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# Keats and Philosophy

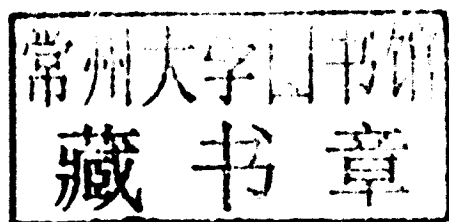
The Life of Sensations

Shahidha K. Bari

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# Keats and Philosophy

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**For Rahimun Nessa Khanom and Abdul Bari**

# Abbreviations

Works that are abbreviated are signalled in the footnote to the first usage. The following abbreviations apply throughout:

- BT* Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1996)
- CJ* Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987)
- EF* Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*, trans. by Bridget McDonald (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993)
- IM* Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by Geoffrey Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000)
- KL* *The Letters of John Keats 1814–1821*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1958)
- PF* Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. by George Collins (London: Verso, 1997)
- TP* Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004)

All citations from Keats's poetry are taken from *John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. by Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1982), unless otherwise indicated.

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Above all others, I thank my brothers, sister and the younger members of our family who have determinedly led me astray. This book is for my parents, who are at the heart of all things.



# Introduction

*However it may be, O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!*  
Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of this book is an attempt to reconceive the work of the English Romantic poet John Keats (1795–1821) within the frame of a philosophical analysis and in the light of contemporary concerns. The book attends closely to Keats's work, presenting new accounts of his poetry, indicating its power and range, but also illuminating the ways in which Keats's concerns might resonate with that of a contemporary readership. The book revisits Keats's work in the present, reading both through and beyond his writings from the early part of the nineteenth century, and recognising in him the Romantic claim to modernity. Crucially, the readings gathered here draw from the variety of his verse an idea of a self-sensing subject that is bound by its complex relationships both with others and to the places in which it finds itself. The study suggests the ways in which this account of subjectivity might also warrant our enduring philosophical and theoretical attention. In this study, the notion of a relational subjectivity is derived from Keats's writing and developed with recourse to a range of philosophical and contemporary theoretical material, with particular attention to the phenomenological lines of enquiry pursued after Immanuel Kant by Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy. Attending to some familiar and several less known works by Keats, this study consists of a series of explorative essays on the nature of touch, the evocation of presence, the poetics of ecology, the thinking of freedom and the weight of grief. Each chapter presents a reading of a poem or set of poems that is discrete and detachable from the broader argument, but which cohere to illuminate the particular phenomenality of Keats's poetry and the powerful affectivity he attributes to his imagined subjects. The book begins with the figure of an insubstantial spectre and ends with the solidity of statues, and the course of this graduated transition traces the emergence of a breathing body whose 'living hand' reaches for others and whose 'wandering' feet traverse a world whose substance is variously light, air, vapour and stone. Central to the project is the proposition that Keats's poetry presents an idea of a reflective and auto-affective subject that discovers its sense of itself through relationships with others and in a landscape that sometimes yields to and sometimes resists its subjective force. This subject is irrevocably singular, vulnerable and mortal but its unshareable condition of being is

insistently challenged by what Keats imagines as the affective commitments of love and grief forged by and between human beings. The book works through Keats's poetry to recover an idea of the irreducible singularity of phenomenal experience and the binding commitments of affectivity, with a final chapter that examines how phenomenality and affectivity might bear upon a conception of collective political life.

Three objectives guide this study. Firstly, the book presents new readings of Keats's poems, retrieving his corpus from early formalist and historicist traditions, and offering a sustained engagement with a wider range of his work. The course of modern Keats scholarship runs from the early, traditionally literary critical monographs of Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), and Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), to Helen Vendler's *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983). Marjorie Levinson's materialist and psychoanalytical study, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), and Nicholas Roe's historicist account, *Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), indicated two decisive breaks in that tradition of Keats scholarship.<sup>2</sup> The historicist revival of Keats, affirmed by Susan J. Wolfson's special edition of 'Keats and Politics: A Forum', *Studies in Romanticism*, 25 (Summer 1986), culminated in the collection *Keats and History*, edited by Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Yet at the same time, Andrew Bennett's exceptional study, *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), presented highly individual, attentive textual readings, suggesting the possibility of rewarding digressions from narrowly historicist accounts of Keats's work. Keats scholarship has, in some ways, been marked by such strikingly singular interventions, his poetry providing the test case for new critical and theoretical directions but also demurring from dominant trends. Recent work undertaken by John Whale, *Keats: Critical Issues* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), and Richard Marggraf Turley, *Keats's Boyish Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2004), has attempted to pose differently the question of Keats's relation to gender and sexuality: Whale has strikingly reframed the traditional 'problem' of the poet's excessive 'feminisation', and Marggraf Turley has proposed Keats's 'immaturity' as a way of understanding of his verse. In some regards, the philosophical approach to Keats is not a new venture. Certainly John Jones's early and virtuosic *John Keats's Dream of Truth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969) took seriously the terms of Keats's highly idiosyncratic, imaginative conceptualisations, considering terms like the 'vale of soul-making' as part of a philosophical idiom from which a fuller aesthetic treatise might be extracted; Jones duly positioned Keats in relation to Goethe, Descartes, Hobbes and especially Matthew Arnold. Jones acknowledged the delightful idiosyncrasy of such readings, confessing to reading 'as if I thought his [Keats's] words, even in casual prose, might sometimes be enchanted. And

in fact that is what I do think'.<sup>3</sup> Essays like those in Geoffrey Hartman's *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) and Paul de Man's earlier 'Keats and Hölderlin' in *Comparative Literature* indicated the ways in which Keats's writing might be understood to engage in a philosophical aesthetics extending beyond his own oeuvre, leveraging open the terms of narrowly 'literary' criticism, but such readings have been occasional and attentive to only a small canon of texts.<sup>4</sup>

In the way of some of the earlier scholarship, this study seeks to suggest the political commitment of Keats's work, although it does so not through the restitution of historical or social context but in the development of ideas drawn from close reading and supported by philosophical and theoretical frameworks of analysis. This approach to Keats studies has its own brief, critical genealogy and is signalled by the distinctly philosophical accounts of Keats that have been visible in the form of some notable essays, most particularly Paul Hamilton's 1989 'Keats and Critique', and his later 'A Shadow of a Magnitude', written for the 1992 collection *Beyond Romanticism*.<sup>5</sup> More recent theoretical and philosophical readings of Keats include Robert Kaufman's 'Negatively Capable Dialectics: Keats, Vendler, Adorno, and the Theory of the Avant-Garde', written for *Critical Inquiry* in 2001, and Tim Clark's thoughtful 'By Heart: A Reading of Derrida's *Che cos'è la poesia?* through Keats and Celan', published in the *Oxford Literary Review* in 2006. Along with Hamilton's work, these essays have offered brief glimpses of new vistas, opened up by the conjunction of poetic and philosophic attention, and they have suggested the evocative ways in which Keats might continue to be read.<sup>6</sup>

The philosophical and theoretical approach employed here extends that movement and presents a departure from the tradition of earlier Keats criticism, ordinarily characterised by the careful historicisation of a limited canon, often chronologically organised to trace a trajectory from juvenilia to mature work. Although such studies have presented an important narrative, illustrating particular moods in Keats criticism and wider literary trends, illuminating significant details of composition, providing context and even rehabilitating Keats's political identity, they have also, at times, significantly diminished his range to a limited, popular canon, frequently overlooking the texture, colour and contour of his verse. The readings presented here attempt to recuperate Keats's extensive range, examining some unfamiliar poems at the expense of more canonical work in order to delineate a different Keats, whose work is reflective, difficult and frequently expresses a profound uncertainty. Notably absent from this study are readings of Keats's odes and the longer narrative poems (namely, 'The Eve of St. Agnes', 'Isabella' and 'Lamia'). This is partially a decision of economy but it is also an exigency of argument, because the poems selected here are in the service of the development of a particular set of ideas. Excellent readings of the odes can be found in Vendler's canonical critical book and Bennett's chapter on 'The Spring Odes' in his *Keats, Narrative, Audience*.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Garrett Stewart offers a fine reading of the 'Ode on Melancholy'

in his *Reading Voices* (1990) and Hartman's essay on 'To Autumn' in *The Fate of Reading* (1975) remains a startling, astute account of the poem, as does his most recent essay on the 'Ode to Psyche' published in 2011.<sup>8</sup> The omission of these poems does not alter the broader propositions of this study, and the readings of certain other poems permitted by those omissions allows for a proper attention to the parts of Keats's canon that sometimes otherwise suffer comparative neglect. The object of the readings of the poems offered here is to broaden Keats's familiar canon and to attempt to open new pathways into his work. The chapters are, accordingly, organised thematically rather than chronologically in order to further those ideas, and the readings presented are intended to yield a new understanding of Keats's poems rather than trace the trajectory of his poetic development. They engage with a thoughtful as well as sensuous Keats, at times acceding to the difficulty of his work and acknowledging those moments of resistance on their own terms.

Secondly, this study explores the possibility of a method of critical reading in the present, where old poems are allowed to resonate in a contemporary moment and, with the support of a robust philosophical and theoretical framework, serve to illuminate broader terms and concepts that might extend beyond Keats's historical moment. In essence, this constitutes an acknowledgement that this study is not about Keats *per se* but an exploration of the ways in which his work might enable his readers to think through him. Yet Keats is not incidental to the account of subjectivity given here; the particularity of his preoccupations serves to focus each of the chapters in highly specific ways. His highly personal evocation of a life that is 'proved upon our pulses', registered phenomenally and affectively as singular and mortal, prompts the reflections that ensue.<sup>9</sup> Implicitly, the book acquiesces to Keats and requires that the reader do so too, submitting to the direction of Keats's attention and so attending to that to which he attends. The essays presented here read Keats insofar as they cede to his interests, but they also think *through* his poems and out of the order of their historical designation. This practice of reading is predicated on an implicit understanding that poems are not hermetically sealed and that the urgencies and exigencies of the moments of our reading might colour and shade the texts that solicit our attention. The essays commit to the proposition that in reading Keats provocatively, we might allow Keats to read our preoccupations too. In part, this book responds to what Derrida identifies as the condition of the archive, which serving to preserve 'a movement of the promise and of the future no less than of recording the past [ . . . ] must inevitably carry in itself, as does every concept, an unknowable weight'.<sup>10</sup> What is archived is difficult to assess; at the moment of its archiving it bears 'an unknowable weight', but it also lies in wait, reserved to be called upon in a moment to come that might give to it its proper measure. The study proposes that Keats's work increasingly weighs upon us, is realised by, and illuminates in turn, the conditions of this particular contemporary moment.

Lastly, the book draws from the method of close reading a sense of the peculiar phenomenality of Keats's poetry, his evocation of touching hands, wandering feet, beating hearts, breathing bodies and an elemental world of air, water and stone. Phenomenality refers here to the 'descriptive elaboration of the field of consciousness', which includes the perceptual, affective, sensible and physiological aspects of life.<sup>11</sup> If this definition is broad, it is so as a defeated acknowledgement of the difficulty of such a definition. Keats's account of this perceptual, affective, sensible and physiological life and the world in which it takes place calls upon our own sense of phenomenal existence. The method of this study determinedly serves the subject with which it engages because the practice of close reading attends to the phenomenality of poetic form that both arises from and reproduces sense experience, evoked in writing and registered in reading. The method of close reading concedes the 'necessity of conceiving interpretation as an imaginative correlation of affects' and recognises the phenomenality of poetic form as 'the morphology of real human feeling'.<sup>12</sup> Reading Keats in this way requires concern for the manner in which poems work upon the senses, the way metricality manipulates one's breath and the shape that words take in a mouth; it registers, too, other less palpable but nonetheless felt effects, like the figurative weight that images sometimes place upon us, or the fluency with which some syntactical constructions move through our understanding.<sup>13</sup> This kind of close reading identifies form as the expression of Keats's particular feeling for a life that is vital, fluent and embodied, but which he recognises as reflective, serious and difficult too.<sup>14</sup>

The increasingly substantial form of a subject, which is figured firstly in Keats's work as spectre and lastly as statue, and a world whose stuff shifts from light to stone, parallels the development of this study, which seeks to locate in Keats's typically ethereal poetry an increasingly sure and realised idea of human life. Keats *feels* that life, phenomenally and affectively, and he expresses it in his poetry, where the feeling *of* things cultivates a feeling *for* life, in the sense of an aptitude, sensitivity or susceptibility to all that it entails.<sup>15</sup> The term 'feeling' operates broadly in this project, moving between the distinctions of sensation, emotion and apprehension. In all three cases, feeling designates something that is non-conceptual, or not 'known' in the properly Kantian sense, but is 'felt' as surely as it were. The feeling of things—registered sensibly, affectively and apprehensively—is variously expressed in Keats's poetry, and feeling then fastens onto thought. The chapters of this book attempt to examine Keats's expression of this thoughtfully felt life, where feeling pertains to a cognitive act arising out of the engagement of a sensible and sensitive subject with the object of its attention, sometimes even with itself.<sup>16</sup> Reading Keats closely, the study explores how affect finds expression (and sometimes deep immersion) in poetic form, but also attends to Keats's own explorations of the ideas of love and grief, and the more particular claims that he understands to be made by and between human beings. Affectivity

functions in this project as a term that connotes both physiological sensations and psychological states, and it heads a nexus of associations which might include 'emotions, feelings, passions, moods, anxiety, discharge of psychic energy, motor innervation, pleasure, pain, joy, and sorrow, rapture, depression'.<sup>17</sup> The definition is drawn from Isobel Armstrong's study *The Radical Aesthetic*, which focuses on 'the reproduction of the conditions of affective life within the text itself' in order to develop 'a dynamic understanding of the text as generating new affect patterns and thought structures'.<sup>18</sup> These conditions and symptoms fall across the categories of consciousness and the register of the body, encompassing states both physiological and psychological, conscious and unconscious. Most particularly, the term affectivity designates the facility or capacity to be affected, and it entails a certain vulnerability or openness that Keats both betrays and demands of his readers. Affectivity, then, is a commitment that is solicited as well as revealed by Keats. For Keats, the experiences of love and grief form the most profound affective attachments and call upon a commitment to the other, the implications of which this study explores both in the course of the poems and in a context that extends beyond them too.

Each of the chapters of this study intimate, to varying degrees, the possibility of a context beyond the textual limits of the poems themselves. This extensive gesture depends on a particular understanding of phenomenality that develops the fullness and firmness of the life and world that Keats evokes, in place of the reductive esseity to which the philosophy of phenomenology sometimes submits. The term 'phenomenality' is favoured over 'phenomenology' insofar as it might refer to the condition or aptitude for the phenomenally felt life that Keats illustrates. The term is also intended to echo Paul de Man's essay on 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant', in which de Man identifies Kant's formulation of the aesthetic as a 'phenomenalized, empirically manifest principle of cognition'.<sup>19</sup> More particularly, it echoes T.J. Clark's method of close seeing and his philosophical approach to Cézanne, after de Man, in his essay 'Phenomenality and Materiality in Cézanne', where Clark's account of seeing the paintings itself evokes the phenomenality to which he understands them to refer.<sup>20</sup> For Heidegger, the phenomenal '*is established as what shows itself in itself*, what is manifest', and the phenomenality of things reveals both how the world is and *that it is*, where the verb 'to be' expresses how we comprehend the interaction of existent things.<sup>21</sup> Heidegger's especial insight is the insecurity of that being; both Heidegger and the more recent French theory developed from Heideggerian philosophy are a visible influence in all the essays here, and are important to the ideas discussed insofar as they present a philosophy sensitive to an embodied human existence and its limits. This is not to suggest that Heideggerian theory supplies all the answers for readers of Keats; rather, it is to recognise the importance of thinkers like Derrida in the development of the idea of a felt and mortal life that Keats recognised as so profoundly important.



When Keats tempestuously demands ‘a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts’, the sensational life he imagines is one in which sensation is not mindless or purely epicurean but which constitutes, for him, a different, non-‘consequitive’ kind of thinking.<sup>22</sup> The poems reveal Keats’s sensitivity to a life that is thoughtful, self-sensing and engaged, and it emerges in poetic form both expressly and implicitly. Here the work of Derrida, Deleuze and Nancy help to theorise and advance ideas drawn from Keats’s poetry; their formulations of auto-affectivity, immanent life and relation to the other support the ideas pressed by this book. These theoretical supplements enhance the readings of Keats put forward, but at times, Keats’s poems, in turn, serve to give fuller expression to those ideas themselves. What is at stake in this study is not solely a particular account of Keats, nor simply an experiment in the literary deployment of theory, but the ideas that are yielded by their conjugation.

The vitality of the life that Keats imagines in his verse is adumbrated by the constant sense of an ineluctable mortality. The high and wide world in which life takes place is sometimes fluent and yielding to his thoughtful inquiry and at other times obdurately adamant. Keats’s thoughtful feeling for life is then dually expressive and explorative. The presentation of the book accordingly reflects this, seeking both to express the evocative texture of Keats’s poetics as well as exploring through critical argument and analysis moments of impasse or difficulty. Such writing depends upon a patient reader. The deliberative and cumulative prose style deployed here is intended to serve in assembling the ideas that emerge through Keats’s work. It also reflects the strong theoretical influences running through this study and endorses a mode of writing which develops ideas through association, accumulation and the iteration of figures and formulas, words pushed forward like tokens, modifying each time with an accruing complexity.

Chapter 1 begins with a reading of Keats’s fragment ‘This Living Hand’ and his two sonnets on the Elgin Marbles, developing a proposition around the trope of touch that emerges in all three poems. The figurative hand supplies for Keats overlapping connections between *sensing* and *making sense*, and is attributed both the autotelic capacity to feel itself feeling and the capacity for risk, reaching for what it does not know in an attempt to know it better. The chapter explores the connections between feeling and knowing, and maps the riskful, seeking grasp of Kantian philosophy against a Derridean concept of friendship whose figurative hand must be extended before it is reciprocated. Chapter 2 discusses Keats’s self-sensing subject through the close reading of some of his most evocative verse. Where in the sonnet ‘On the Sea’ Keats evokes both the sound of the sea and prompts his readers to attend to their own breathing, the metricality of the sonnet ‘Why Did I Laugh Tonight?’ directs readers to attend to the measure of their beating hearts. This affirmative phenomenality is then challenged by Keats’s equally powerful sense of mortality. Reading the sonnets against the backdrop of a mournful Heideggerian philosophy, the chapter explores the poetic evocation of presence as a mode of careful and

caring self-attentiveness that is exposed most powerfully in the care of the irreplaceable, dying other. With particular attention to the sonnet 'When I have fears that I may cease to be', the chapter begins to delineate a poetics of mourning that shades the self-sensing, vital life that Keats imagines.

Chapter 3 reads four particular poems ('O thou whose face hath felt the winter's wind', 'Blue!', 'After dark vapours' and 'To Ailsa Rock'), distinguishing them as a sub-category of Keats's canon specifically concerned with the relation of subject and world. The chapter proposes that these poems develop an idea of poetic ecology where the subject is varyingly dissolved in, expressed through or resisted by the landscape in which it dwells. These poems on colour, climate, weather and season reveal a world that is affectively freighted and an environment whose ostensible exteriority conceals a secret interiority. The chapter invokes Deleuze's formulation of a singular life (*une vie*) in order to better conceptualise what Keats's poems reveal to be a subject and world in complex engagement. Chapter 4 forges a connection between the wandering terrain and wondering desire of Keats's epic romance *Endymion*. Examining the poem's most problematic qualities (its digressive and dilatory narrative), the chapter identifies a metrical structure of excess that reflects the intemperate nature of the poem's most pressing preoccupations, namely, love and freedom. The chapter proposes that the nature of freedom perpetually outstrips any attempt to conceptualise it and identifies an idea of love, which similarly compels one to challenge and exceed the limit of one's self-conception. In this way, both love and freedom are designated as constitutively excessive. *Endymion*'s wandering/wondering journey is then perceived to reflect the radical excess of love and freedom, and the poem's extensive world is mapped intensively in the course of his global journey.

The closing chapter focuses on the bleak wasteland of the *Hyperion* poems, where Keats's grandly sculptural gods struggle to express feeling and find meaning in the aftermath of a violent ending. In the post-apocalyptic interval between one fallen and another ascending mode of government, Keats presents a community in disrepair that possesses neither collective belief nor a recuperative vision of the future. The chapter explores the peculiar temporality of these unfinished poems and proposes that the heavy stone gods of *Hyperion*'s ruined landscape figure the phenomenality of being and its mortality which, felt like a grave weight, also serves to secure that being. The last chapter initiates a reading of Keats that extends beyond the parameters of the poems and begins to explore how the phenomenality and affectivity that he imagines in his verse might bear upon an idea of collective political life. This idea is furnished by Keats's particular feeling for a life that is insistently singular, difficult and mortal, but which is nonetheless committed to the care of others in other places. Keats's poems themselves call for careful attention. This study attempts to read Keats with care, attending to his poems and developing the implications of the thoughtfully felt life he evokes.



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