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The Time of Beauty

POLITICS IS AMONG OTHER THINGS THE WORK OF TIME—PUNCTUAL OR durational, falling with a fine (or terrifying) suddenness or nurtured in silence and slow time. Perhaps only the most utopian or messianic forms of political thought have sought to unmoor themselves from temporality; their credibility as political models has been brought into question to the extent that this is the case. But Keats's orientation in time from the beginning of his writing career was vexed. I refer not only to the legendary briefness of the poet's life, his emulation of distant literary precursors, or even his remark (both admission and boast) that "I never know the day of the Month."¹ To these temporal complications one must add Keats's intense fixation on the posthumous life of writing—a condition well analyzed in Andrew Bennett's work, and more recently evoked in Stanley Plumly's experiment in biography.² Keats records in his writing life the conditions of being both "too late" (too, too late for the fond believing lyre) and "too soon" (to cease upon the midnight with no pain). As in many of the Odes, Keats in *Hyperion* makes this condition of uneasy suspension, between the too-late Titans and the Olympians to come, his first and—until rewriting the poem as *The Fall*—encompassing subject. The poet is at once "belated," in both Bloomian and broader historico-political terms, and makes his home in Derrida's *l'à-venir*, the future-to-come. Oriented toward the inaccessible past, ever watchful of the shadows that futurity casts upon the present, Keats is fundamentally an untimely poet. In what sense—or tense—is he then a political one?

One early, influential attempt to answer this question came from the poet's close friend, mentor, and (later) memoirist, Charles Cowden Clarke. In the 1861 "Recollections of Keats," first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Clarke affirmed Keats's moral and political commitments with reference to the statement which, at least since it adorned the Art Treasures Palace of the 1857 Great Exhibition in Manchester, had become the slogan

1. To George and Georgiana Keats, 29(?) December 1818, in *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), 2:15. Hereafter cited in the text as *LJK* by volume and page.

2. Andrew Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), esp. 139–57; Stanley Plumly, *Posthumous Keats: A Personal Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

of the poet's work. Clarke writes: "His own line was the axiom of his moral existence, his political creed:—'A thing of beauty is a joy forever' [sic].³ Like the nightingale "not born for death," the beautiful object is oriented toward, if not in itself possessing, eternal life. Beauty persists in defiance of time, bestowing "unto" us, in Keats's insistent preposition from the prologue to *Endymion*, a shadow of plenitude that our own lives conspicuously lack.⁴ The life that "life" does not or cannot afford may yet be available in the luminous forms of art.

For reasons that will appear obvious to readers of this journal, Clarke's pronouncement has not consistently struck scholars as the most promising basis from which to begin to examine Keats's orientation in historical time and politics. In the not too distant past, Clarke's statement could be understood as little more than the rhetorical flourish of one committed to asserting that Keats's "creed" was not properly speaking "political" at all. To Marjorie Levinson, for instance, whose assessment of the poet inaugurated an extraordinarily productive era in Keats scholarship, not Keats's "principle of beauty" but his "suffered objectivity" was the master key to the poet's politics. For Levinson, the Keats who thus suffers is our angel of history as described by Benjamin—face turned to the past, blown irresistibly into the future—and, in the later work especially, he reappears as the avenging angel who turns the instruments of domination against the culture that wields them.⁵ A postulate common in the boom years of the new historicism, best captured by Fredric Jameson's famous remark that "History is what hurts," maintained that the force of "history" is chiefly made manifest in forms of affective "hurt," trauma, and so forth.⁶ Where this is

3. Charles Cowden Clarke, "Recollections of Keats" (1861), in *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed. G. M. Matthews (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), 399. The sentence is later altered to read, "His own line was the axiom of his moral existence, his civil creed," in Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1878), 146. On Keats's relationship to Clarke and the Dissenting community, see especially Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8–10, 88–110.

4. *Endymion*, 1:24, 31 in *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978), 65. Subsequent quotations from Keats's work are from this edition.

5. Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 243. Keats refers to "the Principle of Beauty" in letters to J. H. Reynolds, 9 April 1818 (*LJK* 1:266) and to Fanny Brawne, February 1820 (*LJK* 2:263).

6. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 102. In *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London & New York: Verso, 2002), Jameson describes the renewal of interest in beauty as one of the "regressions of the current age"—a step backward both from the modernist critique of classical aesthetics and from the dizzying imponderables of the postmodern sublime (3). Among materialist readers of Keats, Daniel P. Watkins comes closest to Jameson's posi-

the case, the beautiful may signify no more than as the possibility of momentary consolation or the utopianism of a perpetually deferred redemption of time.

Among those who by contrast have sought to deduce a Keatsian politics at least in part from the “principle of beauty” to which the poet was above all things dedicated, some consensus has emerged concerning Keats’s temporal relationship to the political. Whether this work takes its cue from Newell Ford’s description of Keatsian beauty as “prefigurative truth,” Paul de Man’s characterization of Keats’s imagination as largely “prospective” in its orientation, or Patricia Parker’s account of the “perpetual ‘à venir’ in Keats,” it is the forward-looking poet whose voice has most often been claimed for politics.⁷ Hazlitt’s *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* furnishes a guidebook for the ethical dimensions of this self-divesting orientation towards futurity; the negatively capable chameleon poet is hailed as its literary embodiment. Keats’s poetry is often read as dedicated to working out a politics of futurity on aesthetic as opposed to rationalist grounds—its overarching project, “the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come.”⁸ In the disinterest of its construction and disinterestedness of its apprehension, the fragile autonomy of the artwork suggests a model for a self and a world remade.

Or perhaps not. That beauty is “only a promise of happiness,” as Alexander Nehamas (after Adorno, after Stendhal) has recently emphasized, is a salutary reminder of how fragile and provisional that promise is—indeed, how essential to the experience of beauty is the provisionally conceptual form that it takes. Before affirming with Nehamas, however, that “the

tion in arguing that Keatsian beauty represents “a realm of subjective meaning that is apparently untouched by social exchange and social hardship.” See *Keats’s Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989), 38. For a far more nuanced account of how poetry of this period makes manifest “the ‘hurt’ of history,” see Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 126.

7. Ford, *The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1951); de Man, Introduction to *The Selected Poetry of John Keats* (New York: Signet, 1966), xi; Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 14.

8. These are the terms in which Jacques Rancière has described the “aesthetic regime of the arts” of which Schiller is the first and unsurpassed architect. See *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), 29. Morris Dickstein’s essay for the original “Keats and Politics” forum of *SiR* characterizes the political aspirations of Keats and Shelley in similar terms: as he writes, the poets share “the goal of ultimate social renovation by way of the disinterested exertions of art.” See “Keats and Politics,” *Studies in Romanticism* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 181. Subsequent references to individual essays in the “Keats and Politics” forum issue will be indicated by the abbreviation *SiR*.

pleasures of the imagination are pleasures of anticipation, not accomplishment,” one might ask whither flies the pleasure or “joy” that attends beauty amidst these promises of eventual realization, obligations to futurity, or anticipation of changes to come. More pointedly, I mean to ask whether there are terms to describe the event and effect of beauty for which neither future-oriented “anticipation” nor anamnestic reflection on “accomplishment” are wholly adequate. (Adorno, well known for often quoting Stendhal’s dictum that beauty is a *promesse du bonheur*, is I think closer to Keats’s point of view when he writes of the temporal duplicity of this experience: “beauty is perceived both as authoritatively binding and as something incomprehensible that questioningly awaits its solution.”¹⁰) Beauty could not be a promise of happiness were there not some fulfillment of that promise, however delicately posited, from the start. What follows will therefore pose the question, which I take to be an unresolved one in Keats’s work, of whether there can be a politics of aesthetics not solely reliant on the imaginative construction of futurity. What politics, if any, are to be found in the ephemeral moments of “Beauty that must die,” snatched up and momentarily enjoyed in a world where a thing of beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow?

To ask the potential for discerning an aesthetic politics of the present is to come up against an array of critical thinkers who have characterized the “pure” present as the site where meaning, to say nothing of meaningful political engagement, is not. For Marxist cultural theorists including Ernst Bloch, Jameson, and Harry Harootunian, the punctual present, or the point in time with neither tendency nor reference to past or future, is a moment in which substantive political thought and action is impossible. Jameson in particular has long characterized the experience of late capitalist modernity as marked by a “reduction to the present,” the condition of a seemingly unremitting captivity to the “singular modernity” of capitalism’s globalizing movement. So foreshortened, the “purely *fungible* present” is revealed as a site of stultifying vacancy, sheer terror, or both.¹¹

9. Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 76.

10. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 71.

11. Bloch, “On the Present in Literature,” in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 207–23; Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 1–54; *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 14; “The End of Temporality,” *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Summer 2003): 695–718; Harootunian, “Remembering the Historical Present,” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Spring 2007): 471–94. For an essay that usefully contests the devaluation of the “pure” present in Marxist cultural theory, see

In Romantic scholarship contemporary with Jameson's work, and in an explicit challenge to materialist ideology critique, Paul Fry has for years attended to the shining-forth of presentness in Keats (and more recently in Wordsworth). In exemplary readings of "To Autumn," first in 1980 and again in *SiR*'s "Keats and Politics" forum of 1986, Fry characterizes Keats's late masterpiece as the most perfect instance of what in *A Defense of Poetry* (1995) he names lyric "ostension." In the ode, Fry argues, poetic language shows forth as "the sound of being," released at last from the burdens of signification in which being must ever conceptually declare itself a form of being-as: "Here alone, if ever, the English ode stands present to the voice it seeks."¹² That this release into presentness is accompanied in Fry's view by "a release from the tyranny of history and the language that encodes it" is not incidental to my point.¹³ Indeed, Fry's sense of Keats's relative indifference to the state of human affairs in the present affirms rather than challenges a materialist understanding of the pure present as politically neuter, a suspension of meaning-making that may just as credibly be, in the event if not in the final analysis, a release from politics or at least from sociopolitical concern. These critical approaches—historical-materialist on the one hand, deconstructive-phenomenological on the other, and otherwise diametrically opposed in their evaluation of the unadulterated present—converge on a present in which the twittering of swallows in the skies is perhaps less likely to be identified as the concluding image of "To Autumn" than as an emblem of activity on the micro-blogging site Twitter. There, perhaps, in a conjunction of luminous and vacant momentariness, is the signature for an age of instant messaging and high-frequency trading: a "reduction to the present" devoid of meaning or tendency, the site of language and experience absorbed thoroughly into an atmosphere of contemporaneity.¹⁴

I do not intend here to worry the distinction, already considerably frayed in our post-postmodern moment, between the luminous moments of art and the vacuous measures of what Benjamin called "homogeneous, empty time." Nor do I intend to call into question the status of the "aesthetic"

Lauren Berlant, "The Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event," *American Literary History* 20, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 845–60.

12. Fry, *The Poet's Calling in the English Ode* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 271.

13. Fry, *A Defense of Poetry: Reflections on the Occasion of Writing* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 130. Fry's more recent examination, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), of "the marginal consciousness that lives in time without resisting it" (92) in Wordsworth's poetry of 1797–1800 is also pertinent to my discussion here.

14. I am far from the first to note the appositeness of Keats's line for Twitter, as any search of the site will show.

Keats by presenting him as an uncritical celebrant of the latter. Instead, I mean simply to mark the degree of Keats's attunement, however vexed, to conditions of contemporaneity across a presumed divide between moments acknowledged to be social or political and those more narrowly "aesthetic." "The going[s] on of the world make me dizzy," Keats once wrote (to George and Georgiana Keats, 16 December 1818, *LJK* 2:5). Keats registers the force of this dizzying, unsettled present in the course of the "little politics" that he records for his brother and sister-in-law in a long journal-letter, written the day before he composed "To Autumn," (18 September 1819, *LJK* 2:192). What may strike us in this well known, most explicitly political passage from Keats's letters is not the stadialist political history that the poet advances (subject to accidents and interruptions but progressive in the main), nor even his supposition that "the present distresses of this nation are a fortunate thing" in potentially setting this historical progression to rights again.¹⁵ "I know very little of these things," Keats writes (*LJK* 2:194); it is no insult to the poet to presume that he was correct in this assessment.

Quite apart, however, from any world-historical tendency that the contemporary moment might disclose—excepting perhaps the temporal "tendency" of transience itself—Keats is keenly alive to the passing of events whose momentariness, though undeniable, may not tell the whole story. He writes, "There are little signs whereby we may know how matters are going on." (The letter in Keats's hand, silently corrected by Rollins in his edition of the *Letters*, reads, "we *many* know how matters are going on" [my emphasis]. I think this construction at least plausibly admissible as the correct reading of Keats's sentiment.¹⁶) Among these "little signs" of the present time Keats includes the ongoing, well-publicized sedition trials against the publisher Richard Carlile, and the reception of Henry Hunt in London following his arrest in the wake of Peterloo. What amount of time would be required to give an adequate reckoning of these events, even assuming that one was capable of doing so? Keats lingers on these moving moments, in both senses of that phrase, as "little signs" of potentially infin-

15. For commentaries that draw out the relationship between Keats's "little politics" in the letter and "To Autumn," see Bromwich, "Keats's Radicalism," *SiR*, 207–9; Roe, *Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, 253–55; Chandler, *England in 1819* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 426–31. See also Vincent Newey's observation that in both letter and ode, "we are made aware with particular force of Keats being strangely touched by the rhythms of a changing world," "Keats, History, and the Poets," in *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 187.

16. Maurice Buxton Forman transcribes the phrase as "we many know" in his second, revised edition of the *Letters*, though not in the first edition of 1931. See *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Buxton Forman, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 407.

ite resource, rifts loaded with ore.¹⁷ To come at last to the point: the event of beauty affords in Keats an opening onto the aliveness of the present time; it sharpens focus on the fragile ontology of the “now.” In Keats’s terms, beauty lets us see how matters are going on. This is a distinctively minor, resolutely “little politics,” attuned to events and experiences that are neither codified nor wholly codifiable in terms given by the units of historical time. In view of the fact that “apparently small causes make great alterations” (*LJK* 2:194), however, it may be precisely these “little signs” that turn out to matter; the little that we may (or many) know may turn out to be enough.

If there is to be an aesthetic politics of the present in Keats, let the following testimony from the famous letter to Bailey of 22 November 1817 serve as its abbreviated manifesto. Bailey had recently suffered professional disappointment (he had hoped to take up a curacy in Lincolnshire), harsh treatment by the notoriously prickly Haydon, and the experience of being “rack’d” in love. Keats’s consolatory letter contains, characteristically, a good bit of affectionate teasing:

you perhaps at one time thought there was such a thing as Worldly Happiness to be arrived at, at certain points of time marked out—you have of necessity from your disposition been thus led away—I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness—I look not for it if it be not in the present hour—nothing startles me beyond the Moment. (*LJK* 1:186)

With what may seem like cavalier disregard for Bailey’s faith and chosen profession, Keats dismisses the idea of modeling “Worldly Happiness” on providential time, as something to be fulfilled at a future point of time “marked out.” Keats’s claim for the *eudaemonia* in and of “the present hour” is based on his conviction of the impossibility of fulfillment at any other time. His famous exclamation from the same letter—“O for a life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!” (*LJK* 1:185)—is both an appeal and an acknowledgement of how impossible is that which is at the same time utterly necessary, the condition of being fully present to the present.¹⁸ Life

17. “[t] would take me a whole day and a quire of paper to give you any thing like detail” (*LJK* 2:194).

18. I have argued elsewhere that Keats’s recurrent figures of sensible insensibility (“The feel of not to feel it,” e.g.) are responsive to prevailing conceptions of abstract literary value and the consequent estrangement of “Literature” from the sensuous, shared conditions of experience from which it emerges: see my *Science and Sensation in Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 165–96.

that extends “beyond the Moment” (the isolated unit of time and the present instant in time) is not alive enough.

Keats’s conviction that happiness is not something to be “counted” on, that plenitude and delight befall us only in the transient moment, helps explain the avidity with which the poet famously appropriates Hazlitt’s conception of “gusto” as a signal excellence of art and aesthetic enjoyment.¹⁹ For Keats, the experience of beauty is something to be seized and quite literally capitalized upon (“*an artist* must serve Mammon,” Keats advises Shelley in a famous late letter), its resources plundered or stockpiled against its inevitable vanishing (*LJK* 2:322). From this conviction proceeds all the images of seizing, glutting, and gorging for which Keats is justly remembered as England’s most sensuous poet. “What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth,” Keats writes to Bailey (*LJK* 1:184). “Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose” (“Ode on Melancholy”). Milton in *Paradise Lost* “sees Beauty on the wing, pounces upon it and gorges it to the producing his essential verse.”²⁰ Only in the rarest and most privileged moments does one experience the kind of delight in which “every sense / Fill[s] with spiritual sweets to plenitude, / As bees gorge full their cells” (*Endymion*, 3:38–40). These various forms of sensory-aesthetic rift loading are means for weighting to the full an experience that can only be enjoyed in a fleeting instant.

Long before it became a cant phrase of the self-help industry, in other words, Keats grasped intuitively the plenitude and “power of now.”²¹ Of “Lamia,” Leigh Hunt writes: “the lines seem to take pleasure in the progress of their own beauty, like sea-nymphs luxuriating through the water.”²² Such wantonness of pleasure-taking, suggesting Byron’s charges of Keats’s onanistic style (and Levinson’s reading of the same), may be more usefully

19. On “gusto” in Hazlitt and Keats, see e.g. W. J. Bate, *Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1939), 47–78; Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 243–46; James Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 204–5; David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 228–29; Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 140–41.

20. *Keats’s Paradise Lost*, ed. Beth Lau (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 142.

21. See the essay by Leigh Hunt, “A Now, Descriptive of a Hot Day,” which Hunt describes in his *Autobiography* as having been written with Keats’s help, in *The Poetical Works and Other Writings of Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1939), 5:261–67; and Keats’s late poem “The Jealousies,” lines 544–60. Jeffrey N. Cox remarks on the “overwhelmingly occasional” character of Keats’s verse, “its embrace of a Huntian ‘now’ that marks the Cockney style,” in *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 89.

22. Preface to *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*, quoted in Keach, “Cockney Couplets: Keats and the Politics of Style,” *SiR*, 190. Keach remarks that “Keats’s stylistic extravagance might appear to be radically anti-political” (190).

understood in relation to the poet's tendency to find beauty in what Jerome McGann has called the "exquisite surfaces" and plentiful materiality of the poetic signifier. The fruit of a second-generation Romanticism in McGann's view (he finds its exemplar in Byron), this approach refuses the melancholy association of the beautiful with a lapsed, either vanished or perpetually deferred presence. Beauty lives instead as the sensuous inscription on the surface of things, on open display so that its "material virtues" and temporal immediacies may "be attentively marked."²³ "Now 'tis a fairer season," Keats writes in "Sleep and Poetry," marking the advent of a season both productive of and responsive to the charms of "the fair" (line 221). Keats's "Now" is at once a performative utterance instantiating the speaker's desire to "think away those times of woe" (220), and a descriptive, what Austin calls constative, statement marking a change in the literary atmosphere since the waning of the so-called "French school" of poetic composition.²⁴

Keats had more than one reason, of course, for thinking that the time of beauty is "now." A long critical tradition associates beauty with the immediate, ephemeral perception to which, as to the object associated with it, we give our automatic assent. "It is but opening the Eye, and the Scene enters," Addison writes in the first of his famous essays on the pleasures of the imagination; "It is not by the force of long attention and enquiry that we find any object to be beautiful," writes Burke in the *Philosophical Enquiry* of 1759. If, as Kant insisted in his early treatise on aesthetics, "a long duration is sublime," then beauty (that must die) is perforce of short duration. "A thing of beauty is a joy for such a little time," attests the amorous moth in James Thurber's fable. If Keats did not know this statement to be commonsensically true he would not have insisted so forcefully on the reverse.²⁵

23. McGann, "High Instincts and Real Presences: Two Romantic Responses to the Death of Beauty," and "Beauty, the Irreal, and the Willing Assumption of Disbelief," in *The Scholar's Art: Literary Studies in a Managed World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 29, 32. See also Jeffrey C. Robinson, *Unfettering Poetry: Fancy in British Romanticism* (Houndmills & New York: Palgrave, 2006).

24. On the deictic "now" as potentially referring to events of dramatically different durations, either "the instant associated with the production of the morpheme itself . . . or the perhaps interminable period," see Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 74.

25. Quotations from the *The Spectator*, No. 411, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 3:538; Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 92; Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* [1764], trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 49; and James Thurber, "The Clothes Moth and the Luna Moth," *Further Fables for Our Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 34.

One does not need to look far into Keats's work to find evidence of how keenly felt was this temporal predicament. The early poem to Clarke opens with the metaphor of a swan attempting to scoop up and preserve drops of water from the lake on which he glides:

But not a moment can he there insure them
Nor to such downy rest can he allure them;
For down they rush as though they would be free,
And drop like hours into eternity.

(11–14)

In Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, the swan is the bird responsible for securing the immortality of selected dead, whose names, were it not for this intervention, one minute past and Lethe-wards had sunk.²⁶ For Keats, however, the swan is not the helpmeet to the aspiring immortal poet, but his natural double: "Just like that bird am I in loss of time, / Whene'er I venture on the stream of rhyme" (15–16). The "loss of time" incurred in writing poetry suggests a wasteful, at once idle and profitless, expenditure of time; in a similar vein, Keats wishes that Clarke would not find "the reading / Of my rough verses . . . an hour misspent" (81–82). Because the beautiful can be enjoyed only in isolated, luminous instants, the poet claims to lose in composition what was never truly possessed in the first place. The moment is "moving, utterly free," as Elizabeth Bishop writes in connection to another body of water, and the poet is too much in time to secure it.²⁷

Keats's reference to the "trembling diamond" of art (the inverse of Pater's hard, gem-like flame), as well as his phonemic and metrical echoing in the lines quoted above—"downy rest" / "down they rush"—suggest at once how close and how far are eternal possession of time and the condition of captivity to its downward rushing (20). Like the lover depicted on the Grecian Urn, the artist inhabits a world in which eternity is possible, if at all, only in the "before" or "after" of gratified desire. The perception of eternity within the ephemeral was, as scholars have noted, a "common Romantic trope with, ironically, an enduring legacy."²⁸ But whereas Coleridge famously credits the poet with revealing "the translucence of the

26. In Canto 35 of *Orlando Furioso*, Saint John explains to Astolfo how two swans rescue from the bottom of the river Lethe the iron plaques engraved with the names of the dead; those names (and those only) will be remembered by posterity.

27. Elizabeth Bishop, "At the Fishhouses," *The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979), 66.

28. See, for instance, Georges Poulet, "Timelessness and Romanticism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 15, no. 1 (January 1954): 3–22; Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); and Catherine Gallagher, "Formalism and Time," in *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), quotation from 312.

eternal through and in the temporal,” insistent on the point of transparency where the distinction between temporality and eternity is nullified,²⁹ Keats maintains an unbreachable distance between the two. Eternity and the passing instant are connected in Keats’s work not by some implied equivalence but across the gap that separates them. The wish expressed in the sonnet “To J. R.”—to “live long life in little space; / So time itself would be annihilate” (5–6)—is “a happy thought” (14), to be sure, but not one given serious consideration by the poet who is as likely to repudiate as to indulge such fantasies.

Whatever joy it holds forth in promise, then, the beautiful is decisively not for Keats, as it is for the neo-Platonists Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, a material emblem of eternal values. “What the imagination seizes as Beauty” is a thing whose truth we are unable to doubt, “whether it existed before or not” (*LJK* 1:184). Like Wordsworth, Keats is acutely conscious of the artifice required to produce even the most momentary experiences of immediacy in art. The effort to give duration to the fleeting instant of beauty is an avowedly unnatural gesture never far removed from violence in Keats’s work; its signature mode is aggression (e.g., “This living hand”) or at best a stony indifference (“Cold Pastoral!”). That eternal things thus scorn the living moments of the human beings who make or take pleasure from them reflects beauty’s ambivalent relationship to “the present hour” in which the poet lives. For Keats, beauty reveals itself to the present moment without in any sense belonging wholly to it. It intrudes on notice “in spite of” something (the unbeautiful in men, manners, times), or of everything: “in spite of all, / Some shape of beauty moves away the pall / From our dark spirits” (*Endymion*, 1:11–13). Of the “Fancy,” Keats writes: “She will bring, in spite of frost, / Beauties that the earth hath lost” (29–30). Aesthetic semblance, *Schein*, consists of a falsehood both necessary and inevitable.

Keats’s rebuke of the poet-handicraftsmen of the eighteenth century drew fire from several quarters, including from his erstwhile friend George Felton Mathew. In notorious lines from “Sleep and Poetry” Keats attacks the insensibility of these poetasters, their Life of Thoughts rather than of Sensations: “beauty was awake! / Why were ye not awake?” (192–93). This is a particular failing of the “French school,” to be sure, but also a more general failure of recognition that few if any manage to escape.³⁰

29. Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual*, quoted in Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd rev. ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 192.

30. Elaine Scarry, in *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), writes of beauty’s “distributional” character, in which affection for one particular object extends to all others of its kind (80–82). But *Endymion*’s response to Cynthia’s appear-

Beauty's blindingly obvious presence in the world is itself a rebuke of our inability, in all but the most privileged moments, to perceive or appreciate it.³¹ "[T]he fresh to-morrow morn / Seems to give forth its light in very scorn / Of our dull, uninspired, snail-paced lives," Keats writes in *Endymion*, 4:23–25. It follows as a matter of course that the "trembling delicate and snail-horn perception of Beauty," for all the complicated mental operations that go into the production of this experience, is consummated in a moment out of keeping with our "snail-paced lives" (to Haydon, 8 April 1818, *LJK* 1:265). The thing of beauty (the to-morrow morn) and the perceptual organ required to apprehend it (the snail-horn) are alike situated as if in advance of the self's present experience. Beauty is the experience of waking to a presentness that can at best be momentarily inhabited when objects urge us to it.

That the best of Keats's sonnets reportedly written in a fifteen-minute contest with Hunt could make time in the course of its hasty composition to assert, twice, that "[t]he poetry of earth is never dead" may seem like a display of precisely the sort of bravado that I have suggested Keats rejects. Isn't Keats here, like Blake, purporting to hold Eternity in (a quarter of) an hour, laying claim to infinity in the little more than a minute per line allotted? (By contrast, *Blackwood's* found "the fashion of firing off sonnets at each other" that prevailed among the Cockney poets an irritating sign of their enslavement to mere urban faddishness.³²) But Keats's sonnet "on the Grasshopper and Cricket" makes plain that this perception of continuing presence—like that of a beautiful thing whose "loveliness increases"—is founded on a partial misprision. The cricket's winter song makes "one in drowsiness half lost" mistake one season for another (13), and the grasshopper's absence, like that of summer itself, may be felt sharpest when its song is replaced. Though this sound comes to the drowsy listener like a recollection or anticipation, however, it is neither; it is, instead, wholly present.

ance greatly complicates this premise: "Each tender maiden whom he once thought fair, / . . . Pass'd like a dream before him" (2:892–94).

31. The opposite of waking is not, as might be expected, sleep, which Keats regards as a lesser (though still potent) fount of inspiration, but rather death. Appropriately, then, Keats's Wordsworth is found "on Helvellyn's summit, wide awake" (3), in the second sonnet to Haydon, "Addressed to the Same."

32. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 6 (October 1819), in *The Romantics Reviewed: Contemporary Reviews of British Romantic Writers*, Part C, Vol. 1, ed. Donald H. Reiman (New York: Garland, 1972), 117. *Blackwood's* compares the fad of spontaneous sonnet writing in the metropolis to that of the velocipede, the prototype of the bicycle and "nothing of the day," the news of which Keats duly reports to his brother and sister-in-law in a letter of the same year (*LJK* 2:69). By 1819, the reviewer notes, the fashion for the spontaneous composition of sonnets is "now laughed down" (117). It is therefore impossible to come in on time in this race against the clock; the winner has already lost.

The song persists as if in spite of the season, conjuring, as “Fancy” will do, “summer luxury . . . [o]n a long winter evening” (6, 10). Beyond this falsehood, however, and indeed because of it, the singing of the cricket ratifies the claim that “the poetry of earth is ceasing never,” both in the warmth of its winter song and by suggesting to human listeners that “the Grasshopper’s among some grassy hills” (9, 14). Neither “these” hills nor, certainly, “our” hills, but “some grassy hills.” The radiant possibility that, as Larkin says, survives “undiminished somewhere,” is also sought and found in the time that we are given.³³

2

The transience of beauty has been long regarded as an argument either for the necessity of its preservation (in poetry, by procreation) or for its thorough consumption and expenditure. Time needs to be stored up or else used to the full lest beauty perish in the moment of its enjoyment. Shakespeare’s sonnets ring immortal changes on the former theme, and his *Venus and Adonis* presents a sustained treatment of the latter. Consider these lines where the goddess importunes the lovely though resistant youth:

Make use of time, let not advantage slip,
Beauty within itself should not be wasted.
Fair flowers that are not gath’red in their prime
Rot, and consume themselves in little time.³⁴

Venus’s counsel, here and throughout the poem, points to the range of “economic” activities—materialization and production, investment and consumption, stockpiling and display—entailed by the imperative to “make use of time.” In a recent book, Anne-Lise François has called attention to literary texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries especially that resist this charge, dispensing with the productionist demand to make time “count.” Examining a host of Romantic and post-Romantic texts that “both record and accept a failure of telos” in a barely noticed passing of time or event, her work restores to a place of prominence a form of “uncounted experience”—incomplete, minimally defined, but neverthe-

33. Philip Larkin, “Sad Steps,” *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1988), 169. See Giorgio Agamben’s recent renewal of Nietzsche’s claim that to be contemporary is at once to be in present time and out of joint with it. “What is the Contemporary?” in *What is an Apparatus?* and *Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39–54.

34. Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis* (lines 129–32), in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et. al, 2nd edn. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1801. In a letter of 1818, Richard Woodhouse compares *Venus and Adonis* (a poem for which Keats had particular affection) to *Endymion*, the earliest major productions of both poets and indications of their future promise (Woodhouse to Mary Frogley, 23 October 1818 [LJK, 1:383]).

less temporally fulfilled—on which it is unnecessary to act. By means of such moments, François observes, “‘history’—temporal change—can thus take place as a passing out of existence, a trailing off or lapse, rather than as a concretization or production of significance.”³⁵

Such instances as François describes of an “*inverted carpe diem*” (153) are clearly allied to a negatively capable Keatsian aesthetics, and to an experience of beauty that, in the poet’s famous phrase, “obliterates all consideration” (*LJK* 1:194). But Keats takes a circuitous path to the attainment of such inconsequence; he both inherits and modifies Shakespeare’s emphasis on the necessity of materializing and “making use” of transient experience. The result is a *carpe diem* that blends rather than discriminates between the appropriation and expenditure of beauty, its thrifty preservation and heedless waste. For Steven Knapp, the dialectical movement between self-dissolution and grasping appropriateness constitutes a unique conception of “literary interest” in Keats’s work that the poet names “speculation.” The signature of this speculative poetic mindset is a curious oscillation between the trancelike suspension of desire on the one hand and grasping miserliness on the other.³⁶ Translating Knapp’s observation into more explicitly temporal terms, one can say that this latter, quasi-appropriative gesture is a “meantime” activity that seizes time in order to more perfectly yield to it. Grasping is itself a way of letting time happen.

One finds a telling instance of the kind of oscillation Knapp describes in a passage from the first book of *Endymion*. In the hero’s account of Cynthia’s appearance to him and of the erotic encounter that motivates his quest, Keats offers a striking literalization of how imagination “seizes” or “gorges” on beauty as if mining a potentially inexhaustible resource:

I was distracted; madly did I kiss
The wooing arms which held me, and did give
My eyes at once to death: but ’twas to live,

35. François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 149, 143.

36. Knapp, *Literary Interest: The Limits of Anti-Formalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 39. The idea of a uniquely Keatsian “mode of interest that derives from but replaces a ‘reaching after’ objects” has been identified by other names. Knapp’s account of Keatsian “speculation” is similar to what David Bromwich names “abstraction” in Keats, “a pulling away from its origin that does not render the mental object less definite,” “Keats and the Aesthetic Ideal,” in *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*, ed. Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 18. In an important essay that examines the aesthetic politics of Keats’s dialectical play “between monumentality and negative capability,” Robert Kaufman describes the monumentalizing impulse in Keats as “self-reification with a difference,” in “Negatively Capable Dialectics: Keats, Vendlar, Adorno, and the Theory of the Avant-Garde,” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 380, 377.

To take in draughts of life from the gold fount
 Of kind and passionate looks; to count, and count
 The moments, by some greedy help that seem'd
 A second self, that each might be redeem'd
 And plunder'd of its load of blessedness.

(1:653–60)

Rarely has a lover or a poet served Mammon with such unrestrained zeal. Caught up in his vision or waking dream, the hero of Keats's latter-day "poetic romance" seeks "to feede his eye / And couetous desire with his huge threasury." Endymion "counts" the passing moments of time with the same fervency as Spenser's Mammon is shown counting money ("in his lap a masse of coyne he told"), and one hardly needs a Benjamin Franklin here to be reminded of the equivalence of these two commodities.³⁷

However paradoxically Endymion pursues pleasures that are at once death and life to enjoy, the hero's effort "to make the moments signify," this "'plundering' which destroys the *now* of desire," is not a laying-by of store for futurity.³⁸ Nor certainly is it the case, as in Hazlitt's moral philosophy, that the experience is self-interested in the present but disinterested with regard to a future state. Though shadowed by the threat of their vanishing, such moments have no explicitly stated reference to the future. To "give" oneself to the swooning death of the instant and "to take in draughts of life" from moments known in advance to be fleeting are two sides of the same coin. In this sense, Endymion and his "greedy," appropriative "second self" are both manifestations of the moment; they are two aspects of a contemporaneity divided in itself, two dialectically conflicted modes of occupying, living in and through, time. Because happiness cannot be "count[ed] upon" in any time but the present hour, one must "count, and count / The moments" as they pass. The accumulation of time against its imminent disappearance does not represent an effort to "still" time, however, so much as to render more precisely the experience of contingency and temporal flux.

Endymion is thus "distracted" in a precise etymological sense—divided, rent asunder—and suspended, as are many Keatsian figures in the instant of beauty's perception, between the expropriative "giving" of oneself to the

37. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (II.vii.4), ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1978), 281; and see Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1991), 175–76, 228.

38. Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Psychology and Structure of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 149–50. Following Weiskel, Stuart A. Ende speaks rightly (though in somewhat oddly Eliotic terms) of Endymion's "divided sensibility," "a division at the core of his existence" that persists throughout the poem, in *Keats and the Sublime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 62, 63.

event on the one hand, and a “greedy” exercise of primitive accumulation on the other, a response that may seem as much an act of defense against the event as an indication of receptivity towards it. This division of psychic labor between a self that at once surrenders wholly to the moment and a “second self” that seeks to “take in,” “count and count,” redeem and plunder transient moments is our clearest view to the irredeemably social character of beauty in Keats, its “impure” or historically conditioned response to a common temporal predicament. The event of beauty is put under threat not exclusively by sociopolitical forces outside it, in other words, but in terms given by the avowedly fractured character of the perception itself.

To appreciate the force of this divided aesthetics we can look to Wordsworth’s powerful resistance to the rhythms of capitalist modernity, in comparison to which Keats’s hastily recruited “greedy help” could seem a passive adaptation, if not wholesale capitulation, to modernity’s temporal demands. That moments could be “counted” with the same readiness as Mammon’s “masse of coyne” was, after all, possible only through the instruments of modern time-measurement—technologies of apportioning and regulating time which, as E. P. Thompson and others have taught us, became widespread in the late eighteenth century. Thompson’s landmark essay on how the measures of abstract time “regulated the new rhythms of industrial life” concludes with Wordsworth’s polemic in *The Prelude* against those whom the poet punningly calls “watchful men / And skilful in the usury of time, / . . . who in their prescience would controul / All accidents.”³⁹ In the face of contemporary craving for extraordinary incident (at no time more pronounced, the poet insists, than “at the present day”), Wordsworth fashions the first modern specimen of “slow art.” The poetry thus created is short on “action and situation” (plot in the Aristotelian sense) but long on “feeling,” unsparing in its solicitation and at times peremptory demand on the reader’s cooperative exertion of passion and thought.⁴⁰ This gleaning of the brain, nerves, and heart is by Wordsworth pointedly contrasted to labor that can be measured by the divisible units of abstract time. “Sleep in thy intellectual crust,” Wordsworth chides the “Moralist” in “A Poet’s Epitaph,” “Nor lose ten tickings of thy watch / Near this unprofitable dust.”⁴¹ The poet’s “dust” is not, he insists, wholly “unprofitable”; his grave is a space for rest or on which to “build thy house” (60). But time cannot be turned to account in the units allotted for by the watch. Who submits to the abstraction of clock time or worries about the probable yield of the future will not profit from it.

39. E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” (1967), in *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: New Press, 1993), 369.

40. Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800*, ed. Jared Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 746.

41. Wordsworth, “A Poet’s Epitaph” (lines 34–36), in *Lyrical Ballads*, 237.

Keats's identification of Endymion's "greedy help" with a "second self" does not so much derive from Shakespeare's image of devouring Night as "Death's second self" as it alludes to Wordsworth's "Michael," the tale recorded "for the sake / Of youthful Poets, who among these Hills / Will be my second Self when I am gone."⁴² For Wordsworth, the "Poet" is the figure in whom resides a power of resistance to the otherwise relentless, two-handed engine of "modernity" and "progress": "in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed, the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time."⁴³ Keats's account of beauty as inspiring us to wreath "on every morrow . . . / a flowery band to bind us to the earth" is a principle taken on Wordsworth's authority, as to a lesser extent is his sense that beauty makes its appearance "in spite of all" (*Endymion*, 1:6–7). But Wordsworth's second self is chiefly the embodiment of a redemptive wish (however minimally asserted that wish may be): he is the emblem of a future more like the past than the present is capable of being. However inspired by Wordsworth's example, Endymion's second self is actualized only in the present fragile moment of beauty, a "now" experienced and foreseen as continually slipping into the past. The aesthetic artifice that in Wordsworth affords life and food for future years, promising the eventual re-establishment of a severed link to the past, chiefly and more modestly furnishes in Keats's work a reason to keep moving in the present.

It is indeed the "one bare circumstance" of Cynthia's appearance that keeps Endymion moving through the "4000 Lines" that Keats plotted in advance for his longest work.⁴⁴ In this respect, though not only so, the passage describing Endymion's vision has a metonymical relationship to the poem as a whole. Northrop Frye remarks of *Endymion* that "The poem is devoted to the theme of realizing beauty, making it true by creating it." I think it more accurate to say that *Endymion*—which admits doubts concerning the reality of the hero's vision, but under no circumstances the authority or truth of beauty itself—is devoted to making the minimal event or "bare circumstance" achieve temporal duration in the present.⁴⁵ Endym-

42. Shakespeare, sonnet 73 (line 8), in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1856; "Michael," (lines 37–39), in *Lyrical Ballads*, 253.

43. Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 753.

44. I refer to Keats's well-known aspiration for *Endymion*: "I must make 4000 Lines of one bare circumstance and fill them with Poetry" (to Bailey, 8 October 1817, *LJK* 1:169–70).

45. Northrop Frye, *A Study of English Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 127. Patricia Parker describes as the "hidden conflict" of *Endymion* "the tension between the perpetually forward, or displaced, movement of questing and the dilation of the present moment into a totality of presence" (*Inescapable Romance*, 181). Responding to Frye's account of the poem, Helen Vendler contends that *Endymion* is essentially "a prolonged lyric . . . rather than a narrative poem," "Frye's *Endymion*: Myth, Ethics, and Literary Descrip-

ion's oscillation between two competing temporal impulses—to take time and to yield to it—are alike dedicated to this end. The poet sets out his production schedule in the prologue, and largely succeeds in keeping to this timeline, as adroit in the husbandry of time as any tenant farmer in the management of his crops. Paradoxically, this exercise of severe time-management is designed to procure for “Lovers of Poetry . . . food for a Week's stroll in the Summer,” a pastime more leisurely and of longer duration “than what they can read through before Mrs Williams comes down stairs [—] a Morning work at most” (to Bailey, 8 October 1817, *LJK* 1:170). To the finished work, the fruit of these conflicting temporal impulses, Keats appends an epigraph from Shakespeare's sonnet 17: “The stretched metre of an antique song.” (Shakespeare “overwhelms a genuine Lover of Poesy with all manner of abuse,” Keats observes to Reynolds, before claiming the line as “a capital Motto for my Poem” [*LJK* 1:189]). With the epigraph from Shakespeare, Keats says, “I will appear to have worked in vain for what was in actuality given to me in plenty. All this effort will seem to future ages as little more than an idealization of something that could never have been doubted at the time.” Keats's epigraph, which as elsewhere in his work acknowledges the impossibility of projecting beauty or happiness beyond “the present hour,” also indicates by negation the true authority of beauty's perception in the moment.

That the dilatoriness of *Endymion's* narrative, its seemingly endless subplots and divagations, exist in the service of the sudden moment is clearest from Keats's hastily executed conclusion to the poem. In little more than 20 of *Endymion's* 4000-plus lines, the Indian Maid is transformed into Cynthia, Endymion is promptly “spiritualized,” and they vanish together leaving Peona in “wonderment” (4:993, 1003). The profound anti-climax of the conclusion, withheld for so long, has bothered many readers of Keats's work.⁴⁶ But we miss the point, I think, if we regard the conclusion as a failure to achieve dramatic effect, as if Keats had merely bungled the ending or had (as he surely had) wearied of the poem in the course of its composition. There is, it is true, at once an obvious and a scarcely tolerable abruptness to the consummation of Endymion's quest. However, this fact merely underscores the point that the quest has all along been for nothing more than what the hero has already enjoyed. No amount of preparation

tion,” in *The Legacy of Northrop Frye*, ed. Alvin A. Lee and Robert D. Denham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 211. See also Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72–81.

46. *Blackwood's* ridicules the “patched-up wedding” that concludes the poem (*Keats: The Critical Heritage*, 109). Harold Bloom offers a paradigmatic assessment in describing the conclusion as “probably the least satisfactory episode in the entire structure,” in *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 378.

or labor can alter the nature of the “unlook’d for change” that Endymion undergoes (4:992); all that waiting and striving must culminate in a workless instant, the inconsequence of which is paradoxically vouchsafed by the interested care of time that has gone into its production. Endymion’s ascension, an event witnessed though but dimly comprehended by Peona, represents neither a doleful chapter in the unfinished project of modernity (see Shelley’s *Alastor*, one of Keats’s immediate models) nor an elaborately reconciliatory climax hailing the triumphal end of time (see *Prometheus Unbound*, written a few years later). Precisely nothing is changed by this unsought transformation, or everything is. What, then, was it all for? I suspect that the human tendency to pose this question was of greater interest to Keats than any answer that he (or we) could possibly return to it. “Was it a vision, or a waking dream?”; “It was no dream; or say a dream it was” (“Ode to a Nightingale,” 79; “Lamia,” 126).

Endymion’s concluding moment of inconsequential fulfillment, its fulfillment of inconsequence, is therefore not “the herald, companion, and follower” of epochal transformation in the political world.⁴⁷ But nor is it the momentary experience that comes and goes without a trace. Burke writes: “it is very evident that pleasure, when it has run its career, sets us down very nearly where it found us.”⁴⁸ If Keats, insistent on the necessity of finding “Worldly Happiness” in the present, replies “not yet,” he does so with the understanding that beauty’s effects may just as plausibly be ongoing, extending into a “now” whose terminus is yet to be ascertained.⁴⁹ The thing of beauty that remains unpredictable and not fully cognizable is also of uncertain duration; it outlasts “one short hour” because its resources have not yet been sufficiently plumbed (1:26). This “bright something,” as Endymion calls it (1:602), survives as a site of contingency, vitality, and (indeed) promise—little signs of a contested present that is with us still.

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48. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 34.

49. On the affective charge of a historical present that is “not yet” history, see Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism*, 72–78, 104–5.

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