Keats in an Age of Consumption: The "Ode to a Nightingale"
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JOHN Keats wrote during a time in which a newly emerging economic order engendered a redefinition of the self and the body. In particular, his poetry charts the rise of a middle-class society defined primarily by its acts of consumption. This age of consumption can be traced to a burgeoning free-market system and an incipient cultural consumerism resulting from extensions in colonization, new developments in trade or transport facilities, a greater availability of consumer goods in England, and the ongoing processes of urbanization and industrialization. This age witnessed a revolution in the way material objects were produced and consumed, but it also carried with it a change in bodily perceptions and habits. During the course of the nineteenth century, “consumption” not only came to signify a new economic activity, but also became for individuals a central mode of being in the world. The poetry of John Keats maps precisely this historical phenomenon whereby human bodies become both subjects and objects of consumption.

Keats’s early poems give rise to a notion of the individual as a consuming subject. Increasingly, however, his poems exhibit the awareness that just as the self emerges as a subject of consumption, it is also always in danger of being consumed by this new cultural order. In particular, in the “Ode to a Nightingale” we find one of the most elaborate and complex representations of a body that experiences life through consumption, but then incurs the risk of being consumed via this very process. Keats’s ode imagines a body that is above all hungry and desirous, continually gathering, absorbing and assimilating a multitude of sense experiences into itself. At the same time, the poem describes a body that is not so much nourished by healthful ingestion...
as one wasted or depleted by its own masticatory activities. But perhaps what is most interesting about this ode is that here the "consumptive body" refers not only to the equally subjectivized and objectified body of a growing cultural consumerism, but also to the slowly disintegrating body that has been struck by an awareness of its own illness or "dis-ease." For Keats, then, it is through this metaphor of illness that the dual phenomenology of the body as both subject and object is most profoundly expressed and understood. Consequently, he uses the metaphor of illness as a means to write the body of a newly emerging capitalist ethos.

In the early poetry, Keats imagines the self exclusively as a subject of consumption whose primary experience of the world is rooted both in economic acts of accumulation and in physical acts of ingestion. As Alan Bewell explains, Keats's work during this time is indicative of an incipient consumer culture that placed enormous emphasis on the values of pleasure, leisure, or recreation, as well as on the notions of possession and acquisition; for this reason, his writing reflects a nascent cultural consumerism by offering readers "a luxurious abundance of images from which to 'pick and choose' and to which they can return repeatedly, finding new images on each return."1 Accordingly, Keats's "Sleep and Poetry," the long and climactic poem to close his first volume of verse, reads like a capitalist fantasy in which the poet is able not only to collect or amass a whole range of pleasures, but also to "indulge at large" in this "store of luxuries."2 Surrounded by a profusion of artistic prints and imitative statues, Keats describes himself as being in the very center of "pleasure's temple" (line 355), as he finds "sweet relief" (line 312) while lying "upon a couch at ease" (line 353). Composed in the suburban and leisurely atmosphere of Leigh Hunt's cottage, this poem allows Keats to procure and possess the bourgeois lifestyle that he, in real life, could never experience. In fact, as Elizabeth Jones remarks, the last few stanzas of this poem depict a self-contained dream world, as Keats proceeds to catalogue and take inventory of all the garnitures or ornaments of

this archetypal middle-class home. Indeed, Keats's poem offers his readers a literary model of the newly emerging consumer culture.

However, what becomes apparent in this analysis is that Keats does not simply present the structure of a new economic order, but also reveals the outlines of a new definition of the body and of the subject. In particular, this model of the body is one grounded in a notion of experience as consumption: the self is imagined primarily as a consuming subject. Instances of this kind of consumptive subject may also be found in “Sleep and Poetry,” where the acts of reading and writing poetry are themselves envisaged via metaphors of ingestion. In this poem, the speaker describes himself as intending to “taste” poesy’s “pure fountains” (line 101). In the same way, he will pass the realms of Flora and Pan so that he can “Feed upon apples red, and strawberries / And choose each pleasure that my fancy sees” with “a bite as hard as lips can make” (lines 102-109). Here, the kind of subject constructed by Keats involves a body that interacts with the world through a metaphoric “swallowing up” of that world. Consumption constitutes for Keats a central mode of existence.

The ingestive aspects of Keats’s work are best described by Lionel Trilling. Speaking of the luxurious sensuality of the Keatsian aesthetic, Trilling notes how food provided Keats with the most intense of life’s experiences. In contrast to William Wordsworth, for whom sense experience was a means of access to a higher faculty, Keats made food the basis of his life:

It is . . . the appetitive image and the frankness of his appetite that we cannot dispense with in our understanding of Keats. Eating and the delicacies of taste are basic and definitive in his experience and his poetry. The story of his putting cayenne pepper on his tongue to feel the more intensely the pleasure of a draft of cold claret is apocryphal. . . . With Keats the ingestive imagery is pervasive and extreme. He is possibly unique among poets in the extensiveness of his reference to eating and drinking and to its pleasurable or distasteful sensations. To some readers this is likely to be alienating. . . . But Keats did not share our culture’s fear of the temptation to the passive self-reference of infancy. He did not repress the infantile wish; he confronted it, recognized it, delighted in it. Food—and

what for the infant usually goes with food, a cozy warmth—made for him the form, the elementary idea, of felicity.4

The frequent images of eating and drinking found in Keats's writing point to the fact that, for Keats, ingestion and consumption represent genuine ways of apprehending life. In turn, the sensations derived from eating are able to encompass and express a plethora of other kinds of feelings. Of course, it is precisely Keats's appetitive impulse that led early critics such as Lockhart to call his poetry "vulgar," proceeding as it did from "bile and indigestion."5 But, for Keats, this did not matter, since feasting supplied him with a rich metaphor for expressing the subtleties of experience. In Keats's eyes, the experience of the subject in the world could best be imagined in terms of luscious dainties, "beatified strawberries" and "blooming plums."6

Perhaps one of the most extravagant eruptions of the Keatsian appetite may be found in the long romance, "The Eve of St. Agnes." In this work, feasting takes place at various levels, since the poem uses food as a means of conveying different kinds of consumptive experience. For example, Porphyro can be said to voyeuristically "consume" or "devour" Madeline with his very eyes. Conversely, the metaphor of feasting also operates to conjure the opposite activity of fasting as the exercises of sexual restraint that Madeline must endure. However, the most explicit instance of feasting occurs as Porphyro lays out a luxurious array of confections and sweets for Madeline to consume when she awakes. Keats describes this delectable banquet:

Then the bed-side, where the faded moon
Made dim, silver twilight, soft he set
A table, and, half anguish'd, threw thereon
A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet:

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

While he from forth the closet brought a heap
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;

With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
And lucent syrops, tinct with cinnamon;
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr’d
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
From silken Samarcand to cedar’d Lebanon. (lines 253–70)

In this passage, feasting cannot simply be read as a metaphor for sexuality or for other types of consumption; rather, the extremely lavish and detailed descriptions of food seem to exceed their function as symbols. The very tangibility and physicality of the food overwhelms the spectator, while the emphatic sensuality of the passage arouses a gustatory desire within the reader who experiences a cornucopia of delights in the mouth. Moreover, it is important to note that here Porphyro does not lay out any ordinary banquet, but instead lists exotic items that are the result of trade and commerce. This famous scene, with its profusion of sweets and delicacies, evokes a capitalist fantasy wherein a bourgeois subject is able to consume the poem in the act of reading.

But even as this luxurious product appears at first as a sweet bourgeois dream, it also bears the marks of a bittersweet illusion. Unlike Keats’s early poems, “The Eve of St. Agnes” communicates the knowledge that just as capitalism produces subjects of consumption, it also produces individuals who may then themselves be consumed. In fact, as Helen Ellis observes, although this romance may be Keats’s “most erotically fulfilled love dream” and also “the poem most closely associating feasting and sexuality,” it nevertheless “has death as its constant background.” Apparitions of death or of the wasting away of the body may be unearthed, for instance, in Porphyro’s changed countenance after Madeline awakes. First, he is described as turning “pale as smooth-sculptured stone” (line 297) and then as “pallid, chill, and drear” (line 311). He is also “ethereal” and “flushed” (line 318), as he looks rather disconcertedly upon Madeline with “piteous eye, / Fearing to move or speak” (lines 305–306). Ultimately, the poem conveys the knowledge of the body’s consumption in its depiction of Porphyro “melting into” Madeline’s dream (line 320). The romance

ends on a sinister note, with both hero and heroine gliding “like phantoms” (line 361) into the dark, stormy night, leaving Angela to die “palsy-twitch’d, with meagre face deform” and the Beadsman to sleep “among his ashes cold” (lines 375–78). In contrast to Keats’s earlier works, then, this poem illustrates a type of consumption that provides temporary fuel for the imagination, but inevitably fails to nourish the body.

If Keats’s “The Eve of St. Agnes” alludes to the ambiguities or uncertainties of an increasingly consumptive society, then the slightly later “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” reveals in a more explicit fashion the dangers of such a world. Like the previous work, this poem initially views consumption as an experience leading to intense pleasure, as the knight feeds indulgently on “roots of relish sweet, and honey wild and manna dew” (lines 25–26). However, this ingestion leads not to life and health, but to decay and destruction as implied by the rather unpalatable descriptions of the Lady’s victims: they are “death pale” warriors who with their hungry and “starv’d lips . . . horrid warning gaped wide” (lines 38, 41–42). As Marjorie Levinson notes, the knight in this poem delineates an “incontinent appetite,” but one that “ingests without digesting, consumes without consummating” and ultimately “feeds without satisfying.” 8 According to Levinson, this poem signifies “productive self-alienation.” It is the excrescence of an “internally fissured, eternally hungry space: a market that consumes but does not assimilate.” 9 Hence, Keats’s fantasies of consumption have now become all-consuming. The image of the self constructed by this work is one in which the body is both ingesting and ingestable.

While both Keats’s “The Eve of St. Agnes” and his “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” may be said to symptomatize a new moment in the history of capitalism, from which an incipient consumer culture produces bodies that are at once subjects and objects of consumption, it is the “Ode to a Nightingale” that dramatizes this particular phenomenon most vividly. Keats’s ode imagines a self that is, in the first place, hungry and acquisitive. On the one hand, Keats’s creates an image of the body that may be understood in terms of an intense and

dynamic subjectivity, one that is perpetually drawing in or soaking up the external environment. On the other hand, this continuous consumption on the part of the self leads not to health or prosperity, but to a peculiar kind of numbing or paralysis that signifies both its alienation from the outside world and its extraordinary “dis-ease” in that world. It is precisely this complex imagining of the human body that consequently accounts for the contradictory nature of experience outlined by this poem and also for the paradoxical structure of the ode. Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” exhibits, in a profound way, the simultaneous filling up and emptying out of the body that occurs in this age of consumption.

The first stanza of this ode represents the body as a consuming subject. The poem opens with a dramatic situation wherein a speaker is listening to the music of a nightingale. Using the trope of drinking, Keats images the speaker’s “taking in” of song as a metaphoric ingestion:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
   My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
   One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk: (lines 1–4)

Here, the speaker experiences an intoxication of the senses as the nightingale’s music enters and becomes incorporated into his body. In fact, throughout the ode, Keats envisages the bird’s song, itself a form of poetic utterance, in terms of liquid imagery; it is pictured as a limitless river that issues from the mouth of the nightingale and subsequently seeps into the poet’s body. This, of course, brings to mind lines from book 1 of Endymion, where Keats conceives of “all lovely tales we have heard or read” as an “endless fountain of immortal drink, / pouring into us from heaven’s brink” (lines 22–24). Similarly, in the “Ode to a Nightingale,” the bird’s “immortal” song is characterized precisely as a “pouring forth” of bird’s soul (line 57). The ensuing consumption, absorption, and assimilation of the song into the body of the speaker consequently serve as victuals for the spirit and as the occasion for the poet’s own music or verse.

In the second stanza, we find again an emphasis on the act of drinking, as the speaker begins by describing the imagined contact of wine against his palate and ends with the vivid impression of a “pur-
ple-stained mouth” (line 18). Throughout this stanza, the poet’s words are thirsty and full of desire, as he cries out first for “a draught of vintage” (line 11) and then for “a beaker full of the warm South” (line 15). In this last instance, the speaker portrays himself as yearning to drink in not only the nightingale’s music, but also the entire landscape, which he believes to be “tasting of Flora and the country green” (line 13). Therefore, the speaker does not simply observe the external environment, but responds to it in a dynamic fashion by taking it in and incorporating it within the whole of his body. This part of the ode offers a portrait of an active, consuming subject. As in his earlier poetry, this section of Keats’s ode views consumption as a fundamental mode through which the individual is able to experience and interact with the external world.

The ode then goes on to develop the idea that consumption, or the drinking in of life, is intimately and inextricably linked to the acts of reading and writing poetry. This is already evident, for example, in the allusion to the “beaded bubbles” of “blushful Hippocrene,” the sacred fountain that was a source of sustenance for the muses and source of inspiration for most poets (lines 16–17). In the fourth stanza, however, the correlation between drinking and poetry is made even clearer as the speaker tells us that he would rather be “charioted” by the “viewless wings of Poesy” than by “Bacchus and his pards” (lines 32–33). As a result, wine and poetry are understood as closely affiliated vehicles for achieving the kind of reverie that will permit the ode’s speaker to apprehend the nightingale’s world. In fact, as Leon Waldoff points out, “Images of wine and physical sensation in Keats’s poetry are often preludes to visionary experience, increased intensity, or new awareness.”

Moreover, the connection between wine and poetry alludes to the fact that poetic creation is a type consumptive activity.

Yet, unlike the earlier poetry, Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” clearly constructs the body as at once consuming and consumable. On the one hand, the music of the nightingale is an elixir that, when ingested, offers “happiness” (line 6), “mirth” (line 14) and “ecstasy” (line 58). It provides physical pleasure or gratification by stimulating

the senses. On the other hand, this intoxication also has a peculiar anesthetic effect on the speaker, causing drowsiness, amnesia and paralysis. Thus, the creature’s melody is no ordinary sedative; instead, it is like “opiate” and “hemlock” (lines 2–3). Much like the “poisonous wine” we find in the opening lines of Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy,” the nightingale’s music seems to be deadly and fatal to human flesh. Accordingly, the poet “might drink” this substance only to “leave the world unseen” and “fade far away” (lines 19–21). Furthermore, upon ingestion, a gradual numbing of the senses continues until the self is made to altogether “dissolve, and quite forget” (line 21). As the body slowly pines away, it loses its lustre and surrenders its vitality. We realize that the self constructed by this poem is no longer a consuming individual, but one that has itself been consumed and exhausted. Here, the music of the nightingale does not seem to nourish the body with healthful drink; rather, the body is shown to be starved, depleted, emaciated, “pale” and “spectre-thin” (line 126). In its attempt to meld with the nightingale, the subject finds itself progressively dematerialized as it is scattered diffusely into the thin atmosphere and “into the forest dim” (line 20). In other words, the speaker finds himself outside of his own body, thereby reflecting an existence that resonates clearly with Marx’s description of the alienated bourgeois subject who views the activities of his body as “not his own” and literally “feels outside himself.”11 At points, the self in this ode is one that has virtually evaporated into nothingness; it is no longer an active, embodied subject, but a passive, disembodied object.

Keats proceeds to develop this theme of disembodiment in the middle stanzas of the ode, as the speaker appears to experience a certain suspension of his corporeal senses and, as a result, becomes increasingly disengaged from the external environment. For example, the shutting down of eyesight occurs as the speaker discovers that he “cannot see” (line 41) and now dwells in a place where “there is no light” (line 38). A similar numbing of the senses occurs in Keats’s “Sonnet to Sleep,” where the poet describes the “soft embalmer” of midnight as “shutting with careful fingers and benign” the speaker’s “gloom-pleas’d eyes” (lines 1–3). In this earlier poem, Sleep is de-

picted as wrapping or engulfing the speaker in darkness until he is “embower’d from the light” and “enshaded in forgetfulness divine” (lines 3–4). In like manner, the speaker of the “Ode to a Nightingale” is described as being wholly “embalmed in darkness” (line 43), while “darkling” he listens to the nightingale’s soothing song (line 51). Just as Keats’s sonnet ends with the image of death—this time with the speaker embalmed in the “hushed casket” of his “soul” (line 14)—the ode also imagines the expiration of life with the speaker describing himself as “half in love with easeful Death” (line 52). In this way, both of these poems effect a certain dematerialization of the physical body, as the self becomes disassociated from the outside world and insensate to its external surroundings or natural setting.

But while the first part of the ode viewed the dematerialization of the individual as an outward dissipation of the body, the middle stanzas of the poem chart this disintegration of the body as taking the form of an inward regression or collapse into the self. This is suggested, for example, by the fact that the poet, who is now unable to apprehend his immediate environment, must “guess” as to the composition of his setting (line 43). Of course, this phrase recalls lines from the earlier poem, “I Stood Tip–Toe Upon a Little Hill,” where the speaker’s “greediest eye” is also barred access to the beauties of the landscape and so is forced to speculate as to what constitutes the topography (lines 15–28). In both poems, it is apparent that the prospect being described is not any actual physical terrain, but an imaginative or inner realm. Yet, what is striking about both the ode and this earlier poem is that just as the speaker begins to shut off his senses, he experiences at the same time a heightened sensuality. In the ode, for example, Keats discards the knowledge derived from ordinary sight, but educes a fusillade of alternative physical sensations in a closely packed and condensed space. The sense of smell is activated through the sweet, redolent fragrances of “soft incense,” “white hawthorn,” “pastoral eglandine,” and the “coming musk rose” (lines 42–49). Appealing to the sense of touch, Keats evokes the leafy, velvety textures of “grass” and “thicket” (line 45), all while leading us through “verdurous glooms” and “winding mossy ways” (line 49). The sense of taste is also stimulated through references to “dewy wine” (line 49) and the “fruit–tree wild” (line 45). Keats then ends by
engaging our auditory senses by invoking, onomatopoeically, the hum of a “murmurous haunt of flies on a summer eve” (line 50). This part of the ode is in fact a perfect example of what Richard Fogle has termed Keatsian synaesthesia: the rich, dense fusion of “sense, emotion and concept” that Keats is able to attain in “the utmost degree of synesthesizing compression.” Paradoxically, then, this part of the ode effects a certain shutting down of the senses while simultaneously leading to a multitude of sense impressions. In other words, the image of the body that Keats paints here is one which is contemporaneously embodied and disembodied. It is described as a passive object at the same time that it is defined in terms of an intense subjectivity.

This notion of the body as both subject and object has already been articulated, in many ways, by Keats, himself, in his famous letter to Richard Woodhouse on the attributes of the “poetical character.” It is in this letter that Keats defines the poet as a “camelion” or shape-shifter. Lacking an “identical nature,” the poet also has no self of his own to possess or retain:

As to the Poetical Character . . . 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 Iago as an Imogen. . . . A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none; no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of God’s Creatures. . . . When I am in a room with People if ever I am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me.

On the one hand, this passage seems to conceptualize the poet’s self as completely disembodied and as having no essence of its own, visualizing as it does an individual devoid of all subjectivity or corporeality. Unlike the sun, moon, sea and other permanent or changeless

identities, the poetic self is a "camelion" in that it is not only changeable, but also exchangeable. It is able to "fill other bodies" or move laterally in space from one item to another. Substitutive and replaceable, the self here is virtually turned into a commodity-fetish. Drained of life, it is simply an object among objects. However, as Steven Knapp notes, Keats's idea of the self's being able to "fill other bodies" is doubly interesting, because it points to the fact that the subject is "not so much surrendered as unleashed." In making this claim, Knapp ascribes a certain amount of agency to Keats's version of the self, seeing it as simultaneously penetrable and penetrating. In fact, Keats's words are able to evoke contradictory notions of "possession," working at once in terms of commodity-relations and in terms of bodily occupations. Although Keats may not be able to own or possess his own self, his body is able to possess, enter into, seize upon, and exhaust the bodies of others.

Similarly, the "Ode to a Nightingale" effects a complex and nuanced understanding of the body, whereby it is at one moment a passive object to be acted on, and is at the very next moment an intense, dynamic subject able to soak up or take in the full range of sensual experiences that the world has to offer. It is precisely this enigmatic imagining of the human body that accounts not only for the ambiguous nature of experience outlined by this poem, but also for the paradoxical formal arrangement of ode. Noticing the contrapuntal structure of the work, John Baker characterizes the cadences of Keats's poem as a relentless "oscillation" between flight and descent, intimacy and withdrawal, as well as between "the achievement of communion and the falling away from that communion." This constant vacillation between the filling up of the self and the emptying out of the self once again confirms the idea that the speaker is both a subject of desire and an object of consumption. In this way, Keats's ode represents on its level the contradictions inherent in this stage of early capitalism.

Rather than resolving or suppressing these contradictions, the last
stanzas of the ode continue to reveal the conflicting and changing nature of the culture in which Keats was writing. By the end of the poem, the nightingale has left and its diminished song is now “plaintive” and fading until it is eventually “buried deep / In the next valley-glades” (lines 75–78). Consequently, it is the bird who now dissolves while the speaker is summoned back to his “sole self,” occasioning a movement away from the nightingale and back to the speaker’s own consciousness. Yet, the exact location of the speaker’s body remains indeterminate even here, as the ode ends with the extremely disturbing question: “Do I wake or sleep?” (line 80). Moreover, the funereal echoes of “Adieu! adieu!” (line 75) carry a haunting ring, while the repetition of the word “forlorn” suggests a sense of hopelessness or desolation (lines 70–71). In the end, we know that the nightingale was “not born for death,” but the speaker seems to be left to endure a rather tragic fate: he is to be consumed and trampled down by “hungry generations” (lines 61–62). As implied by the word “hungry,” Keats may be alluding here to his fear of losing himself and his work to a budding consumerism: namely, to a future generation of consuming subjects as embodied in the newly emerging literary marketplace.

At the same time, this last line can also suggest a consumption of an altogether different kind, namely, the kind of consumption of the body engendered by the disease, tuberculosis, which at that time was believed to be hereditary. Keats’s own history with the disease is of course a well-known and documented fact. When Keats was only fourteen, his mother died of what was presumably tuberculosis, with Keats nursing her during the final stages of the illness. Just a few years later, Keats’s brother, Tom, contracted the disease and Keats attended him until his death in December of 1818, exactly six months before the “Ode to a Nightingale” was written. Thus, the “generations” that burden the poet in this ode may very well refer to members of Keats’s own family whose deaths he had witnessed from one generation to the next and whose inheritance now seemed to weigh heavily on him. Seen from this angle, the adjective “hungry” could signify the way in which the disease exhausts or eats up the individual. As Susan Sontag writes, tuberculosis has the connotation of “disintegration, febrilization, dematerialization.” It is imagined as “a disease of liquids.
—the body turning to phlegm and mucus and sputum and, finally, blood.”\textsuperscript{16} As an illness that was thought to devour the body, tuberculosis was indeed the ultimate metaphor for consumption and a consumptive society. Consequently, for Keats it provided a powerful image for expressing the changing conceptions of self that emerged during this particular period of history. The metaphor of illness not only offered Keats a means to comprehend and conceptualize the simultaneously subjectivized and objectified entity that the body became under the newly emerging capitalist culture, it also offered him a means of writing this body.

In other words, we might say that illness became, for Keats, an explanatory narrative of sorts. Julia Epstein writes, “The body is a physical object and biological entity; but it also houses subjectivity and personhood. We live within our bodies, and we invest our bodies with history and meaning.”\textsuperscript{17} In a similar vein, bodily symptoms, signs, and experiences became a key with which Keats was able to construct meaning out of the world around him; and as such, they became important tools for his poetry and writing. In fact, as Jennifer Davis Michael observes, the important and intricate relations between the body, writing, and illness were often detailed by Keats in several of his letters.\textsuperscript{18} Here we see how the creative process was for Keats a highly corporeal event. Altogether unable to detach mental states from the physical symptoms of his own and others’ bodies, Keats exhibits in his letters the continuing “tendency to read and inscribe symptoms of intellectual or emotional states onto the body” (Michael, 41). Consider, for example, this excerpt from a letter that Keats wrote to C. W. Dilke in September of 1818, just as he was nursing Tom:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Julia Epstein, \textit{Altered Conditions: Disease, Medicine, and Storytelling} (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Jennifer Davis Michael, “Pectoriloquy: The Narrative of Consumption in Keats’s Letters,” \textit{European Romantic Review}, 6 (1995), 38–56 (41). Keats himself did not develop the symptoms of tuberculosis until much later, after the “Ode to a Nightingale” was written. In fact, as Michael notes, the development of tuberculosis in Keats’s body intersects with the end of his literary career, since at this point he stopped writing poems, although he continued to write letters. However, the knowledge or awareness of the disease came early to Keats, especially since he watched both his mother and his brother die, and also because of the way in which Keats could never separate this mental awareness from attendant physical sensations. Thus, even though Keats was not necessarily suffering from tuberculosis while writing any of his poems, I am suggesting that the mental awareness of disease caused Keats, in an odd sort of way, to experience his body \textit{as if} ill. This experiencing and understanding of the body’s “dis-ease” or estrangement from itself, then, was what helped Keats to better conceptualize the particular alienation of the body in a capitalist culture.
\end{itemize}
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I wish I could say Tom was any better. His identity presses upon me so all
day that I am obliged to go out—and although I intended to have given
some time to study alone I am obliged to write, and plunge into abstract
images to ease myself of his countenance, his voice and feebleness—so
that I live now in continual fever—it must be poisonous to life although
I feel well.19

As Michael explains, fever in this letter has several different meanings
(41). Most obviously, it is a reflection of Tom’s disease, which Keats
feels “pressing” upon him through the identity of kinship. This strain
consequently impels him to write; he attempts to escape illness
through “abstract images” and tries to “ease” himself not only of the
knowledge of Tom’s symptoms, but of their presence in his own body.
The effect of all this, however, is not healthful release from illness, but
rather a reinscription of the disease itself in the course of a “fever” of
writing. In fact, the very ambiguity of the phrasing implies a confu-
sion between the “poison” of disease and the pathology of writing
such that poetry, fever, illness and the body all become conflated in
Keats’s mind.

More and more, illness became a metaphor through which Keats
inscribed the body, and as such, it became a context for his writing.
Thus, while Helen Vendler states that Keats’s poetry allowed him to
escape sorrow by “averting the eyes from human suffering,”20 she fails
to account for the fact that Keats actually saw the “world of
Pain and troubles” as a necessary precondition for thinking, writing
or “soul-making.”21 Indeed, in his last days, this belief only became
stronger, as even in his final correspondence he observes that “the
knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade” and “all that inform-
ation . . . necessary for a poem are great enemies to the recovery.”22
For Keats, illness—that is the experience of the body’s “dis-ease” or
estrangement from itself—was a context for comprehending some of
the strange conditions of his life and the world. It also provided him
with a powerful metaphor with which to conceptualize and write

Press, 1983), p. 82.
about the particular alienation of the body in a newly emerging capitalist culture.

Accordingly, in the “Ode to a Nightingale,” metaphors of illness offer yet another frame for understanding and interpreting the nature of the body being inscribed by this poem. The most explicit reference to the diseased body is, of course, to be found in stanza 3, where the poet describes a world of “weariness,” “fever” and “fret” (line 23). This is a universe where “men sit and hear each other groan; / Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, / Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies” (lines 24–26). Many critics have attributed these lines to Keats’s passing memory of his brother’s death; yet, as we have already seen, images of the dissolution or wasting away of the body are not limited to these few lines, but may be found throughout the ode. The consumption of the body may be observed, for instance, in the constant fading or dissolving of the speaker’s self into the dim forest and, especially, in his call to “easeful Death” to “take into the air my quiet breath” (lines 52–54). The allusion to “breath” is particularly significant in this context, since it refers specifically to the tubercular lungs. At the same time, it is important to note that illness does not concentrate in any one organ in this poem, but rather is spread and located throughout the speaker’s body, at once in his “heart” (line 1), his “purple-stained mouth” (line 18), his “leaden-eye[s]” (line 29) and “dull brain” (line 34). Here, the haunting spectres of fever, decay, pallid skin, and sunken eyes contribute to the making of a self struck by illness.

What is most important about Keats’s use of illness as metaphor in this particular ode, however, is not simply that it allows him to write the body, but that it allows him to represent a complex notion of the body as both subject and object. Consider, for example, the odd shutting down of the senses accompanied by the heightened sensibility that occurs in this poem. It is significant that the speaker’s condition is not simply that of a “drowsy numbness,” but a numbness that “pains,” while the soporific experience of losing sensation is paradoxically accompanied by a wrenching heart ache (line 1). On the one hand, the anesthetic or amnesiac experience of self reflects a body that has been quite violently disengaged from the external environment; this is a body that has undergone a certain objectification
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and dematerialization. On the other hand, the speaker’s intense feelings of anguish, his erratic vacillations between ecstasy and despair, along with his inward pose are the marks of an intensely subjective experience. Moreover, the speaker’s trance-like reverie, his inability to distinguish “vision” from “waking dream” (line 79), as well as the interrogative stance with which the poem ends, all point to the fact that the self is not so much disembodied as it is “embodied otherwise” in an altered state of illness. It is my contention, then, that it was the metaphor of illness that allowed Keats to express most powerfully the dual phenomenology of the body as both “thing” and “being.” Indeed, it is with illness that the body becomes, at one moment, completely disassociated from the self as simply a series of signs, fluids, surfaces or symptoms, and then at the very next moment, commences to question the self with an all too human voice regarding the significance of its dis-ease.23

For this reason, it is also the metaphor of illness that allows Keats to map changing conceptions of selfhood in a newly emerging economic order—an order that produces bodies which are at once subjects and objects of consumption. This culture views, at one level, the body as a site of ingestion, and from this perspective, understands consumption as a means through which the self is able to experience, and eventually come to own, its surrounding environment at a rate that was previously unimaginable. However, from a different perspective, this very act of consumption causes the body to be itself consumed, emptied of energy, severed from the social and natural milieu that gives it life and meaning. This condition of the body as both subject and object—at once insensate yet anguished—is what Marx, in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, understood to be the “estrangement” of human beings stemming from a bourgeois economy. It is a condition in which the activity of the body becomes “alien” to itself. In this condition, the individual feels as if “he belongs, not to himself, but to another.”24 Keats, by contrast, expressed this new state of the self not in political or philosophical

23. See Michael Taussig’s The Nervous System (New York: Routledge, 1992), esp. pp. 83–108, for a more thorough account of this dual phenomenology of subject as both “thing” and “being.” Within an anthropological framework Taussig also elucidates in detail precisely how modern perceptions of disease, medicine, and the body may be understood as linked to a capitalist economy.

terms, but in poetical ones, through the metaphor of illness. He described this condition of the body as the feeling of not being at home in the world, or the experience of oneself as “continually in for—filling some other body.” This is likewise a state of not knowing whether one is occupying a “vision” or a “waking dream.” Perhaps this particular illusion of the body is by now ubiquitous in our culture. Reading Keats, we are able to picture more clearly its origins. And even though his poetry may not offer any cure for this peculiar malady, at least it attends us in our affliction.

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