seems to be

aware of the need to depersonalise himself, to iron out any idiosyncracies, before replacing his former individual characteristics with an archetypal image of a poet, a timeless icon. The image, in other words, which Keats sought to project was one of selflessness, both in his person and in his poetry. This self-mythologisation on Keats's part was what the memoir writers were inevitably responding to and then perpetuating by their own accounts of his life.

Keats's first priority, in the process of depersonalisation, was not to impose his opinions and personality upon others. 'When I am in a room with People', he wrote to Richard Woodhouse, in a letter included in Monckton Milnes's biography, 'if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated' (To Woodhouse, *Letters*, I, p. 387; 27 October 1818; see also Milnes (1848), I, p. 222). Keats's self observation seems to have been supported by his friends, since both Benjamin Robert Haydon's recollection of his dinner parties with Keats and the story of Keats and Hunt in *Fraser's Magazine* describe Keats mingling in with the crowd, not pushing his opinions or dominating the group (see Haydon extract and extract from *Fraser's Magazine*). Indeed, this lack of self assertion or distinctiveness in his character made Keats all the more difficult a subject for biography. But Keats is making a literary point to Woodhouse as well as an anecdotal one. He is attempting to describe the need for any poet to observe the world around him intensely, to assume imaginatively the feelings of others. 'If a sparrow comes before my Window', he wrote to Bailey, 'I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel' (To Bailey, *Letters*, I, p. 186; 22 November 1817). In order to achieve the necessary imaginative leap into another's world for the writing of poetry, Keats claimed that the poet had to abandon any thought of his own identity or fixed personality: 'the poet has none; no identity – he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's creatures' (To Woodhouse, *Letters*, I, p. 387; 27 October 1818).

Keats's declared aspiration, to divest himself of identity, was bound up with his belief that a poet should have no didactic purpose in his poetry, no obvious moral investment. It was this belief which lay behind his famous thesis of the camelion poet:

As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself – it has no self – it is everything and nothing – It has no character - it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated – It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of

the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation.

(To Woodhouse, *Letters*, I, p. 386-7; 27 October 1818)

Critics are now beginning to argue that Keats's declared lack of political or moral investment in his poetry could paradoxically be interpreted as political in its final intentions, an act of rebellion against the established morality of the day (see McGann (1985), pp. 17-65 and Butler (1981) pp. 113-137). But in the process, it meant that Keats hung back from proffering opinions and individual observations which could shed light upon his individual nature. 'It is a wretched thing to confess', he continued to Woodhouse, 'but is a very fact that not one word that I utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature'.

Keats claimed in his letters that a poet should not retain any baggage of opinion or knowledge extraneous to his immediate surroundings. The effort he made to replace his individual beliefs and opinions with speculation and spontaneous reaction was motivated by what he called 'negative capability', the most important attribute of a poet. 'At once it struck me', he wrote to his brothers, 'what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (To George and Tom Keats, *Letters*, I, p. 193; 27 December 1817). Leigh Hunt criticised Keats for this strange passivity, terming it a 'poetical effeminacy' (Hunt (1828), p. 253). But, as can be seen from the letter to Woodhouse, Keats actually relished his ability to abandon his own sense of self and to enter into the identity of others. It allowed for a sense of naivety, which gave a freshness to old subjects, as he attempted to describe to Benjamin Bailey: 'The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found it truth' (To Bailey, *Letters*, I, p. 185; 22 November 1817). Such openness and 'delight in sensation' was something to which, Keats argued in his letters, all poets should aspire.

The myth which Keats was developing about himself, that he was a camelion who asserted no opinion and possessed no distinctive features, also influenced his poetry. The narrators in his poems are noticeably passive and are led into other worlds through the non-judgemental force of their imaginations. Again and again, scenes in his poems flash upon one like visions in a dream. His first major poem, *Endymion*, set in mythical ancient Greece, describes the love of a shepherd, Endymion, for the shadowy figure of the moon goddess who overwhelms and confuses him and who entices him further and further away from the known world which he can understand. 'She took an airy range', Endymion attempts to describe his first meeting with her to his sister,

And then, towards me, like a very maid,  
 Came blushing, waning, willing, and afraid,  
 And press'd me by the hand: Ah! 'twas too much;  
 Methought I fainted at the charmed touch,  
 Yet held my recollection, even as one  
 Who dives three fathoms where the waters run  
 Gurgling in beds of coral.

(*Endymion*, I, ll. 633-640)

Endymion's increasing immersion in the sensuous realm of language and imagination means that eventually he is swept away for eternal marriage with the moon goddess and his more corporeal sister is left alone in this world:

Her brother kissed her too, and knelt adown  
 Before his goddess, in a blissful swoon.  
 She gave fair hands to him, and behold,  
 Before three swiftest kisses he had told,  
 They vanish'd far away! – Peona went  
 Home through the gloomy wood in wonderment.

(*Endymion*, IV, ll. 998-1003)

Similarly, in 'Ode to a Nightingale', Keats attempts to chart the 'diving' or sinking feeling of entering another imaginative world. The poem alludes to the painful circumstances of the narrator's life, which was probably inspired by Keats's own experiences of watching his brother Tom die of consumption and of witnessing many grisly deaths of patients at St. Thomas's hospital. But the poem is concerned with the desire to leave that historical reality behind. The narrator wishes, instead, to be led like Endymion to an imaginary world where the ethical dilemmas prompted by illness and death are not posed:

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim:  
  
 Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
 What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
 The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,  
 Where pale youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;  
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
 And leaden-eyed despairs

('Ode to a Nightingale', ll. 19-28).

At the end of the poem, after exploring the worlds of fairy tale and romance, the narrator is brought back to his original situation: 'Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!'. But like Adam in



Keats's account of Adam's dream, he is unable to distinguish fact from fiction: 'Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep?'. The naivety of the narrator, which made the entry into the imagination possible, means that no decision can be made over the relative merits of the historical or mythical worlds.

Keats's 'negative capability', the emptying out of distinct and personal features in his character, seems to have had an impact upon his behaviour and his poetics, as described in his letters and poems. But if we look again at Keats's letter about 'negative capability', the paradox of his idea of the poet becomes apparent: 'what quality went to form a Man of *Achievement* .... I mean Negative Capability' (my italics). Keats seems to have been obsessed with 'achievement', with the 'fame' of becoming a successful poet. As a result, along with the image of the camelion or selfless man, he also paradoxically cultivated the image of himself as the vocational poet, destined to fulfil the traditional role of a poet and, crucially, destined to be recognised as an important and influential poet after his death. For him, being a poet seems to have been synonymous with gaining a place in some great canon of literature, which is perpetually studied and discussed by readers over centuries. 'I have asked myself so often why I should be a Poet more than other Men', he wrote to Hunt, a few months after his first volume of poems was published, 'seeing how great a thing it is – how great things are to be gained by it – What a thing to be in the Mouth of Fame – that at last the Idea has grown so monstrously beyond my seeming Power of attainment that the other day I nearly consented with myself to drop into a Phaeton [a type of carriage]' (To Hunt, *Letters*, I, p. 139; 10 May 1817).

Keats often acted the expected role of the poet. He crowned himself with laurel leaves after the publication of his first volume of poems, inspired by the ancient Greek practice of crowning their writers (see extract from *Fraser's Magazine*). He also deliberately set himself the task, aged only twenty one, of writing an epic-length poem, *Endymion*: 'It will be a test, a trial of my Powers of Imagination', Keats wrote of his long poem to Bailey. 'I must make 4000 Lines of one bare circumstance and fill them with Poetry; and when I consider that this is a great task, and that when done it will take me but a dozen paces towards the Temple of Fame – it makes me say – God forbid that I should be without such a task!' (To Bailey, I, pp. 169-170; 8 October 1817). The opening verses of *Endymion* describe the proposed length of the poem in terms of the heroic quest, undertaken like Telemachus's journey in the *Odyssey* or the travels of Spenser's knights in *The Fairie Queene*, as a crucial *rite de passage* to maturity:

Many and many a verse I hope to write,  
Before the daisies, vermeil rimm'd and white,  
Hide in deep herbage; and ere yet the bees



Hum about globes of clover and sweet peas,  
 I must be near the middle of my story.  
 O may no wintry season, bare and hoary,  
 See it half finished: but let Autumn bold,  
 With universal tinge of sober gold,  
 Be all about me when I make an end.  
 And now at once, adventuresome, I send  
 My herald thought into a wilderness:  
 There let its trumpet blow, and quickly dress  
 My uncertain path with green, that I may speed  
 Easily onward, through flowers and weed.

(*Endymion*, I, ll. 49-62)

Surprisingly, Keats managed to keep to this rigidly determined timetable, beginning *Endymion* in April 1817 and completing it on 28 November, just at the end of 'Autumn bold'.

Keats's conception of a poet's vocation depended upon an awareness of who else was crowding into the 'Temple of Fame' or of what he called 'the overpowering idea of our dead poets' (To Sarah Jeffrey, *Letters*, II, p. 116; 9 June 1819). Besides setting himself awesome 'tasks' of writing in order to emulate poets such as Homer and Spenser, Keats created his own fame by writing about his relationship to the canon of great poets. His first poem to attract the attention of Leigh Hunt was about his reaction to Homer, when he felt like 'stout Cortez when with eagle eyes / He stared at the Pacific' ('On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer', ll. 11-12). Later, he was to write, among other things, of his reaction to Milton ('On Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair') and to Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

When through the old oak Forest I am gone,  
 Let me not wander in a barren dream,  
 But when I am consumed in the fire,  
 Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.  
 ('On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again', ll. 11-14)

In each encounter, Keats, while praising the literature of the past, actually manages to assume some of the sublimity of his subject (for more on Keats's appropriation of sublimity, see headnote to Haydon extract). In the Homer poem, his sense of wonder at Chapman's translation transfigures him into the heroic pioneer Cortez, while reading Shakespeare allows him to take on some of his subject's fiery genius with 'new Phoenix wings'. Indeed, as Bate describes well in his biography, although Keats was acutely aware of his 'belatedness' and the difficulty of matching the excellent literature of the past, he managed to develop an aesthetic of writing about writing. 'Keats', Bate observes, had 'virtually no other subject [for his poetry] than how it feels to lack subjects' (Bate (1979), p. 73).

Keats's self-consciousness extended to his thinking about his own death, which of course overshadowed the last year of his life. He thought about the implications of his impending death, the obvious fears of pain and suffering and loss. 'I wish for death every day and night to deliver me from these pains, and then I wish death away, for death would destroy even those pains which are better than nothing', he wrote to Charles Brown, torn between debilitating illness, from which death would be an escape, and his love for Fanny Brawne, from whom death would bring terrifying separation (To Brown, *Letters*, II, p. 345; 30 September 1820). More startlingly, he also thought of himself after death, of his life retrospectively. In what Milnes called 'the last letter of Keats; probably the last he wrote', Keats confided to Brown: 'I have an habitual feeling of my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence' (To Brown, *Letters*, II, p. 359; 30 November 1820). The idea of his 'posthumous existence' seems to have become a preoccupation for Keats in his dying days. According to Joseph Severn, he repeatedly asked the doctor in Rome, when he visited him, 'how long is this posthumous life of mine to last' (Sharp (1892), p. 85; see Severn's *Journals* extract). While Keats was probably using the phrase in despair, cut off from his friends in England and with no hope of recovery or return, he was also employing the phrase in a literary sense, thinking about the way in which writers' lives are shaped by biographers after their death. (For his self-consciousness in this regard, see the anecdote of Keats fighting the local butcher in the Milnes extract and the discussion in the headnote). Besides the myth of the vocational poet, then, Keats was developing the idea of himself as a 'posthumous' poet, as a 'dead poet', already in that 'Temple of Fame'. He attempted to deny the living man in order to transform himself into a text, canonical and contemplated retrospectively.

The interest in the poet as a 'posthumous being' was rehearsed frequently in his poetry, before he knew of his actual impending death and literal fulfilment of the role. One fragment is particularly haunting and horrifying:

This living hand, now warm and capable  
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold  
And in the icy silence of the tomb,  
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights  
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood  
So in my veins red life might stream again,  
And thou be conscience-calm'd – see here it is –  
I hold it towards you.

This fragment of a poem, written in December 1819, is a palimpsest, uniting time past, present and future. It tantalises with its juxtaposition of the living poet and the dead poem, and collides imaginary time with real time. Holding the hand eerily out towards the reader, the poem demands consideration of

the process of creating a 'dead poet', of turning the living hand of the writer into the dead hand of the written text. (For an excellent analysis of the poem, see Bennett (1994), pp. 11-14).

The transformation of a living man into a 'dead poet' is further considered in Keats's poem about Robert Burns, supposedly written in Burn's cottage in Ayr. Keats was excited at the prospect of seeing the home of Burns, who he implicitly compared with Shakespeare: 'One of the pleasantest means of annulling self is approaching such a shrine as the Cottage of Burns', he wrote to John Hamilton Reynolds. 'I shall look upon it hereafter with unmixed pleasure as I do upon my Stratford on Avon day with Bailey' (To Reynolds, *Letters*, I, p. 323; 11 July 1818). In the event, he discovered that part of the cottage had been turned into a whisky shop, while the other half was guarded by a custodian who was 'a great Bore with his anecdotes' (To Reynolds, *Letters*, I, p. 324; 13 July 1818). However, in the absence of what he might consider a worthy or authentic relic, Keats found the space to ponder, half humourously, the after-life of any poet:

This mortal body of a thousand days  
 Now fills, O Burns, a space in thine own room,  
 Where thou didst dream alone on budded bays,  
 Happy and thoughtless of thy day of doom!  
 My pulse is warm with thine own Barley-bree,  
 My head is light with pledging a great soul,  
 My eyes are wandering, and I cannot see,  
 Fancy is dead and drunken at its goal;  
 Yet can I stamp my foot upon thy floor,  
 Yet can I ope thy window-sash to find  
 The meadow thou hast tramped o'er and o'er –  
 Yet can I think of thee till thought is blind –  
 Yet can I gulp a bumper to thy name –  
 O smile among the shades, for this is fame!

Drunk on Burns's whisky, Keats recognises his similarity to Scotland's most famous alcoholic poet. But the similarity between the two also depends upon Keats's acknowledgement of his mortality, his ability to foresee himself dead and visited by tourists as Burns now is. 'Fame' comes about through the curious juxtaposition of present prescience and future recollection.

#### 4. Great Romantic

The discussion so far has involved the stripping away of the illusion of truth and certainty. The memoirs of Keats, I have argued, are unavoidably influenced by caricature and idealisation and do not convey the 'indisputable

truth' of the poet, while even Keats himself continually attempted to re-invent himself as a featureless yet canonical poet. The biographer Ken Robinson noted recently that 'from the philosophy of science through the social sciences to critical theory, the naive conception of objectivity no longer has intellectual credibility' and that the art of biography is no exception to this (Batchelor (1995), p. 101). The Marxist critic Terry Eagleton has poured scorn on biography because of its conservative recourse to a notion of an essential and knowable life: 'The structure of biography is biology; even the most wayward of geniuses have to get themselves born and educated, fight with their parents, fall in love and die' (*LRB*, 2 December 1993, p. 12). But one of the great contemporary biographers of the Romantics, Richard Holmes, has refuted Eagleton's assumption. Biography, he argues in *Footsteps*, his book about writing biography, forces the writer to accept the unknowability of the past and of any individual: 'It is the paradox that the more closely and scrupulously you follow someone's footsteps through the past the more conscious do you become that they never existed wholly in any one place along the recorded path. You cannot freeze them, you cannot pinpoint them, at any particular turn in the road' (Holmes (1985), p. 69).

Having deconstructed the illusion of ever really knowing Keats, we can build up again the invented image of Keats, through reading the myth-making memoirs. Despite his obstinate assertion that he is offering the reader the 'undisputable truth' of Keats, Milnes seems to recognise the process of creating a life when he chooses to include Wordsworth's remarks on biography in his preface: 'Biography, though differing in some essential from works of fiction, is nevertheless like them an art – an art, the laws of which are determined by the imperfections of our nature and the constitution of society. Truth is not here, as in the sciences and in natural philosophy ...' (Milnes (1848), p. xiii). Biography, for Milnes, becomes a kind of fiction, whose origins are in the subjective emotions rather than in objective scientific truth. It becomes, as Ken Robinson puts it, 'a form of story-telling' (Batchelor (1995), p. 102). Richard Holmes has offered a vivid analogy for the creative role of biography, in which each re-telling of a life (or successive memoir in this volume) becomes a new addition or a new version of that life. In his biography of Coleridge, he confessed:

In 1986 I crawled [into a cave] and was astonished to discover the initials STC carved at the very back of the cave. It took me a moment to realise that the sandstone walls are so porous and flaky that these could not possibly be Coleridge's original graffiti, but some later act of piety. Such carvings and re-carvings of his initials, ceremoniously repeated by generation after generation of unknown memoiralists, suddenly seemed to me like a symbol of the essentially cumulative process of biography itself.

(Holmes (1989), p. 12n)

The recognition of the elusiveness of the biographee and the metaphorical 're-carving of his initials' is something characteristic of all biography. However, this lack of historical identity and necessary literary 're-carving' is even more marked in Keats than in others. Keats's life, after all, offers scanty materials to the biographer. The most famous act of his life was, paradoxically, to die (young). But, just as his poetry was, according to Bate, about 'not having a subject', so the life he invented for himself was about not having a life, at any rate not for much longer. It is in this respect that Keats can be classed a 'Great Romantic'. Jerome McGann has pointed out that Romantic writers displaced the material conditions of their lives with the ideology of a poetic life or with the cult of the individual poet in his imaginative world (McGann (1983), pp. 59-71). Keats's displacement of the world around him – and at the same time his material sickly body – by the contemplation of his death and of himself dead carries the Romantic ideology to extremes. Again and again he inscribes in his poetry the moment when the material life of a man becomes the 'Life' of a poet, and it is this self-extinguishing impulse to which the writers of the memoirs included in this volume were attracted and bore witness. The longevity of Keats's reputation depended crucially upon the brevity of his life. Similarly the beauty of his poetry derived from its fragility, its source in annihilation and despair. To read the following memoirs is to understand better the uncertainty behind the modern Keats of the tea-towel and the classroom, and the narrow distinction (and occasional connection) in Keats's life, work and subsequent reputation, between 'fame' and 'nothingness':

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
     Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,  
 Before high-piled books, in charactery,  
     Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;  
 When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,  
     Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
 And think that I may never live to trace  
     Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;  
 And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
     That I shall never look upon thee more,  
 Never have relish in the faery power  
     Of unreflecting love; – then on the shore  
 Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
 Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

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## CHRONOLOGY

- 1795 (31 October) John Keats born at Swan and Hoop Livery Stables, Moorfields, London.
- 1797 (28 February) George Keats born.
- 1799 (18 November) Tom Keats born. The family move from the rooms over the stables to a house in Craven Street, Shoreditch.
- 1803 (3 June) Fanny Keats born. (September) Enters school of John Clarke at Enfield.
- 1804 (15 April) Keats's father dies, after falling from his horse on his return from Enfield late at night. (27 June) Keats's mother marries William Rawlings but soon leaves him, thereby losing her right to her property and children. The Keats children live with their grandparents at Ponders End.
- 1805 (8 March) Keats's grandfather dies. The family move to Edmonton.
- 1810 (March) Keats's mother dies from consumption. (July) Keats's grandmother appoints Richard Abbey as the children's guardian.
- 1811 (August) Keats leaves Clarke's school and is apprenticed to Thomas Hammond, a surgeon in Edmonton. He begins to read Spenser with Charles Cowden Clarke. George Keats joins Abbey in the counting house of his tea business.
- 1814 (December) Keats's grandmother dies.
- 1815 (Spring) Meets George Felton Mathew. (October) Enters Guy's Hospital as a student and lives in St Thomas's Street. After a month becomes a 'dresser' to supplement income, dressing and bandaging wounds. Tom joins George in Abbey's counting house.
- 1816 (Spring) Meets Joseph Severn. (May) First published poem, 'O Solitude', appears in the *Examiner*. (July) Passes examination at Apothecaries Hall, and is licensed to practise as an apothecary or surgeon. (August-September) Stays in Margate. Moves with Tom to 8, Dean Street, Southwark, near the hospital, and continues to work as dresser. (October) Meets Leigh Hunt, Benjamin Robert Haydon and John

Hamilton Reynolds. (November) Writes 'On first Looking Into Chapman's Homer'. Moves to 76, Cheapside with George and Tom. Haydon makes life mask of Keats. (December) Chapman's Homer sonnet appears in Hunt's article in the *Examiner* on 'Young Poets'. Meets Shelley.

1817 (January) Dinner party at Horace Smith's with Haydon and Shelley. (March) Visits Elgin Marbles with Haydon. *Poems* published by Charles and James Ollier; possibly exchanges laurel crowns with Hunt. Meets John Taylor, future publisher. Moves with George and Tom to 1, Well Walk, Hampstead. (April) Travels to Isle of Wight and, later, Margate where Tom joins him. Begins *Endymion*. (May) Stops in Canterbury, on his return from Margate. (September) Stays with Benjamin Bailey in Oxford while brothers are in Paris and visits Stratford-on-Avon. (October) Returns to Hampstead to find *Blackwood's Magazine*'s first attack on the Cockney School. Meets Charles Brown. (November) Stays at Burford Bridge, Box Hill, where he finishes the first draft of *Endymion*. Sends 'Adam's dream' letter to Bailey. (December) George and Tom go to Teignmouth, Devon, for Tom's failing health. Meets Wordsworth through Haydon and attends Haydon's 'immortal dinner'. Writes letter to brothers on 'negative capability'. 'Going out too much', drinking and playing cards.

1818 (January) Begins to correct manuscript of *Endymion*. Attends Hazlitt's lectures at Surrey Institution. Writes 'On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again'. (February) Writes sonnet 'To the Nile' in competition with Hunt and Shelley. (March) Travels through storm to Teignmouth to look after Tom, while George returns to London. Sends *Endymion* to the publishers. (April) Rewrites preface to *Endymion* on Reynolds's advice; meanwhile working on 'Isabella'. (May) *Endymion* published. Returns with Tom to Hampstead. George marries Georgiana Wylie. (June) Travels with Charles Brown and George and Georgiana Keats to Liverpool, where he watches his brother and sister-in-law set sail for America. Continues with Brown on walking holiday, visiting the Lake District, (July) Dumfries, Kirkcudbright, Belfast, Ayr, Glasgow, Inverary, Oban, Iona, (August) Fort William, Ben Nevis and Inverness. Develops a sore throat and decides to return to London quickly by ship from Cromarty, leaving Brown to continue his holiday alone. Arrives back at Well Walk to find Tom very ill, nursed by Charles and Maria Dilke. Meets Fanny Brawne. (September) Reads attacks on *Endymion* in *Blackwood's Magazine* and *Quarterly Review*. (October-November) Looks after Tom and begins

*Hyperion*. Sends 'camelion poet' letter to Richard Woodhouse. (December) Tom dies. Goes to live with Brown in Wentworth Place. Suffering from a persistent sore throat.

- 1819 (January) Haydon asks him for a loan. Stays in Chichester, where he writes 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. (March) Joseph Severn exhibits miniature of Keats at the Royal Academy. (April) Meets Coleridge. Writes 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' and gives up writing *Hyperion*. Haydon still pestering for a loan. (May) Writes 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'Ode on Melancholy' and 'Ode on Indolence'. (June) Travels to Isle of Wight with James Rice. (July) Sends the first of his love letters to Fanny Brawne. Writing *Otho the Great* and 'Lamia'. Brown joins him in Shanklin, and Rice leaves. (August) Moves with Brown from Shanklin to Winchester, where he also works on 'The Fall of Hyperion'. (September) Writes 'Ode to Autumn'. Letter from George asking for more money. Meeting with Abbey fails to procure any of their inheritance. Announces that he will become a journalist and must have more independence from Brown. (October) Returns with Brown to London and tries living alone in 25, College Street, Westminster. Ten days later back with Brown in Wentworth Place. (November) Writing 'King Stephen' and 'The Cap and Bells'. (December) Writes 'This Living Hand'. Probably becomes secretly engaged to Fanny Brawne.

- 1820 (January) George Keats returns from America and stays for a month. Departs from Liverpool with £700, leaving Keats with £60. (February) First haemorrhage on 3 February, tended by Brown. Fever and starvation diet. Fanny Brawne sends him a ring. (March) Seems to be recovering and meets Barry Cornwall. Revises 'Lamia' and attends private view of Haydon's 'Christ's Entry Into Jerusalem'. (May) Moves to 2, Wesleyan Place, Kentish Town near Hunt while Brown away on walking holiday in Scotland. (June) Another haemorrhage, so moves in with Leigh Hunt in Mortimer Terrace. Is told by doctors that he will not survive another winter in England. (July) *Lamia* volume of poems published. (August) After misunderstanding with Hunt, moves back to Wentworth Place and stays with Fanny Brawne and her mother. Correspondence with Shelley. (September) Departs for Italy from Gravesend with Joseph Severn. Bad weather detains them, and they anchor in Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight. Writes sonnet 'Bright Star'. (October) Finally leave English Channel. Reach Bay of Naples three weeks later, and wait in quarantine for ten days. (November) Travel to Rome and settle in 26, Piazza di Spagna opposite Dr Clark. Keats throws disgusting food out of his window and writes his final