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Breathing Eyes:
Keats and the Dynamics of Reading

by

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It is the very one who wants to write down his dream who is obliged to be extremely wide awake.

-Paul Valéry

Abstract

Starting with Jerome McGann's landmark 1979 essay "Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism," the recent sixteen-plus years of Keats criticism brims to overflowing with the dominance of New Historicism and its archaeological recovery of the political, historical Keats against the previous preeminence of a formalist, aesthetic Keats. The grip of New Historicism now holds tightly enough, perhaps, to the point where it suffers from a lack of attention to formalist, aesthetic, stylistic differentials and peculiarities. A critical position, then, that addresses this lack of attention looks to be an assessment of the relationships between New Historicism and formalism: how, in fact, New Historicism owes a debt to the formalist ways of reading it works to overcome. Such ways of reading find one of their most powerful statements in Keats himself--and, in a startlingly close twentieth-century analogue, the reader-response theory of Wolfgang Iser. The readings here of Keats's poetry consider how it reveals that Keats, like Iser, holds the germ of New Historicism's methodology, as it falls under the general taxonomy of Iser's theory but for how it actually dramatizes and predicts that theory. Reading, for Keats, ultimately places one in a dynamic relationship with history--a relationship always of potential, perpetually "widening speculation" to "ease the Burden of the Mystery" that is history.

Résumé

Commençant avec l'article-clef de Jerome McGann, publié en 1979, "Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism," la critique Keats des derniers seize ans a été dominé par le "nouveau historicisme," c'est à dire, la récupération d'un Keats politique et historique remplaçant le Keats formaliste et esthétique. Le nouveau historicisme tient maintenant si fort que ses partisans ont tendance à ignorer les particularités formalistes, esthétiques et sylistiques. Alors, une position critique qui aborde le manque d'attention à ces particularités devient aussi une évaluation des liens étroits entre le nouveau historicisme et le formalisme, examinant en effet de quelle manière celui là est redevalbe aux façons formalistes de lire un texte qu'il cherche à remplacer. Ces façons formalistes sont solidement soutenues par Keats lui-même, et, au vingtième siècle, plus vivement par la théorie "reader response" de Wolfgang Iser. Mes interprétations de la poésie de Keats laissent voir comment Keats, comme Iser, tient au germe formaliste du nouveau historicisme, en ce qui concerne la taxonomie générale d'Iser, et comment ce germe dramatise et prévoit cette théorie. Le lecteur, selon Keats, établit un rapport dynamique avec l'histoire--un rapport qui entraîne toujours une "spéculation qui augmente" continuellement afin "d'atténuer le fardeau du mystère" qui est l'histoire.

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Contents

CHAPTER ONE
Other People's Interests: Setting the Theoretical Stage

By Way of Introduction . . .

"The cyclical history of modern criticism," writes Matthew Scott, "meant that sooner or later we had to get round to historicizing Keats." His comment appears in a review of a 1995 collection of essays edited by Nicholas Roe, titled *Keats and History*, the latest contribution to what might be called a history of the historicizing of Keats. Starting with Jerome McGann's landmark 1979 essay, "Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism," the recent sixteen-plus years of Keats criticism brims to overflowing with the dominance of New Historicism and its archaeological recovery of the political, historical Keats against the previous (supposed) preeminence of a formalist, aesthetic portrait. McGann's 1983 *The Romantic Ideology*, while not affording a great deal of attention to Keats specifically, next presented his general manifesto of historicist scholarship, growing out of his essay on Keats and other earlier works. Then, in 1986, appeared the "Keats and Politics" forum edited by Susan J. Wolfson for *Studies in Romanticism*; a forum inspired, apparently, by a conference paper from Morris Dickstein three years earlier that discussed the relation between the aesthetic and political Keats, when the thought of Keats as related to politics was "something of a metaphysical conceit" (Wolfson, Introduction 171). The essays included in the forum all cite or respond to McGann's 1979 essay, establishing a key instance of the efficacy of McGann's call to historicize Keats as well as Romantic criticism. Marjorie Levinson's 1988 book *Keats's Life of Allegory* offers the next major event in the history of historicizing Keats, and perhaps the most influential work alongside McGann's essay. In 1995, the year of Keats's bicentennial no less, the several special issues in Romantics journals included

mostly historical and political studies of Keats and there was of course Roe's volume.[1] All this is not to say, however, that New Historicism comprises the only critiques of Keats over the last sixteen or so years. It is to suggest, though, that we have reached a point where a historically and politically aware Keats requires no dispute, nor, really, any further proof. The intense archeological recovery of the historical/political Keats (with all the connotations of digging up, unearthing, dusting off, cataloguing, and presenting the evidence of a dinosaur or lost city), it must be noted, has effectively taken off the veil from the poet once considered the least historical of all the Romantic poets.[2]

In a sense, the study of Keats has always included a sort of historical look at the poet, from the point of view of his own artistic development. With the evidence of the letters to support the poems, criticism of Keats (at least in the twentieth century) often follows a course of tracing his poetic and intellectual development from his first productions (i.e. "An Imitation of Spenser") through to his final works (i.e., *The Fall of Hyperion*). Owing to an intensely compact poetical "career" of about four years (from 1816 to 1820), the attraction to see Keats through developmental lenses is understandable. Claude L. Finney's 1936 two volume *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry* offers perhaps the best early example of this trend in Keats scholarship, where Finney near-exhaustively covers the whole of Keats's writing life. Another early study of Keats, John Middleton Murry's 1925 *Keats and Shakespeare*, shapes Keats's brief writing "career" around the persistent presence of Shakespeare from *Sleep and Poetry* to *The Fall of Hyperion*. More recent works on Keats also follow the pattern of assessing Keats by the chronological order of his poems; the two most influential, Walter Jackson Bate's 1963 biography *John Keats*, and Stuart Sperry's 1973 *Keats the Poet*, furthermore establish the intimate connections between

Keats's life (letters) and his work (poetry).[3] Even Susan Wolfson's 1986 *The Questioning Presence*, coming in the thick of historicist readings of Keats, moves through Keats's poetry from the early poems to what appears as the popular poem for finishing a study of Keats, "To Autumn." Such studies of Keats reinforce the feeling that the brevity and intensity of his writing "career" provides a fruitful ground from which to assess his intellectual development or his maturation or his increasing skill as a poet. Fascinated by Keats's rapid "progress" poetically and intellectually, those like Bate and Sperry and Murry in some ways entrenched a historical view of Keats--treating him chronologically; assessing, for example, *Sleep and Poetry* before "Ode to a Nightingale."

For New Historicism, however, the issue rests not so much with a developmentall view of Keats as with assuming that Keats was not historically or politically involved and so did not write his poetry in relation to such factors (in contrast to the often more overt political motives of, say, Shelley). This assumption achieves, in our century, a somewhat paradigmatic expression in T.S. Eliot: "Keats's sayings about poetry," felt Eliot, "have no apparent bearing upon his own times, as he himself does not appear to have taken any absorbing interest in public affairs-- . . . he was merely going about his business" (93-4). A feeling like Eliot's leads to what New Historicists understand as the dominance of formalism and manifest theme--what McGann calls "formal or stylistic analysis" ("Keats and the Historical Method" 988[4])--in studies of Keats (indeed, of Romanticism in general), which must be countered, even supplanted. By silencing, muffling, eliding, negating the "field of social facts and motivations" (Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory* 33[5]) in and around and behind the poetry, scholars of Keats--as well as Keats himself--are accused of a lack of precision and comprehensiveness, of ignoring the socio-historical factors that actually

produce poetry. While Sperry and Bate read Keats's poetry in conjunction with his letters, while Finney charts a chronological and evolutionary course through Keats's writing career, their sorts of formalist and thematic analyses are thought ultimately to suffer from what McGann calls "a Romantic Ideology . . . an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations" (*The Romantic Ideology* 1 [6]),because they fail to situate the poetry historically and socially, i.e. ideologically. And so, the history of historicizing Keats is both the recovery and assertion of his relationship to the political and social (the ideological), as well as an increasing requirement that the critic highlight his or her particular political and social context in relation to the past s/he analyzes. This means not being mystified by Keats's historical elisions or by the silence of history in formalist critiques of Keats. It is, ultimately, the attempt at a historical distance and objectivity not even Keats (or any poet under the piercing gaze of New Historicism) could manage.[7]

New Historicism thus at first hit the scene as a subversive element, to upset the dominant formalist, thematic, stylistic readings of Romantic poets, and Keats owns a key position (next to Wordsworth, it seems) as a recurring fertile site of analysis because of his supposed lack of interest in "public affairs." Levinson begins her 1986 book *Wordsworth's great period poems* with a bold summary of this subversive project:

> A new word is abroad these days in Wordsworth scholarship--"historicist"--and the adjective carries distinctly heterodox overtones. What is thereby refused is an idealizing interpretive model associated with Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, Paul de Man, and even M.H. Abrams. At the same time, historicist critique distinguishes its interests and method from *historical* scholarship, or from the researches and argumentation of David Erdman, Carl Woodring, and E.P.

> Thompson. . . . They use history, or sociopolitical reconstruction, to resist the old control of Yale. (1)

Levinson's sense of "distinctly heterodox overtones" highlights New Historicism's originally unconventional and contrary character. As well, "resist" puts New Historicism in a combative stance, an aggressiveness that directs itself not just at "Yale" but also, ultimately, often at the poet/poetry under consideration. Of course, as shown above, "sociopolitical reconstruction" no longer holds a subversive, heterodox position in Romantic criticism--rather, it now appears almost as the orthodoxy, especially for Keats studies.[8] McGann's desire that the "historical method" achieve a "hegemony . . . [in] literary studies in general," that it become the "governing context of all literary investigations" ("KHM" 1025), appears to have successfully supplanted the formalist, aesthetic Keats with a socio-historical Keats.

New Historicism has not been without its several detractors and doubters over the recent sixteen-plus years, but--and this seems especially so with Keats--no new "ism" has come along to forcefully challenge its dominance.[9] A significant part of McGann's assessment of the "Romantic Ideology" aims itself at the institution of literary studies, at the "failures of scholarship, in literary matters, [that] frequently result from a lack of attention to historical differentials" (*RI* 28). Furthermore, in McGann's eyes, "the critical literature of Romanticism," at his time, "[had] begun to lose its grip on the historical and structural peculiarities of Romantic works" (*RI* 20). That "grip" now holds tightly enough, perhaps, to the point where New Historicism suffers from its own "lack of attention"--to formalist, aesthetic, stylistic "differentials" and "peculiarities."

The subversive position, then, that could somewhat "cure" this "lack of attention" looks to be an assessment of the *relationships* between New Historicism and formalism--how, in fact, New

Historicism owes a debt to the formalist ways of reading it works to overcome. Susan Wolfson offers a sense of this possibly subversive position, suggesting that "to refresh the value of close reading, we need to see . . . how, in fact, attention to aesthetic formation in its particularities, densities, and complexities can be generated out of the very criticism that has emerged in antithesis to it" ("'Romantic Ideology'" 190). Seeds of this "attention" appear, actually, in the 1986 "Keats and Politics" forum mentioned above. Morris Dickstein's original 1983 conference paper is provided, where he concludes that Keats "shared [with Shelley] the goal of ultimate social renovation by way of . . . aesthetic creation that--far from turning in upon itself--aims at a renewal of both self and society" ("Keats and Politics" 181). As well, William Keach's essay "Cockney Couplets: Keats and the Politics of Style" draws attention to how the couplet form Keats chose in some of his early poetry constituted a political (or, ideological) action. Keats's early reviewers, Keach informs, were well aware of the politics of his *form* and attacked him on those grounds, particularly owing to his association with Leigh Hunt (183, 189-90).[10] Thus, Levinson's critical project in *Keats's Life of Allegory* harbours a paradox, an incongruity: to "read the meaning of a life in the style of a man's writing, and then to read that writing, that style, and that life back into their original social context" (6), would seem to require an acknowledgment of form in its categories of "style" and "writing"; yet, ultimately, she works to deny form by remaining "always in the field of social facts and motivations," where *her* "John Keats is a dynamic reflection of social configurations" (33). I would, however, be getting ahead of myself here with an extended critique of New Historicism, which is to come below. The contrast between Wolfson's position and Levinson's proves significant enough at this point, though, to suggest something of the subversive potential of pulling New Historicist, ideological critique back

to at least an awareness of formalist, aesthetic ways of reading. Such ways of reading actually find one of their most powerful statements in Keats himself--and, in a startlingly close twentieth century analogue, the reader-response theory of Wolfgang Iser.

New Historicism and Reader-Response

Paul de Man, in the Introduction to his 1969 selection of Keats's poetry, draws attention to an important fact when considering the flux of "literary and critical movements" in relation to Romanticism. Movements that begin with "the avowed aim of moving beyond romantic attitudes and ideas" ultimately make us aware, he relates, "of certain aspects of romanticism that had remained hidden from our perception." "What sets out as a claim to overcome romanticism," de Man reveals, "often turns out to be merely an expansion of our understanding of the movement" (179-80). In this sense, "certain aspects of romanticism" thus predict and prefigure New Historicism, making it perhaps not so "new." The same holds true for Iser's reader-response theory, especially in regard to Keats's formulations of the dynamics and efficacy of reading.[11] Coordinating the two "movements," actually seeing formal, imaginatively aware reading as necessary to socio-historical critique, will finally be "an expansion" of what Keats already contains and offers--a position like that of Wolfson's described above, where "close reading" significantly informs and even produces ideological critique.

Of the two "movements" involved here--New Historicism and formal "close reading"--the latter, as suggested so far, seems almost displaced in recent Keats studies. The curiosity of this becomes apparent in relation to the abundance in Keats, especially his letters, of speculations and surmises about reading--about the value of aesthetic experience, about reading as experience in its

own right. For example, at the time of starting *Endymion* (early May, 1817), Keats writes to his friend Benjamin Robert Haydon, "I never quite despair and I read Shakespeare--indeed I think I shall never read any other Book much . . . I am very near Agreeing with Hazlitt that Shakespeare is enough for us" (1.143).[12] Experiencing some doubt and despair concerning the project of *Endymion*, Keats turns to Shakespeare, to reading Shakespeare, for comfort and positive reassurance. A year later, Keats offers John Hamilton Reynolds something like a maturer, more realized awareness of this comfort: "An extensive knowledge," he suggests, "is needful to thinking people--it takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery: a thing I begin to understand a little . . ." (2.277). Reading, here, is a necessary activity for "thinking people" to, again, receive comfort from "the heat and fever," but also to extend their knowledge and insight toward alleviating "the Burden of the Mystery" that is life. Imaginative, aesthetic experience harbours a particular efficacy and necessity for Keats, then, which New Historicism often denies or ignores--an efficacy prevalent enough to prompt de Man to propose that with Keats "we are . . . reading the work of a man whose experience is mainly literary" (181).

As intimated above, Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory provides an analogous twentieth-century version of Keats's formal, imaginatively aware reading. More accurately, in view of de Man, Iser expands and uncovers, systematizes, what already inheres in Keats--though, oddly enough, Iser himself never refers to Keats. The work of Iser's most significantly tied to Keats, for my purposes, is his somewhat famous 1974 essay "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." To offer an initial link to Keats: Iser writes that reading affords the "possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to

elude our consciousness" ("The Reading Process" 68[13]),and discovering the "previously" unknown, it might be said, builds up the "extensive knowledge" valuable to Keats precisely because it expands our "speculation" toward not just a worldly, historical knowledge, but a greater awareness of the self. McGann seems to believe something similar, when he states (in words resonating with important Keatsian terms) that the experiences of "intense feeling" or "human sympathy" in literature "occur because all readers of poems register in their feelings the social and historical gulfs which, even while they separate and define exact differences, ultimately join together by calling out human sympathy" ("KHM" 1026-27). These "gulfs" are Keats's "Burden of the Mystery" or Iser's "previously" unknown aspects of the self; this joining "together" in "sympathy" could well be Keats's comfort of "widening speculation" or Iser's discovery and formulation of the self; and so, McGann's shift of the focus to "social and historical" concerns apparently emerges out of an original aesthetic experience.

All of this initially hints at the links by which ideological critique (i.e., New Historicism) actually owes a debt to the formalism it struggles against. Iser, curiously, receives little attention in Keats studies in this regard, despite the importance his work would seem to hold as a way to coordinate Keats's notions of reading and New Historicism's apparent silence on those notions. Donald C. Goellnicht, quietly it seems, published in 1989 "'Delicious Diligent Indolence': Keats and Reading," an essay connecting Keats and Iser; he also appears in *Approaches to Teaching Keats's Poetry*, writing of the pedagogical value of reading Keats along with Iser and other reader-response theorists; and Susan Wolfson, in *The Questioning Presence*, mentions Iser twice in her readings of Keats's poetry.[14] While these instances provide a (limited) history of "Keats and Iser," they crouch obscured deep within the shadows of New Historicism. Yet, Iser is

valuable precisely for working out how "close reading" (i.e., aesthetic experience)--in Keats and New Historicism--informs and even gives rise to ideological critique. Assessing, thereby, the different features of New Historicism in light of "Keats and Iser" reveals ultimately that its socio-historical methodology is not truly a dramatic alteration of criticism but rather that it shifts the *object* of criticism to socio-historical, ideological themes: it is, in the end, enabled by what it desires to overcome.

For the rest of this chapter, however, Keats will be asked to stand just off to the side while New Historicism and "Iser" are assessed to show how the former is indebted to the latter. Keats will remain always the wider margin of consideration, to be returned to in the readings of his poetry in following chapters, but now the setting of the theoretical stage is important for establishing that return as one which will delineate how the protocols of reading he works through in his poems and letters--systematized and given a modern taxonomy by Iser--are necessary to ideological critique. In the assessment of New Historicism and Iser's reader-response theory, the latter's taxonomy actually subsumes and even describes the former's, the only difference their objects of inquiry: historical and political registers for one; the reader, obviously, for the other. Ultimately, what allows Iser's reader-response theory to subsume New Historicism is that New Historicism enacts another form of response to Keats among others; it is, as Iser might say, one "configurative meaning" or attempt at "a consistent pattern" as opposed to another ("RP" 59, 62).

In the conclusion to *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton proposes two ways by which a literary theory distinguishes itself: one is its method; the other, its object of investigation (197). New Historicism, certainly as practised by McGann and Levinson, takes the first route, especially in the early knowledge of its "heterodox overtones." McGann's explicit

wish for the "hegemony" of his "historical method" expresses forcefully the importance of the methodological issue for him:

> to establish the pertinence of historical method to the field of literary studies is tantamount to establishing the hegemony of historical method to literary studies in general. This is not to say that more specialized investigations should be discouraged . . . . But it is to say that the governing context of all literary investigations must ultimately be an historical one. ("KHM" 1025)

"Poetic analysis," he also states, "requires an historical method if it is to achieve either precision or comprehensiveness" ("KHM" 1000); and, in *The Romantic Ideology*, he asserts that "all . . . specialized studies must find their *raison d'etre* in the socio-historical ground" (3). Also taking up the methodological issue, Levinson wants to avoid the "abstraction and idealization, i.e. canonization, of works to the point where we only 'admire' them," with a method that pits "image against idea, form against content, process against product" to upturn the "tired organic apparition" of formalist texts and readings (*WGPP* 11, 10). "Formalism," with Levinson, "is opposed throughout by the highly *material* investigation of . . . forms" (*KLA* 34; my emphasis).[15] Behind and inspiring these methodological proclamations, as discussed above, lies the perceived dominance of formalist, aesthetic methods of reading that specifically lack attention to "the socio-historical ground"; that idealize and canonize; that privilege "image" over "idea" and "form" over "content"; and which finally are imprecise and severely limited in scope. The "specialized" becomes other ways of reading--i.e., New Critical, Deconstructionist, Psychoanalytic, Reader-Response--under the general canopy, within the greater environment, of "historical method." Armed by a "new" way of doing criticism, then, McGann and Levinson ready themselves for

combat with not just other Romantics critics, but Romanticism itself.

A ground thesis for this "new" method of criticism sees poetry as a social action pressured into existence by its historical and political context, and located definitively within that context. Poetry at all points defines itself by, and appears to us in, its irreducible pastness. "Specific poetic utterances," states McGann, "are human acts occupying social space; . . . [and] poetry is itself one form of social activity" ("KHM" 991). Such "utterances" transcend their time and place owing specifically to their "activity" only within that past: "all works of art . . . transcend their age and speak to alien cultures because they are so completely true to themselves, because they are time and place specific, because they are--from our point of view--*different*" (McGann, *RI* 2). The critic, then, is a member of an "alien" culture who comes to a poem--a past social action tied to past social and historical contexts--that is an object totally "*different*" from what s/he knows. Totally, because a poem's existence results from the political and ideological "pressures" that "organiz[ed]" it (Levinson, *WGPP* 1)--"pressures" unique to the poem's context, inherent in its structures and very production. "Organize" proves to be a defining word and theme for McGann and Levinson, as it affords the social, political, historical circumstances of a poem primary and originary agency, where it is not the author who writes the poem but his or her historical moment. For example, Levinson's project in Keats's *Life of Allegory* confirms the "original social context" as generative of Keats's "writing, . . . style, . . . [and] life" (6). McGann's desire is to view a poem "in terms other than its own" (*RI* ix, 41), for these "terms" are, in Levinson's words, its "original social context"--the "terms" of political and social (i.e., ideological) factors that "organize" the poem, that order and arrange and structure the poem as a social act.

With such a view of the poem's material reason(s) for existing, of its origins, New

Historicism should harbour a different understanding of the nature of a poem from the formalist one that sees it perhaps solely in what Brook Thomas calls "the seemingly isolated realm of pure creation" (193). This McGann does, by separating the "poem," as what the reader experiences, from the "text," as the poem's material existence. "No poem," he suggests, "can exist outside of a textual state any more than a human being can exist outside of a human biological organism"; and thus, the "'text'" is not the "'poem'" but instead "the linguistic state of the 'poem's' existence" ("KHM" 991-92). Formalism, therefore, problematically focuses upon the "text" instead of the more comprehensive and precise field of socio-historical experiences that produce and structure the "poem." If the "poem" is the social act, *it* is what we read and thus what criticism needs to analyze.[16] Reading in such a manner, for the "terms" of a poem's social existence and expression, reveals what Levinson sees as "the historically actualized human character of works" (*WGPP* 11). Here, New Historicism definitely moves outside of an "isolated realm of pure creation," with the reader's attention *expanded* toward the social and historical (i.e. "human") particularities of the "poem" rather than, as with formalists, restricted to the linguistic characteristics of the "text." Methodologically this seems crucial, for McGann and Levinson appear to suggest that formalism purposefully denies and evades the "human character" of poetry, effectively sapping it of a life New Historicism would restore. Formalism's reduction of "poetic works to a network of themes and ideas," for McGann, causes any "artistic product . . . [the] loss of its soul" (*RI* 11)--a "loss" New Historicism would redress with the "hegemony of historical method."

Under the spotlight of Iser's sense of the relationship between text, poem, and reader, however, this apparently far-reaching methodological change by New Historicism--fixing criticism

always in the "historical" and so the "human"--actually becomes more a shift in the object of reading, in the definition of the space of imaginative activity. It might be felt that situating a "poem" always in its past, always from its difference to now, creates a harsh distance between it and the reader of the present. One of New Historicism's procedural snags, notes Brook Thomas, occurs exactly in the realization of this gap: while New Historicism asks "how reading literature from the past can alter and shape beliefs of those reading it today," quite often the position it assumes is one of "a privileged seat of judgment"--owing to the work's pastness or completion--instead of more productively examining how that "privileged" position might be "put at risk" by the work from the past (161-62). Anne Mellor levels precisely this charge of privilege against McGann, who in *The Romantic Ideology*, she feels, "does not sufficiently acknowledge that his preferred Critical tradition is itself an ideology, a product of a particular academic interest with its own assumptions, values, and limitations" (284). Where Iser proves valuable here resides in New Historicism's gap between the poem's definite pastness and the position of the reader in the present, for his understanding of the relationship between text and poem and reader makes them all vital and active now.

Iser's central tenet, from which the bulk of his theory and taxonomy arises, telescopes in on the "convergence of text and reader" that effectively begins the reading process. He writes that

> the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the esthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by author, and the esthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. From this polarity it follows that . . . the work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the

> realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader--though this in turn is acted upon by the different patterns of the text. The convergence of text and reader can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader. . . . As the reader uses the various perspectives offered him by the text in order to relate the patterns and the "schematised views" to one another, he sets the work in motion, and this very process results ultimately in the awakening of responses within himself. Thus, reading causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character. ("RP" 50-51)

I quote Iser at length partly because this passage proves crucial for later parts of this chapter, but also because at this point Iser works with similar terms to McGann's, and helps readjust or expand them. As McGann understood the "poem" to not be the "text," to be "more than" the text's material, linguistic existence, so Iser sees a similar important difference between "work" and "text." Iser's "work," then, coordinates to McGann's "poem," and their notions of the "text" are relatively alike in that they want to direct attention away from the text's "reality"--yet Iser's injection of the "reader" and sense of "convergence" supplies the "now" missing from McGann and Levinson. Missing, because the "poem" as a social act or a social product definitively tied to its past, while greater than its material "text," could for McGann and Levinson have "life" only in that comprehensive past. Iser's "text" and "reader" meet, come together, *now* to realize (i.e., give "life" and "soul" to) the "work" that is more than either of them. From here, the "dynamic character" of the "work"--its motion and activity and potency--"unfold[s]" exactly in that

"halfway" and "virtual" position *between* "text" and "reader"; a position, finally, of potentiality rather than completedness. Implicit in Mellor's criticism of McGann, it might be suggested through Iserian lenses, is that he fails to "acknowledge" his own "individual disposition's" role in the ("esthetic") "realization" of a "poem," thereby masking its potentiality now to instead fix its pastness.

This lack of acknowledgement, ultimately, serves a critical interest in that the *object* of reading for McGann, and Levinson, turns out to be social and historical and ideological realizations rather than those confined to the supposed formalist "prison house of language" (McGann, "KHM" 989). Keats is their poem put in motion by the convergence of the text of his "social facts and motivations" (Levinson, *KLA* 33) and their "disposition[s]" as socio-historically inclined readers. Connecting McGann and Levinson to Iser's terms, however, is not meant to make them into Iserian reader-response critics but instead subsumes their own terms, hopefully, into a more expansive situation where ideological critique emerges from the traditional, formalist coming together of text and reader. "Although (as Romanticism itself knew) resistance to uncriticized prescriptions is invigorating," writes Susan Wolfson, "no project of critical inquiry . . . gains much by blunting its instruments of reading" ("'Romantic Ideology'" 190). Thus, a claim like Levinson's that Keats's poetry is "ambitiously masturbatory" owing to his adolescent, sexual "self-consciousness" that is the "self-consciousness" of "a middle-class in a middling stage" (*KLA* 25, 26)--awfully unkind as it is[17]--seems to dull and desensitize not just Keats himself, but the value of aesthetic experience to such ideological critique. Iser helps recall aesthetic experience to the equation, for his sense of "convergence" betrays McGann and Levinson to be as much a part of their "poem" as its irreducible historical particularity and textuality. Theodor

Adornofeels, in "The Artist as Deputy," that ultimately art was social when it concerned "anyone and everyone," and by this moves beyond itself as art "to fulfill itself in the true life of human beings" (107, 108). At base rests the recognition, by Adorno and Iser, that the aesthetic experience is primary; Adorno then argues for that experience or engagement of the imagination to bear a vital social or political potentiality for the reader now.[18] In this way, the formalist "convergence" of "text" and "reader"--the initial aesthetic experience, or engagement with the aesthetic--actually enables the New Historicist's socio-historical "poem" and the "realization" of its "inherently dynamic" social and political themes: a situation, I will show in the next chapter, dramatized by Keats's poems "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and *Sleep and Poetry*. The "blunting" which McGann and Levinson are vulnerable to is the lack of acknowledgement that their reading which occurs in the present can (as Thomas would want) "put at risk" that present, not just the ideological assumptions of a poem or period of history or critical activity.

Despite this "blunting," the pastness of the "poem" for McGann and Levinson is the space of their imaginative, critical activity--and what triggers that activity is properly the poem's own silences and evasions of its socio-historical grounds for being. If for Iser the "convergence of text and reader" operates as his central tenet, the New Historicism of McGann and Levinson receives the greater part of its inspiration and energy from the silences and evasions of history in the poem and in the history of Romantics criticism. The methodological issue, really, focuses here. And it is a double-edged issue, to McGann especially, in how both Romanticism (poets and poetry) and the critics/scholars of Romanticism implicate themselves in the social and historical and political elisions that are "the Romantic Ideology."

With the poets and poetry of Romanticism, McGann and Levinson point their attacks at

the common conception that the Romantics avoided and escaped the harshness and conditions of their time through poetry, through writing "illusions." Governing their critical thrusts is the proving of this common conception. A "materialist and historical criticism," asserts McGann, owns the proper vantage point from which to know how "the ideology represented through Romantic works is *a fortiori* . . . a body of illusions"; and one of the "illusions" from which Romanticism "'suffers'" is that poet and poetry can "transcend a corrupting appropriation by 'the world' of politics and money" (*RI* 12, 13). Levinson feels that *her* "John Keats," the "dynamic reflection of social configurations," tenders a more precise "finer-tone repetition of the very forces [he] was resisting" (*KLA* 34)--a portrait of nothing less than exactly what Keats keeps out of his poetry, the world itself.[19] Primarily, then, the "historical method" enacts a project of recovery, of returning to memory all the forgotten (purposefully or otherwise) circumstances of a poem's context that make it "*different*" and particular. Such a recovery and remembering is enabled, then, by the historicist critic's "privileged seat" of historical distance and difference, by his/her "lucky remove" that affords a "total understanding." As McGann programmatically puts the "case":

> In the case of Romantic poems, we shall find that the works tend to develop different sorts of artistic means with which to occlude and disguise their own involvement in a certain nexus of historical relations. This act of evasion . . . [is the] reason [why] the critic of Romantic poetry must make a determined effort to elucidate the subject matter of such poems *historically*: to define the specific ways in which certain stylistic forms intersect and join with certain factual and cognitive points of reference. (*RI* 82)

These "artistic means" of occlusion and "disguise" and "evasion" bear the brunt of Levinson's critique of Keats, especially in her characterization of his poetry (the early poetry, at least) as "masturbatory" and adolescent in its concern with its own production (*KLA* 25-26). They are, ultimately, what makes a poem not "impersonal" but rather "tendentious and ideological in quite specific ways" (McGann, "KHM" 1023)--purposeful and biased and thus "human" instead of just language or theme or aesthetic form. Romantic poetry's own silences, occlusions, biases, and illusions trigger a reading process in McGann and Levinson acutely aware of the poet's and poem's historical particularity and difference, and able to delineate that particularity and difference accurately, totally. Essentially, this is to remain free of Romanticism's own evasions of the historical.

What McGann and Levinson deem formalism, then, distinctly lacks this necessary and "lucky remove," leading to the second edge of the methodological issue for their New Historicism: to reveal criticism's reproduction of and investment in Romanticism's illusions and evasions. Perhaps the more difficult and contentious aspect of McGann's critique especially, this charge of "uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations," drives hard to separate "historical method" from "formal or stylistic analysis" with all the polemical force it can summon. Levinson, as shown above, sets the "heterodox overtones" of historicist analysis against the work of specific critics of Wordsworth, an action she repeats in *Keats's Life of Allegory*, by wanting to "read against," for example, "totalizing" studies of Keats such as Helen Vendler's *The Odes of John Keats* (33). Formalism comes off as "uncritical" or "totalizing" because by its ignorance of historical particularity and difference it merely reproduces, without self-conscious distance, the very evasions and illusions of history already enacted by the poets and poems under

consideration--i.e., formalism generalizes and universalizes. Brook Thomas calls this characterization of formalism by New Historicism a "pragmatic distrust" of any grasp at a "coherent ideology" abstracted from the "flux of history" (xii); Frances Ferguson, in a similar tack, notes that McGann is wary of "any form of abstraction" where the suspect "terms of similarity (homogeneity) are allowed to obscure . . . differences" (150). To avoid "homogeneity," McGann brings into his artillery "textual criticism, bibliography, book production and distribution, reception history" (*RI* 81)--a more scientific and exacting approach that comprehensively situates a poem down to the (silenced) politics even of its publication.[20] The central charge in New Historicism's methodological polemics, then, is that formalist criticism has not been critical enough, where "critical" refers to the socio-historical awareness which alone gives criticism--and, therefore, Romantic poetry--true value. Sole focus on the linguistic "text" only complies with its historical evasions, only maintains its illusions of escape.

McGann and Levinson seek to avoid reproducing Keats's "artistic means" of escape and elision through readings that firmly reveal the political and social motivations of those "means." In large part, their readings hit at Keats's first publications, *Poems* (1817) and *Endymion* (1818), for the more easily noticeable political implications of style employed in those volumes--style as a result of social and historical pressures and a response to those pressures. For Levinson, a return to the early reviews of Keats recovers the original political implications of Keats style because their invectives against Keats's youth, sensuality, and liberalism (owing to his association with Leigh Hunt) denigrated primarily that style, which she calls "fetishistic possessive" (*KLA* 25-26). In the famous attack on Keats by John G. Lockhart, for example, the poet fares badly as the disciple of Leigh Hunt who "has adopted the loose, nerveless versification, and Cockney rhymes

of the poet of *Rimini*" and is but "a smaller poet, and . . . only a boy of pretty abilities" (Matthews 104). Finally, this leads Lockhart to proclaim "that Keats belongs to the Cockney School of Politics, as well as the Cockney School of Poetry" (Matthews 109), where "Cockney" included the "loose" style of Keats's and Hunt's couplets as well as their London-focussed lives. Armed with a "critical knowledge of the early responses to Keats's poetry," Levinson shows, we remember the "conditions which determined" his style that was a response to the series of "isolated storms" he suffered (*KLA* 31). Such "conditions" caused Keats's "almost complete lack of control over the social code [that] kept him from living his life," and so a "fetishistic possessive" style seeking the "authority, authenticity, and ease" (*KLA* 8) Lockhart would deny him.[21] Levinson comes at Keats in terms other than his own to produce a reading that binds him to social and historical pressures even he was not aware of, to the point where the recovery of Keats presents a man beset by history instead of an artist responding to history. Art for Levinson is invention organized by the artists's "conditions"; it is, as McGann says of Keats, "artifice" and "artificiality" and "artificially constructed fantasy" ("KHM" 1024, 996, 1024)--if one does not wear the socially tinted glasses of "historical method."

Yet, as I earlier suggested, Iser can show this sort of historicist reading of Keats to be one "configurative meaning" or attempt at "a consistent pattern" as opposed to another, pulling McGann and Levinson's double-edged methodological issue around to being an issue of a reader's response arising from engagement with the formal, the aesthetic. In the "convergence of text and reader," Iser proposes, the "work" gets "set . . . in motion" by the reader's activity of responding to and relating the "patterns" of the text. More deeply, that activity of response and collation receives its energy and inspiration from what Iser calls the "gaps" and "indeterminacies"

of the text, without which the imagination does not function and so reading does not proceed. Precisely here New Historicism becomes not so different from formalist methods of reading; in fact, it performs the same activity, only with different goals.

Just as reading for McGann and Levinson begins, essentially, with the recognition of evasions and occlusions and illusions and silences (in the poetry and criticism of Romanticism), so for Iser the reading process owes its "dynamism" to the "inevitable omissions" in a text. "The written part of the text gives us knowledge," states Iser, "but it is the unwritten part that gives us the opportunity to picture things; indeed without the elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the texts, we should not be able to use our imagination" ("RP" 58). And, in a similar vein: "The moment we try to impose a consistent pattern on the text, discrepancies are bound to arise . . . [a]nd it is their very presence that draws us into the text" ("RP" 64). What "draws" McGann and Levinson "into the text" that is Keats becomes the "discrepancies" between his poetry and its evasions or mufflings of the historical conditions that wrote it. Their intense archaeological recovery of the "unwritten" parts of Keats's poems, the socio-historical "gaps," forms the source out of which they "picture" Keats--a fragmentary portrait of political and social themes that would, Iser feels, "fulfill the intention of the text" ("Indeterminacy" 43).

This sense of the text's "intention" proves significant with Iser for it understands that while every reader produces a "configurative [i.e., individual] meaning," every "meaning" finally arises from the materials offered by the text. As McGann and Levinson stake out their "privileged seat[s]" of "lucky remove" and historical difference to comprehensively see Keats in terms other than his own, they are perhaps more accurately realizing what (de Man would say) was always already implicit in Keats but hidden from our knowledge. Their "pragmatic distrust" and

demystification of "illusion" and ideological maneuvers leads to, in Iser's taxonomy, "innovative reading" ("RP" 56)--reading that creatively, imaginatively engages the text and strives for a "consistent pattern"--that becomes "innovative" in so far as what they *read for* releases and remembers the political and social "intention[s] of the text." As McGann writes, the text *is* "tendentious and ideological"; Iser, however, posits the reader as the agent who realizes this purposefulness always already in the text, not as a muffled truth needing exposure but as the result of his/her imaginative engagement with the text's "gaps" and "unwritten" parts. Not truly overcoming formalism, McGann and Levinson are instead indebted to its attention to indeterminacy in texts as a trigger for (critical) reading--such as in, chapter three will show, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn"--where the object of analysis, not the method, is the distinguishing mark.

Not only do the socio-historical themes distinguish the New Historicism of McGann and Levinson, but as discussed above their positing of a poem strictly within its past also separates them from a formalist view like Iser's that keeps a poem vital and active now--a positing that defines well the integral feature of an historicist "configurative meaning." Reading, for Iser, involves a persistent process of the "continual modification" of the reader's expectations; a "work" proves to be "virtual" (potential) because the reader is always in a process of "anticipation and retrospection," always after a "consistency" that comes up constantly against the "polysemantic nature of the text" and so must be readjusted ("RP" 53, 58-59). Stephen Cole objects to the New Historicism of McGann and Levinson because their view of art gives them a "neutral or objective access" to a "social ground . . . immune from further debate," and for how their "unmediated access" effectively "denies further debate" (33, 34). His complaint spotlights

the significant difference between McGann-Levinson and Iser: the latter keeps reading open to new configurations, open to *process*; the former, by its "lucky remove" and precision and "social" perspective, would halt that process with a definitive reading of a text. Yet, such an obstruction itself would be over-stepped for there are always new readers coming to the same texts, and each reader realizes a new "gestalt," a new shape and consistency, for the text (Iser, "RP" 55). New Historicism proves no different, for it finally gets to where it does (historical and political registers) by the activity of reading (literary) texts, by a reading process that is, at the least, essential to political awareness or action.

You Say Ideology, I Say Ideology

"The formal immanence of the work of art," felt Adorno, "revealed" a "deeper knowledge of historical changes of essence" than "utterances so adroitly aimed at changing the world" (99). Adorno, as Wolfson would desire, does not reject the formalism of art but retains its necessity for the awareness of "historical changes of essence"--the aesthetic and ideological kept in relation, not one discarded for the other. Trying, in essence, to change "the world" of Romanticism's poetry and critical methodology, McGann and Levinson push aside the very "formal immanence" that enables their ideological critiques. Yet, as Terry Eagleton pointedly insists, "'ideology' is always a way of describing other people's interests rather than one's own," and so it is a "myth" that there "are 'non-political' forms of criticism" (211, 209). Frances Ferguson expresses a certain level of frustration with McGann in relation to Eagleton's words, writing that "although he repeatedly urges a critical criticism upon his readers, critique sounds less like a panacea when we realize that we can never know when we are standing apart from ideology and when we are

merely instantiating it" (147). The historical method, then, harbours a bind that darkens its hope to remedy formalism's ills, for we cannot know when we are outside of or representing (i.e., reproducing) ideology. What perhaps rankles most about McGann and Levinson are the all too cut-and-dried boundaries they establish, where formalism (and Romantic poetry, especially Keats, inheres in this term) is ideological and the historical method is allegedly not owing to its precision and comprehensiveness; in effect, formalism lacks the proper historicist lenses while New Historicism properly lacks the blinders of ideology. But, as Eagleton tell us, this becomes more of a self-interested project of exclusion, involving what Brook Thomas suggests are "narrative acts of repression" which actually perpetuate "the play of domination" New Historicism critiques (41-42).[22] Repressing the "formal immanence of art," then, serves more to delineate New Historicism's "interests" than to distinctively alter the way criticism gets done.

Those "interests" involve the loss of the dynamic and potential of art experienced in the present that Iser as well as Adorno hold onto, and which Keats powerfully represents in his letters and poems. In fact, for Iser the reading process mirrors the way in which we gain experience, becomes a metaphor of the process of experience. Discrepancies not only draw us into the text, but they also compel us "to conduct a creative examination . . . of ourselves" ("RP" 64). As well, that the text causes the reader to set up and readjust a "configurative meaning" is proof for Iser that "reading reflects the process by which we gain experience" ("RP" 64). The important understanding this builds toward in Iser telescopes reading in upon the efficacy of self-realization:

> The need to decipher gives us the chance to formulate our own deciphering capacity--i.e., we bring to the fore an element in our being of which we are not directly conscious. The production of the meaning of literary texts . . . does not

> merely entail the discovery of the unformulated, which can then be taken over by the active imagination of the reader; it also entails what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness. These are the ways in which reading literature gives us a chance to formulate the unformulated. ("RP" 68)

McGann and Levinson would charge Iser with perpetuating an "uncritical absorption" in a literary text's ideology that would want the reader to think reading is experience.[23] Their own critique, however, hopes for similar results in its quest to "formulate the unformulated" network of social pressures upon art and thereby expand awareness of one's own ideological investments. Often absent from that critique, and what causes its myopia, is the acknowledgement of the "literary," i.e., the aesthetic object of a poem that remains the locus of analysis. And it is an absence of the sort that leaves out the enabling efficacy of aesthetic experience (reading) where in "that moment of now . . . the act of reception becomes the act of production" (Thomas 212)--"production" as that socio-historical consciousness desired by McGann and Levinson as well as Adorno, and which Keats, my final chapter will show, perhaps achieves in *The Fall of Hyperion*.

What ultimately coordinates New Historicism with formalism is the realization that the text remains an object of knowledge--of meaning, be it socio-historical or aesthetic, derived through reading. Even though McGann and Levinson situate poetry as social action, they read that poetry for the meaning and knowledge of how ideological evasions and disguises work; they still *interpret* poetry, for its historical and political themes, and so still perform the operations of formal, imaginatively aware reading.[24] McGann appears to be suggesting as much at the end of "Keats and the Historical Method." While he may give stress to words and concepts like "ability" and "power" and "analyze" and "fact" and "limits," he ultimately admits that readers *feel* when

they read poetry and meaning should thus be sought in the efficacy of "social union" those feelings inspire (1027). Romantic poetry's "transcendence," despite its illusions, registers this desire for "union," and thus to more fully know its particularities will "reciprocate" that "transcendence" (1027). In other words, the true hope in McGann's "historical method" is to discover--interpret--what we did not know but was always there. The critical germ of his and Levinson's analysis thus already appears in Iser (and therefore Keats), for reception (reading) leads to production (meaning, interpretation) and what the reader realizes should always be more than just him- or herself and the text. As Keats wrote, we all come to art for the possibility of that "momentous depth of speculation" (1.192).

To accuse Keats of evading and muffling and making illusions of history ultimately tends to ignore his own acute awareness of his times and the "Burden of the Mystery" that is the necessity of flux in history. Morris Dickstein points out that "no less than a massive and deliberate evasion would indeed have been required for a poet whose active career spanned the four years from Waterloo to Peterloo, when England was abuzz with working-class unrest, middle-class agitation for reform, and economic crisis," and a host of other pressing troubles ("Keats and Politics" 175). He then astutely informs us that Keats's "evasion of politics is also a significant political gesture, especially in a period of reaction like the Regency era" (176). William Keach adds to Dickstein, noting that "Keats knew what he wanted to do in his 1817 Cockney couplets" and so analysis should see "to what extent, and in just what ways, the stylistic choices and performances of the 1817 and 1818 volumes *are* political choices and performances" (189, 190). Also from the 1986 *Studies in Romanticism* forum, Alan Bewell suggests an agreement with Keach and Dickstein when he understands Keats's uneasiness with the political

potential of a poet as itself "a political viewpoint" (229). The combative stances McGann and Levinson take with Keats quite succinctly elide this sense of his definite political awareness and choices, of the political opportunities he *did* discover through poetry.[25]

"Do you not see," insists Keats in his long letter of February-May 1819 to his brother George and sister-in-law Georgiana, "how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand different ways!" (2.102). He knew that engagement with the world's "Pains and troubles" was unavoidable, and necessary to shaping individuality. He knew full well the vagaries and hardships of life, a reality struggling its way into his poetry by *The Fall of Hyperion*, even if he chose other subjects and styles in the early poetry that suffers badly at times under the bark of New Historicism. That he read and wrote poetry with the hope of easing the "Burden of the Mystery," for himself and others, constitutes not an evasion of politics but a dynamic political choice. Reading, and writing, were for Keats activities that concerned anyone and everyone.

Notes

1. Especially in the last few years, several essays have looked at Keats, politics, materialism, and/or socio-historical issues. See, Kandl; Kaufman; Lundeen; Pyle; Roe, "Keats's Lisping Sedition"; Schmid.

2. As McGann wrote in his 1979 article "Keats and the Historical Method," Keats was "a poet for whom historical analysis--by the virtually unanimous decision of western literary critics--has no relevance whatsoever" (995).

3. Other works that perpetuate this historical and/or chronological presentation of Keats include: Bate, *The Stylistic Development of John Keats*; Blackstone; Bloom; Dickstein, *Keats and His Poetry*; Vendler; and Wasserman. Some studies of Keats do not, however, always follow a strictly chronological path through his thought and work: for examples, among others, see Jones; Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory*; and Thorpe.

4. Hereafter, McGann's will be cited as "KHM."

5. Hereafter, *KLA*.

6. Hereafter, *RI*.

7. As Marjorie Levinson characterizes New Historicism in the Introduction to *Wordsworth's great period poems* (hereafter, *WGPP*): "It is a self-consciously belated criticism that sees in its necessary ignorance--its expulsion from the heaven of Romantic sympathy--a critical advantage: the capacity to know a work as neither it, nor its original readers, nor its author could know it" (12). As well, in *Keats's Life of Allegory*: "A critical knowledge of the early responses to Keats's poetry . . ., by clarifying our lucky remove from the canon, . . . enables the sort of total understanding Keats could not produce" (31). Here Levinson reveals some of the aggressive, combative stance of New Historicism, which I will discuss later.

8. Forest Pyle notes that "the 'New Historicism' has passed into the main currents of literary scholarship." This situation has come about, however, from the fact of its own "lack of methodological self-consciousness" (57 n.1)--a condition I address below.

9. In the past few years, however, one of the burgeoning areas of Keats scholarship appears to be the study of Keats and ekphrasis. Although not actually instituting a new "ism," this line of investigation--highlighted, so far, by Grant F. Scott's 1994 *The Sculpted Word* and

James Heffernan's 1993 *Museum of Words* (see reviews of both by Nancy Moore Goslee, in *European Romantic Review* 6.2 [1996] and *Studies in Romanticism* 34.4 [1995] respectively)--looks to be an exciting one not explicitly having to do with New Historicism.

10. For other work on the relation between the politics of Keats's style and the attack of his reviewers on such grounds, see Bromwich, "Keats's Radicalism"; Levinson, "Introduction" to *KLA*; McGann, "KHM" 997-99; Roe, "Keats's Lisping Sedition."

11. Actually, just as New Historicism seeks to overcome formalism so did Reader-Response critics like Iser--the focus upon the reader as the producer of meaning supplanting the "formalism" of New Critical textual analysis. Jane Tompkins, in her essay "The Reader in History," characterizes "the reader-response movement" as an opposition to and even "attack" upon "formalist principles." But for her Reader-Response theory's focus on the reader really is no "revelation" or true "radical departure," as it actually reproduces "formalism" in "a new key" by its similar assumption "that to specify meaning is criticism's ultimate goal" (201). How this also relates to New Historicism will be taken up later in this chapter.

12. Keats's letters are from Rollins, and are cited by volume and page numbers.

13. Hereafter, "RP."

14. Goellnicht's essay "'Delicious Diligent Indolence'" actually offers Iser as one of a few modern links to Keats, citing also Hans-Robert Jauss and Georges Poulet; the same theorists receive mention in his *Approaches to Teaching Keats's Poetry* contribution, "Re(:)reading Keats." In Wolfson's *The Questioning Presence*, the two citations of Iser are quick and nearly unnoticeable: one is a footnote (305 n.4); the other, a suggestion that Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (to be discussed in chapter three below) displays "Keats's management of what Wolfgang

Iser calls the 'phenomenology of reading'" (322). None of these instances, however, confront New Historicism with Iser's formalist notions of reading, which perhaps accounts for the unfortunate silence of Goellnicht's work in Keats studies. Wolfson, of course, by the time of her essay "'Romantic Ideology'" meets ideological critique with "close reading," but does not bring Iser into the discussion.

15. The pairing of McGann and Levinson here and throughout the essay does not come purely from their methodological similarities, but from how they cite and acknowledge each other as doing the same thing. In *The Romantic Ideology*, McGann cites and summarizes Levinson's unpublished but "brilliantly researched" essay on Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" which appeared eventually in her book *Wordsworth's great period poems* (86, 165 n.19). Levinson, in the Preface to that book, acknoweldges McGann as "the first and last influence on all my thinking" (*WGPP* x); as well, in *Keats's Life of Allegory*, she lists McGann as one of the readers of its manuscript while suggesting she has somewhat departed from his methods.

16. The fuller context of McGann's discussion that I have quickly summarized is:

> The special procedures which are appropriate for the study of the poem's text are what literary critics--especially modern ones--most often concentrate upon. An exclusive attention to the poetic text, rather than on the entirety of the poetic event, will necessarily produce a narrow focus. In every poem, we encounter a localized and time-specific set of human circumstances which--because of their placement within artistic space--enter our experience as if their connections with all of human history were clearly present. . . . What is crucial to see, however, is that this experience of finality and completion--of the poem as trans-historical--

> fundamentally depends upon our initial experience of the poem's complete, social particularity. ("KHM" 992)

17. Matthew Scott quotes Michael O'Neill on Levinson's unfairness: "Pity Keats, pilloried by snobbish reviewers in his own life, now patronised by politically correct critics who think that systems of social relations hold a poet's pen, inscribing sombre predictable secrets into texts." Scott then notes how in O'Neill's essay, and another by Vincent Newey, "Levinson [and] McGann . . . emerge as the kind of critics who say what is not true of someone they seem not to like too much."

18. Steven Cole accuses Romantic New Historicists like McGann and Levinson of effectively taking away such potentiality by offering no beliefs and no standards of judgement. "Because new historicism," he charges, "denies that there are beliefs at all--there are, instead, only institutional functions . . .--it has literally nothing it can offer as a suitable candidate for judgment" (31). Moreover, that New Historicism understands art as "social" (different, of course, from Adorno's sense of the word) skilfully cuts off debate, for "the social apparently allows an unmediated access whose real purchase is its ability to expose the ideological reproduction of appearances" (34). His incisive objections appear to bear out in proclamations of the sort Levinson makes about knowing a work better than even its author (*WGPP* 12) or about having a "total understanding Keats could not produce" (*KLA* 31)--as well as in McGann's use of "hegemony." The contrast of Adorno shows, I believe, the academically and institutionally focussed gaze of McGann's and Levinson's New Historicism that sees the "social" almost strictly in literary critical terms versus Adorno's wider "human" context.

19. Levinson's use of "finer-tone," as far as I can tell, is a doubly ironic reference: one, to

the title of Earl Wasserman's 1967 book, *The Finer Tone: Keats's Major Poems*, likely one of the studies to fall under her and McGann's pejorative umbrella of formalist studies of Keats ; second, to Keats's letter of 22 November 1817, where he writes Benjamin Bailey that he feels our "happiness on Earth" will be "repeated in a finer tone" in the "here after" (1.185). For Levinson, the irony would be that her "here after" is no illusion but a repetition of the Keats beset by socio-historical determinants--the real social world silenced in the poetry.

20. His reading of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* in "Keats and the Historical Method," for example, not only assesses the poem's manuscript history but the politics and ideological investments of that history, particularly over what he sees as the suspect editing of the poem's first line--all because "its physical text has not much been analyzed, nor ever satisfactorily" (1000).

21. Roe's "Keats's Lisping Sedition" and Levinson's Introduction to *Keats's Life of Allegory* form the basis of this discussion, as both concentrate on Lockhart as well as the stinging jabs levelled by Byron at Keats. Byron, for example, calls Keats's poetry "a sort of mental masturbation" (Matthews 129).

22. New Historicism's repressions and "play of domination" are indicative to Cole of forever rising demands on the "purity" of criticism: McGann and Levinson's sense of a "self-consciousness unmediated by any ideological content," he writes, "has produced an escalating standard of critical purity" (36)--let alone an epistemological snag.

23. Thomas notes that "socially concerned critics" feel that Iser does not ensure that reading (aesthetic experience) will "alter social practices at all" (203). For other critiques of Iser, see Eagleton 78 ff.; and Tompkins, "The Reader in History."

24. Much of the discussion here is inspired by Tompkins, "The Reader in History" 222-23.

25. The curiosity of Levinson's rather marked difference from the essays of the "Keats and Politics" forum is signalled by a favourable reference to Bewell's essay in *Keats's Life of Allegory* as "the beginning of the departure from the critical norm for Keats studies" (38 n.1), and her passing over of the other essays by Dickstein, Keach, Bromwich, and Fry. While not all the essays agree with each other, they do at least maintain Keats's political awareness, which Levinson pointedly does not and so raises the question, for now, of her overall relation to the forum's contributors in light of her praise of just Bewell.

CHAPTER TWO
The Double Possibility of Poesy: "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" and *Sleep and Poetry*

Keats's poetry, it might be said, at all points embodies the dynamic potential of the reader, for Keats himself is at all points a reader who knows the efficacy of imaginative activity and who consistently places himself in the position of reader instead of author. The poems thus derive their energy and vitality from Keats working as the observer, the audience, the watcher: "Ode on a Grecian Urn," for example, drives forward by the questions Keats asks of the object (urn) under observation; *The Fall of Hyperion*'s very narrative, for another instance, is one of the poet watching, first Moneta's face and then the fallen Saturn; and, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" itself offers one of the most poignant, well known descriptions of the wonder of reading. What Keats seems to discover from his position as reader, what many of his poems reveal, is the dynamics of process--i.e., of activity and movement--so important to Iser. To watch or read, to be the audience, embodies for Keats that valuable "unobtrusive" (Rollins 1.224-25) and negatively capable quality that defines the best poetry and poets, for that quality allows process instead of cuts it off. Owing, then, to the prevalence of concerns with the reader and reading in his poetry (as well as his letters), Keats presents what amounts to a pre-history of Iser's reader-response theory[1]--not a systematic taxonomy as with Iser, but throughout a recurring and developing awareness of the dynamic potentiality of the reader's imaginative engagement with what s/he observes or watches.

What follows in the readings of Keats's poetry here assesses that developing awareness, especially for how it reveals that Keats, like Iser, holds the germ of McGann's and Levinson's

New Historicism(s). Maintaining the connection between Keats and Iser, the poetry will fall under the general taxonomy of Iser's discussed in Chapter One--for how the poetry actually dramatizes and predicts Iser's theory, not for how it neatly fits into his particular categories. In this chapter, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and *Sleep and Poetry* are shown to forcefully express the dynamics in the convergence of text and reader; Chapter Three then discusses "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn" in light of their confrontations with gaps and indeterminacy, and the energy of the configurative meanings produced; and finally, in the last chapter *The Fall of Hyperion* looms as a powerful work of self-reflexivity, of formulating the unformulated in the self as well as in society/history. Each poem holds at its heart an engagement with form and the aesthetic that ultimately enables the historical consciousness valued by McGann and Levinson. Enables, because that engagement is the act of reception that becomes an act of production, where production entails not just the writing of a poem but also the awareness of historical process. Reading thus concerns anyone and everyone for Keats because it places one in a dynamic relationship with history--a relationship always of potential, always virtual, perpetually "widening speculation" to "ease the Burden of the Mystery" that is history.

Early in his "career," as the verse epistle to Charles Cowden Clarke from September 1816 shows, Keats recognized a power in the imaginative activity of reading. In fact, this early production of Keats's makes the significant equation between reading and experience vital to the rest of his poetry. Calling his own initial verses a "wine . . . of too poor a savour" and "a desert rude" (1.110), Keats downplays his own abilities in view of the far greater experiences of Clarke's with classic and esteemed poetry. Clarke has "on Baeie's shore reclined at ease, / While Tasso's page was floating in a breeze / That gave soft music from Armida's bowers" (1.110); he as well

has experienced Spenser's *Faerie Queene*:

> . . . [has] beheld Belphoebe in a brook,
>
> And lovely Una in a leafy nook,
>
> And Archimago leaning o'er his book;
>
> . . . [has] of all that's sweet tasted and seen,
>
> From sil'vry ripple, up to beauty's queen . . . . (1.110)

Keats himself, it can be inferred, knows these effects of reading Tasso or Spenser and so projects them onto Clarke. More importantly, out of this Keats reveals himself as someone who experiences intensely when he reads: seeing, tasting, hearing with the imagination. His deference to Clarke's relationships with great works springs from the anxiety that his own verse will not similarly excite Clarke's imagination, will not let Clarke see or taste or hear as powerfully as would Tasso or Spenser. Yet, it is precisely the experience of reading Tasso or Spenser or "Miltonian storms, and . . . tenderness" (1.111)--of discovering "the sweets of song" (1.110)--which fires Keats to write his own verse. Clarke, as Keats's teacher in his early education, introduced Keats to the wonder of reading poetry and so stands as an integral figure in Keats's life--to the point where Keats muses, in this verse epistle, "Ah! had I never seen, / Or known your kindness, what might I have been? / What my enjoyments . . . ?" (1.111). Indeed, I think we can ask with Keats what sort of poet he "might . . . have been" without the dynamic potential he discovered as a reader, and in the power of reading to engage the senses.[2]

Breathe the Words

That Keats's first volumes of poetry, *Poems* (1817) and *Endymion* (1818), receive the

greater part of New Historicism's attention comes as no surprise when one realizes that they, along with the first reviews of them, bear strongly upon his subsequent reputation as sensuous and youthful and naively liberal. Their political implications and resonances--especially *Poems*--are often obvious (i.e., Keats's well-known association with Leigh Hunt) and thus fertile ground for attacks such as those delivered by Lockhart and Byron.[3] Marjorie Levinson herself recalls the spirit of Lockhart's and Byron's invectives by characterizing Keats's poetry as "ambitiously masturbatory" and so "fetishistic possessive": Keats's concern with production, what Byron called "viciously soliciting his own ideas into a state" (Matthews 129), seems an evasion of historical circumstance through the sheer pleasure of writing for himself (*KLA* 21-26).[4] The style of *Sleep and Poetry*'s couplets, for example, followed Hunt's in breaking from the traditional (conservative) style of Alexander Pope and other eighteenth-century poets, and this was ammunition enough for Lockhart to declare Keats one of the "uneducated and flimsy striplings . . . [and] fanciful dreaming tea-drinkers" who degrade Pope without "understanding" or "logic" or "learning" (Matthews 101).[5] Apparently, the subversive potential of Keats's poetry caught the political ire of those like Lockhart because, published at first by Hunt in his left-wing/liberal *Examiner*, they represented the attempt of a middle-class "stripling" to enter the privileged circles of authority. While the political implications of Lockhart's and Byron's attacks on Keats perhaps faded over time--to be recovered by New Historicism--their language lived on in Keats's reputation. Gerard Manley Hopkins, for example, felt Keats's poetry everywhere abandoned "itself to an unmanly and enervating luxury" and that Keats thus "lived in mythology and fairyland the life of a dreamer" (qtd. in Bromwich, "Keats's Radicalism" 199). A popular site for unearthing the social and historical context of Keats's production, the early poetry thus figures

strongly in the historicizing of Keats not only because of what he wrote but for the politically-charged responses to his "masturbatory" "luxury."

"On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" and *Sleep and Poetry* certainly do present a poet obviously concerned with production, with the "luxury" of writing poetry; more significantly, they are poems that dramatize how reception becomes production. Both poems, in fact, arise from specific moments of engagement with aesthetic and so formal objects, such as a translation of Homer in the first poem and some sculptures in the second. These moments of engagement with the aesthetic dramatize what Iser calls the "convergence of text and reader." And, as this "convergence" produces or propels the "work" that is more than the "text" or the "reader," "Chapman's Homer" and *Sleep and Poetry* are the "work[s]" generated from Keats imaginatively meeting the object (poem, sculpture) under his observation. Reading in these "work[s]" thus appears as the vital and engendering activity of production, so that it might be suggested that Keats was actually concerned more with the energies of reception than Levinson or Lockhart acknowledge.[6]

"Through the power of the creative imagination to provide us with vicarious experience," writes Carl Woodring of Keats's sonnet "Chapman's Homer," "it is not only as if I were reading Homer in Greek; it is as if I were landing in Ithaca with Odysseus" (34). Highlighted by Woodring here is the ability of "Chapman's Homer" to essentially allow for its reader the sort of experience that inspired its creation. It is "vicarious experience" at a few removes: Keats's access to "Homer" goes through "Chapman"; the reader's access to "Chapman" and then "Homer" goes through Keats's poem--i.e., the function Keats performs for Woodring, "as if" he were in "Ithaca with Odysseus," repeats the function "Chapman" performed for Keats.[7] The key to Woodring's

comment, then, is "creative imagination." Engagement with the aesthetic occurs through the imagination, and by this "power" the reader can have experiences not actually available to him/her empirically so that reading becomes a sort of metaphor of perception as well as a mode of access. Keats alerts us to these possibilities right in the sonnet's first quatrain:

> Much have I travell'd in realms of gold,
>
> And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
>
> Round many western islands have I been
>
> Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold. (1-4)[8]

Reading here not only becomes an activity of perceiving "realms" or "states" or "kingdoms" or "islands" but also a mode of access to these places; the imagination, essentially, can take one places (as the verse epistle to Clarke certainly suggests) to which one does not have physical access, but that can nonetheless be discovered. And discovery, even by the sonnet's title ("On First . . ."), rests ultimately as the governing subject of "Chapman's Homer"--reading as a sort of "vicarious" act of discovery, owning as much experiential force as "Cortez" being reduced to silence at the sight of "the Pacific" (11-14).

The point of engagement with the aesthetic in "Chapman's Homer" occurs at the transition between octave and sestet, where Keats reveals the "convergence" that generated his sonnet:

> Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
>
> That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
>
> Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
>
> Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

When a new planet swims into his ken . . . . (5-10)

"Till I heard . . . Then felt I" telescopes in on the "convergence" of Chapman (text) and Keats (reader), fusing the octave that is about reading as travelling, as voyage ("Much have I travell'd . . ."), with the sestet that is about reading as the discovery of the "new." Keats always knew reading as a form of discovery, of visiting different "kingdoms" or "realms of gold," yet "Chapman" proves of special importance for how "Then" Keats experiences Homer's "pure serene"--for how at a particular moment "Homer" comes into Keats's "ken," his field of vision or range of experience. To "breathe" the "pure serene" of Homer's "demesne"--the clean, unmitigated tranquillity and calm brightness of Homer's territory (text)--thus communicates the feeling of reading "Homer" through "Chapman": "breathe" figures powerfully the coming together of text and reader, where the reader inhales and in-spires the text, takes the text inside and lives it, to "Then" exhale the text and so animate it, give it utterance.[9] A certain intimacy between text and reader inheres in this activity, offering a sort of metaphoric pre-history of Iser's "convergence" where to read/"breathe" "sets the work in motion" and so "unfolds its inherently dynamic character." Keats's inhaling and exhaling of "Chapman" effectively releases the "dynamic" potential of "Homer"; the respiration of "Chapman" activates the "work" that is "Homer," triggering the imagination necessary to the reading process.

It is a process, for Keats, where reading operates as a metaphor for perception, of how we can have experiences other than our own. The metaphor conflates the activities of travelling (from the octave) and discovery (from the sestet) into the realization that reading presupposes both, especially in its potential to experience the "new" and, as the sestet proves, to incite

"surmise":

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies,
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific--and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise--
Silent, upon a peak in Darien. (9-14)

Importantly, Keats in these lines equates his position of reading "Chapman" to those of observation, of audience. The astronomer gazing at the sky and the adventurer silently staring "at the Pacific" become no different from Keats, each action arriving at a point of virtuality, where discovery stands at the threshold of dynamic potentiality and capacity. Considering as well that Keats at the time of writing "Chapman's Homer" was reading works of history, he reveals in the sestet more than the experience of Homer's "pure serene" but also the imaginative experience of times and places otherwise unavailable to him.[10] Thus the reader of "Chapman's Homer" experiences the efficacy of discovery in general because s/he reads of--"breathe[s]," perceives--Keats's own particular discoveries. In this way, we are moved beyond strictly the poem itself to the "wide expanse" of knowledge. Reading in "Chapman's Homer" compares to the dynamic activity of perception, for it is offered as analogous to the moment of comprehension whereby we acquire knowledge through discovery.

Coordinating this aspect of Keatsian reader-response with the New Historicism of McGann and Levinson proves fruitful when highlighting the theme of discovery. To link the theme of discovery in "Chapman's Homer" with the New Historicism of McGann and Levinson

uncovers how Keats's sonnet expresses or dramatizes the original encounter with form necessary to a socio-historical critique. When it is understood that "discovery" realizes what was always already present--the "Pacific" was there before "Cortez"[11]--New Historicism's own attempt to be "new" instead actually discloses the historical/political themes already implicit in the work under observation through engaging with the aesthetic. Keats, essentially, unfolds the dynamic potentiality of "Homer" through "Chapman"--discovers Homer (as well as Chapman) this way--just as McGann or Levinson unearth historical and political dynamics through Keats's poetry. Levinson, actually, offers a pertinent example of an historicist reading of "Chapman's Homer," and so a valuable site to work through how her rejection of formalism relies upon formalist ways of reading dramatized by Keats in "Chapman's Homer."

For Levinson, the social act that is "Chapman's Homer" represents Keats's confrontation with and pillaging of the "canon," as Keats's access to "Homer" came through a translation and not the original Greek. She writes:

> Keats effectively . . . advertises his corrupt access to the literary system and those social institutions which inscribe that system systematically into the hearts and minds of young men. To read Homer in translation . . . is to read Homer badly (in a heterodox and alienated way), and to subvert the system which installs Homer in a particular and originary place. (*KLA* 12)

Keats's subversion of the "system" of the canon, Levinson continues, is like a "scavenging" that "replaced the authority of Authority, a natural and internal quality, with that of a more literal, original author-ity: with the figure of the literary entrepreneur" (*KLA* 19). As an opportunist--of, it should be recalled, the middle-class in a "middling stage"--Keats attempts to enter the "system"

of "Authority" with "Chapman's Homer," but does so by a "corrupt" route because it is not the "natural" way to have read and responded to "Homer."[12] Here lies, Levinson feels, much of the source for the ire and energy of reviews like Lockhart's. Challenging the "Tradition," a sort of "limited-access code," Keats sparked harsh reactions in Lockhart and Byron as a middle-class, uneducated "stripling" claiming access to Homer through at best a translation (*KLA* 17). In effect, "Chapman's Homer" under Levinson's gaze expresses Keats's confrontation with the social pressures that excluded him from "Authority." The sonnet presents more of a political attempt to "subvert" the "Tradition" than primarily a convergence of Keats and "Chapman" that discovers "Homer," so that its historical particularity evinces itself in light of the pressures of a "system" that "alienated" Keats.

In this approach to "Chapman's Homer," the pressures of a "limited-access code" that Levinson hits upon are specifically what the sonnet's apparent aesthetic focus evades or silences. It is, as I suggested in Chapter One, a combative approach to Keats in that she feels her "lucky remove" affords her a "total understanding" of Keats not even Keats could acquire. Yet, because Levinson actually offers more of a shift in the object of criticism by way of Iser's reader-response theory, and as Keats now resides as the pre-history to that theory, her reading of "Chapman's Homer" institutes more a reading of the sonnet's already implicit socio-historical themes just as Keats reads the always already present "pure serene" of "Homer" through "Chapman." What Levinson seems not to assess is how the engagement with form--the convergence of Keats and "Chapman," Keats's breathing of "Homer"--itself is proto-critical and proto-political, not merely a sort of "scavenging." This returns us to Adorno: for how the "formal immanence of the work of art" offers a vital register of historical change; for how art becomes social exactly when it inspires,

engenders, originates critical reflection and the promise of political awareness or action. Levinson's own engagement with "Chapman's Homer" reads for its *evasions*, but along the way discovers its dynamic potential as a *critique* of "Tradition" which thus indicates a significant historical change in the concept of authorship and access to that "Tradition."

Keats's breathing of "Homer" in "Chapman," then, enacts a particular critique of "Tradition" through its "formal immanence." The distinction from Levinson's tack of placing the sonnet comprehensively in its originating socio-historical context is that by taking the poem's formal and aesthetic qualities as a critical engagement with that context, "Chapman's Homer" appears as active and dynamic instead of completed in its pastness. In this, the claims by Dickstein or Keach or Bewell of Keats's "political choices and performances" bear out: Keats *chose* the efficacy of reading--as access to experience and as like discovery--to confront instead of scavenge the "Tradition." As John Kandl points out, that choice implied a particular attack on the "Tradition" that at Keats's time held Alexander Pope's translation of Homer as the standard. To value "Chapman" over Pope (where Pope becomes merely the rumour of "Homer" in "Oft . . . had I been told"), notes Kandl, "directly undermines the Pope translation" by questioning its interpretation of Homer and thus the grounds of its authority (89, 90-91). All of this, of course, moves away somewhat from the immediacy of Keats's reading experience couched in "Then felt I."[13] Yet, just as that experience discovered what was always already present--the "pure serene" of "Homer"--reading for social and political registers discovers, as the sonnet aesthetically dramatizes, the implicit presence of such registers in the poem. Levinson's convergence with the text that is "Chapman's Homer," therefore, puts in motion its socio-historical character; it is a reception of form that becomes a historicist production. That Keats dramatizes this in his sonnet

pulls the reader into its very understanding of reading, whereby Keats becomes Every Reader to make his poem vitally social. Each convergence of text and reader, Keats tells us, inspires an imaginative voyage and harbours the potential for a discovery of what already exists. To "breathe" the words of a text, whether poetry or history, brings a "new planet" into our field of vision that offers the opportunity for engagement with the world in "new," dynamic forms.

Go Forth My Son

Moving out of "Chapman's Homer" now and into *Sleep and Poetry*, it is valuable to see Keats's sonnet as a governing narrative of reading that persists on the periphery and is developed, expanded, and detailed in the rest of his poetry. In fact, Keats's poems present a series of imbrications where each one includes what came before but also anticipates what may come next--much like we can read a story of reading in the poems. Already this is apparent, for example, in the relationship between "Chapman's Homer" and the verse epistle to Clarke: Keats's projection of Clarke's imaginative reading experience becomes, in the sonnet written approximately a month later, a more compact and powerful expression of reading in general. *Sleep and Poetry*, then, should contain both the epistle to Clarke and "Chapman's Homer" but further their explorations of reading. This it does, and in terms of how reading becomes more intimately bound up with production as Keats explores his growing responsibilities as a poet.

Sleep and Poetry ends with the occasion of its beginning: a scene of double watching, between the poet and the figure of "Poesy." The scene, set a few lines earlier, places the poet in another "poet's house" (354) where he looks at "cold and sacred busts" of "bards who sung / In other ages" (356-57). "Poesy" is the last bust at which he looks, and ultimately the inspiration of

the previous 390-plus lines:

> from between them shone
> The face of Poesy: from off her throne
> She overlook'd things that I scarce could tell,
> The very sense of where I was might well
> Keep Sleep aloof: but more than that there came
> Thought after thought to nourish up the flame
> Within my breast; so that the morning light
> Surprised me even from a sleepless night;
> And up I rose refresh'd, and glad, and gay,
> Resolving to begin that very day
> These lines . . . . (393-403)

Attempting to understand the "things" which "Poesy" discerns and governs, our poet was sent into a process of "thought[s]" of which the present poem is the memory, record, or reading. Thus, just as "Till I heard . . . Then felt I" in "Chapman's Homer" implied the point of convergence between text and reader, so the "Thought after thought" triggered by speculating about "Poesy" reveals the engagement with form ("busts") that led to the production of "These lines." Significantly, "Thought after thought" functions as a description of the dynamic process of mental, imaginative activity that begins *Sleep and Poetry*--a rapid succession of rhetorical questions that praise "Sleep" (11), contrasting the poet's "sleepless night" which proves responsible for the poem's production. What set *Sleep and Poetry* in motion, then, was the resolve to write of a specific moment of reception; its "lines" are the "work" begun from that

point of reception, unfolding the poet's speculations upon those "things that [he] scarce could tell" about Poesy's mysterious observations.

By revealing the originating moment of the poem at its end, Keats effectively asks his reader to re-read *Sleep and Poetry*--with special consideration for the presence of "Poesy." Throughout the poem, "Poesy" appears in different guises that each time relate intimately to both reception and production. At poem's end, "she" is a work of art among other works of art, but placed "over" "Petrarch" and his love "Laura" (389-92) to be the presider and/or inspirational force of their love recorded in the former's sonnets. Just as "she" overlooks "Petrarch" and "Laura" here, so "Poesy"--by her importance for the production of Keats's poem--owns the view from on high "over" the whole of *Sleep and Poetry*. The quick tally of rhetorical questions about "Sleep" that kickstart the poem immediately fall to another set of questions concerning "what is higher beyond thought than thee" (19), questions that strain to "compare" (23), we discover eventually, the exalted nature of "Poesy!"(47):

> O Poesy! for thee I hold my pen
> That am not yet a glorious denizen
> Of thy wide heaven . . .
> . . .
> O Poesy! for thee I grasp my pen
> That am not yet a glorious denizen
> Of thy wide heaven . . . . (47-49, 53-55)

As she is at the end of *Sleep and Poetry*, "Poesy" is here personified, only now more directly as the presider "over" the *poet's* production ("pen") and perhaps also as his salvation. We are

prepared for her entrance and vital presence in the poem, upon re-reading, and thus the possibility she harbours as both what is received and, essentially, what is produced. For, "Poesy" means either "poetry" as the text that is read or "poetic inspiration" that becomes the text that is written--i.e., "she" is both the work of art and the engendering force behind the "pen" that writes art. ("Chapman's Homer" actually proves this formulation, as the poetry of "Chapman" inspired Keats's "pen" to produce a poem.) *Sleep and Poetry* moves through and between this double possibility of "Poesy," fusing its actions of reception and production while, importantly, discussing its social force and function.

The first reference to "Poesy,"cited above, deals primarily with the fusing of reception and production, the implication of one in the other. In fact, the initial appearance of "Poesy" at line 47 appears in a context that reiterates the themes of access and discovery from "Chapman's Homer" as well as expands them with regard to how a poet writes. Where "Chapman" was the point of convergence--the text--that inspired Keats to write his sonnet, "Poesy" now presides as much like the traditionally invoked Muse who inspires the poet to create:

> to my ardent prayer
> Yield from thy sanctuary some clear air,
> Smoothed for intoxication by the breath
> Of flowering bays, that I may die a death
> Of luxury, and my young spirit follow
> The morning sun-beams to the great Apollo
> Like a fresh sacrifice . . . . (55-61)

Keats thus reveals a growing concern with the activity of poetry itself, the source and inspiration

of poetry that in "Chapman's Homer" was the "pure serene" of a particular text but is now the "clear air" released from the consecrated, sacred place where "Poesy" resides. It is "air" mediated by "flowering bays," accommodated to human perception by the "breath" of a natural object--much like "Homer" was mediated to Keats by "Chapman"--so that a certain measure of translation, a point or pathway of access, appears necessary in the creation of poetry.

Importantly, the poet understands this activity of translation, of transcription, to describe his process of production, a process whereby he discovers what was always already present. "If I can bear / The o'erwhelming sweets" (61-62) of the "clear air" from the "sanctuary" of "Poesy" and not be lost to "intoxication," he submits, then he can hold onto or sustain a dynamic position as the reader, the audience, and receive "the fair / Visions of all places" (62-63). This position is like another sort of "death":

> a bowery nook
> Will be elysium--an eternal book
> Whence I may copy many a lovely saying
> About the leaves, and flowers . . . (63-66)

Trading a "death" of one "luxury" for another, the poet here opts for the paradise of a "bowery nook" wherein he sits as the reader of an "eternal" and perpetual and continual source of inspiration: the text of nature, of the world. "Poesy," by "her" "clear air," heightens or unclouds the poet's perceptive abilities so that he reads the "book" of what was always before him but not known--much like the function of "Chapman." The "bowery nook" thus proffers one site of imaginative potential (i.e., discovery), where reception is the necessary first step toward production--toward setting in motion a "work" ("many a lovely saying") that translates or

transcribes the convergence of poet and place/text.

Another site of convergence is the poet's "fire-side" (72), where he details a portrait of himself reading and imaginatively voyaging through the "realms" and "islands" he discovers, intimating almost a recreation of the scene of Keats composing "Chapman's Homer."[14] "Imaginings," the poet relates, "will hover / Round my fire-side, and haply there discover / Vistas of solemn beauty, where I'd wander / In happy silence" (71-74). Again, the process of imaginative activity--of reading--accesses and exposes experiences otherwise unavailable to the poet. "Vistas" recalls "realms" and "western islands," while the poet's "happy silence" links up to the "silent" point of potential that ends "Chapman's Homer." Reception--in both poems; for Iser and Keats--enacts a vital and dynamic process where, even if it is pleasure and "luxury," knowledge is revealed and copied or translated into graspable terms. The poet, finally, serves as a pathway, a mediation, of that knowledge:

> where I found a spot
>
> Of awfuller shade, or an enchanted grot,
>
> Or a green hill o'erspread with chequered dress
>
> Of flowers, and fearful from its loveliness,
>
> Write on my tablets all that was permitted,
>
> All that was for our human senses fitted. (75-80)

"Chapman," it can be said, "fitted" "Homer" to Keats's "senses"; now Keats furthers that process to make it the key activity of the poet toward the reader. From reading, the poet copies and transcribes (i.e., reads back, repeats) into his "work" what the "clear air" of "Poesy" allows or authorizes in terms of "our" ability to grasp the information, the discovery. At this particular

point, Keats poetically describes what Iser theorizes as "the reader's mind working on the raw material of the text . . . [that] consists just of sentences, statements, information, etc.," where that "written text imposes certain limits" on the implications of what may be discovered ("RP" 54, 51). Keats and Iser both posit an active, involved reader who handles the "raw material of the text"--meets, comes together with, an event of form--to shape or realize or render a subsequent text that itself will be read, discovered. "Poesy," for Keats, always harbours the double possibility of reception and production because those two activities fuse to where the "clear air" of inspiration not only can issue from a text (i.e., "Chapman") but can "yield" a text in which the next reader "wander[s]" for his/her own discoveries.

Such a formulation inheres in each subsequent appearance of "Poesy" in *Sleep and Poetry*, particularly as Keats comes to discuss its, as well as the poet's, social function. *Sleep and Poetry*, actually, serves as Keats's declaration of his devotion to "Poesy"; a declaration whispered of in the verse epistle to Clarke ("what might I have been?"), but now exclaimed and announced:

> O for ten years, that I may overwhelm
> Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed
> That my own soul has to itself decreed. (96-98)[15]

In one sense, we already know Keats as a *reader* "overwhelm[ed] . . . in poesy": the verse epistle to Clarke that treats reading as experience, as seeing and tasting and hearing; "Chapman's Homer" that displays reading as a way of access to knowledge, as a metaphor of perception. With *Sleep and Poetry*, then, Keats conflates this immersion in reception with a wish for an immersion in production, which may reach its ultimate fruition perhaps in "ten years" but embodies the command and decision of his "own soul" to realize a specific feat or action through

"poesy." Even here, despite the effusiveness of "overwhelm," Keats projects a role for "poesy" far beyond simply what Byron calls "mental masturbation" (Matthews 129)--where to read and to write "poesy" dynamically engages and possibly betters the world.

As the recognition of "ten years" implies, Keats understands that for him to achieve the full receptive and productive potential of "poesy" requires a process of development. Not surprisingly, he figures this process as a voyage: "Then will I pass the countries that I see / In long perspective, and continually / Taste their pure fountains" (99-101). The first of these "countries" incorporates the verse epistle to Clarke and "Chapman's Homer" and even *Sleep and Poetry*:

> First the realm I'll pass
>
> Of Flora, and old Pan: sleep in the grass,
>
> Feed upon apples red, and strawberries,
>
> And choose each pleasure that my fancy sees . . . (101-104)

"Pass" thus appears as a significant descriptive verb of the voyage that here is a process of reading as in "Chapman's Homer": to make one's way through or to cross as to experience; to "feed" and taste in a similar vein as "breathe." Active and sensuous in what Stuart Sperry calls "the primal world of mythological discovery" (84), the poet's (i.e., reader's) imagination or "fancy" exclusively seeks "pleasure" and "kisses" (106) and "play" (107), and certainly here Lockhart or Byron (or Levinson) would find ammunition to label Keats "loose" and somewhat "masturbatory." Yet, such an approach ignores the significance of "pass" and "ten years," where Keats sees himself in a motion of progression with necessary pauses, necessary convergences. "Flora, and old Pan" offer Keats that early, indispensable pleasure of the text, the "realm" where the imagination freely "choose[s]" its objects of observation so as to know them immediately,

sensuously. It is a quality of experience in reading, the epistle to Clarke demonstrates, that he desires to reproduce in his own work. What ultimately results from the pause in "the realm . . . Of Flora, and old Pan" is a "lovely tale of human life" (110), where "luxury" and "nymphs" (105) and "dance" (115) and "rest" "in the bosom of a leafy world" (119-20) *do* effectively disguise the "the Burden of the Mystery," but only for a time, only momentarily. *Sleep and Poetry* illustrates, in this respect, the next stage of the poet's voyage, a turning point and a recognition that he cannot eternally remain a child of "fancy" if he is to fulfill the demands of his "soul" and of "Poesy."

Eventually, what the poet must "pass" through in the journey of development becomes the harsh world that the child--the "fancy"--stays safe from in "the realm . . . Of Flora, and old Pan. One of the most integral passages of *Sleep and Poetry* registers the necessity of this "nobler life":

> And can I ever bid these joys farewell?
> Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,
> Where I may find the agonies, the strife
> Of human hearts . . . (122-24)

Now, "pass" means not to move through a "realm" but refers instead to the action of moving away from the "joys" of "Flora, and old Pan" toward a more appropriate and moral imaginative engagement with the reality of pain, anguish, distress, conflict, discord that "human hearts" experience. The "tale of human life" does not always make for a "lovely" read, is not always the "bosom" of a "bowery nook" or "leafy world," which obligates the poet to confront "the agonies, the strife" and discover ("copy") the anguish and struggle as well as the "joys." Reading not only entails a pleasant "intoxication" and "luxury"; a convergence with ugliness and pain and distress produces a greater excellence of character, a loftier sensibility than does dancing with nymphs.

Keats presents the vision of the "charioteer" (127) that follows his declaration of "a nobler life" as the apparent ideal of this sort of loftier poet, this more excellent reading. Despite the distinct impression that this "charioteer" does not actually confront "the agonies, the strife"[16]--he appears as an imaginative vision; he releases a pageant of "Shapes of delight, of mystery, and fear" that "murmur, laugh, and smile, and weep" and go on "dancing" (136-51)--his action of reading represents an example, a form, of proper attention:

> Most awfully intent,
> The driver of those steeds is forward bent,
> And seems to listen: O that I might know
> All that he writes with such a hurrying glow. (151-54)

Again, a moment of reception quickly becomes a moment of production. In fact, the action of the "charioteer" in transcribing what he hears links up immediately with the poet's copying of the "eternal book" or etching on his "tablets . . .all that was permitted." Through an Iserian taxonomy, the "charioteer" can be seen as producing a "work" from his "convergence" with the "text" of the "Shapes" and their pageant, a "work" that mediates a certain knowledge gleaned by his listening which the poet desires to *read*. Reception begets reception, for which the "nobler" production is one that has transcribed, translated, the anguish and conflict of "human hearts." The poet holds on to this "thought" of the "chariot" and its "strange / Journey" (160-62) even as the vision swiftly passes away to leave the shock of the "muddy stream" of "real things" (157-58), for the "charioteer" proposes the hope and function of "poesy" to turn what are only "Shapes" or what is only cloudy and obscured and muddled into the clarity of knowledge.[17]

Such a hope and function of "poesy" predominates for the rest of *Sleep and Poetry*, in

which Keats delineates more of his pre-history of the reader's dynamic potential. Concerned with "the great end / Of Poesy" (245-46), the "end and aim of Poesy" (293), the poet turns to consider what makes "Poesy" social and perpetually active now. "Poesy," ultimately, is "A drainless shower / Of light . . .; 'tis the supreme of power; / 'Tis might half-slumbering on its own right arm" (235-37), so that its "great end" (i.e., purpose, result, intention) is to "be a friend / To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man" (246-47). Reading as well as inspiration perpetually illuminate and enlighten; each is a "drainless" activity, an inexhaustible possibility of revelation; both harbour a latent potentiality that waits for release or activation--all of which Keats directs toward the *social* capacity of "Poesy" to comfort, reassure, and relieve worries or apprehensions as well as to elevate and transport "thoughts" above "the agonies, the strife."[18] Here abides the final goal and result of the poet's journey, the eventual achievement of the "deed" that requires "ten years," where aesthetic experience realizes the implicit socio-political potentiality in a text, and more importantly in the reader. "Poesy," I think, "sooth[es]" and "lift[s]" *Keats* so that he hopes for a similar experience and value to define his productions. Importantly, this intimates a stark recognition of the *need* for "Poesy" (the text created, the text read) to supply comfort and assurance or to raise "thoughts" in a world specifically lacking those qualities; a world, to recall Dickstein's list, beset by war and uncertainty and crisis. To be a poet who "simply tell[s] the most heart-easing things" (268) involves a dynamic political choice that emerges from the personal knowledge that "Poesy" owns that very capacity, owns the "might" to be both therapeutic and therefore morally or intellectually revelatory for the reader. This "liberty" (292) that Keats discerns in the "end and aim of Poesy"--not escape or evasion, but emancipation--comes with its "toil" (307) and "desperate turmoil" (308), yet the reward involves a dynamic social awareness

rather than an elision of historical circumstances.

We now return to the end of *Sleep and Poetry* that holds its beginning, its inspiration. Here, the result of the poet's "sleepless night" over speculating upon what he "scarce could tell" of "Poesy's" mysterious observations is the perception of the social "end and aim of Poesy." *Sleep and Poetry* dramatizes the process of how aesthetic experience produces socio-historical awareness and ideological critique, because that social "end and aim of Poesy" emerges out of a journey of reading triggered by the poet's engagement with the aesthetic that is the bust of "Poesy." "Thought after thought," the poet arrives at the awareness that the "liberty" possible in "Poesy"discovers "her" already implicit extra-aesthetic potential: to illuminate or reveal, to "sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts," to offer those "heart-easing things"--to, as Adorno writes, "fulfill itself in the true life of human beings." Keats's sense of his responsibilities as a poet, then, knows this social "might" of "Poesy" and strives to achieve that "end" with his own productions.

The New Historicism of McGann and Levinson also recognizes the extra-aesthetic potential of form, yet it places that potential in terms of how form disguises its socio-historical reason for being and not in terms of how form instead actively, politically, engages its socio-historical circumstances to produce a "work" that transcribes and even transforms those circumstances. To construct a Keats that evades and silences history in his poetry only fails, David Bromwich feels, to acknowledge "the reality of the freedom he associated with poetry." "It is enough," he continues, "that it [the freedom] won something for him and for readers like him, and we are wrong to weigh it against the freedoms he cared for but left others to win" ("Keats's Radicalism" 210). Here abides another aspect of the source of Lockhart's strong reactions to Keats, for Keats gives tremendous potential to the *individual* reader to converge with "the

agonies, the strife[s]" and through "Poesy" find an "immortality" (84) that transcends them. *Sleep and Poetry*, actually, explicitly criticizes those poets--i.e., Pope--who do not afford "Poesy" this function:

> beauty was awake!
> Why were ye not awake? But ye were dead
> To things ye knew not of,--were closely wed
> To musty laws lined out with wretched rule
> And compass vile . . . (192-96)

Sleep and Poetry's style, its "Cockney couplets" of a "loose" and "fetishistic" nature represents a political statement in its own right, one that William Keach suggests could be "radically anti-political in its tendency to produce lines"(190) that *are* sensuous and conscious of the pleasure of their creation instead of bound to "musty laws" or "wretched rule." As Nicholas Roe states, "the diction of Keats's poetry . . . articulated the subversive challenge of beauty to the discourse of the political and cultural establishment" ("Lisping" 49). Keats chides sleeping, unaware poets like Pope for their inadequacies as watchers, observers, readers--for their concern with the "laws" of production and not the potential of reception. In essence, he also critiques McGann and Levinson: to subordinate form--"beauty"--to the "compass" of socio-historical pressures, the "laws" of political and economical circumstance, muffles its proto-critical force by beginning with those "laws" instead of effecting or producing them out of aesthetic experience. Always we must "breathe" and "taste" and "listen" first, then we may "pass" to the "nobler life" of historical consciousness.

"Poesy," by this formulation in *Sleep and Poetry*, remains perpetually active now because

each new convergence of text and reader discovers its always already present capacity to enable a particular historical consciousness. Like "Chapman's Homer," *Sleep and Poetry* closes at a point of virtuality where physically it has finished but otherwise maintains the possibility of "surmise":[19]

> And up I rose refresh'd, and glad, and gay,
> Resolving to begin that very day
> These lines; and howsoever they be done,
> I leave them as a father does his son. (401-4)[20]

The poem ends always in the present of the reader, left to mature and grow with each successive reading so that "These lines" are not ever actually "done." In effect, the journey of reading passes through stages of maturity, where the verse epistle to Clarke and "Chapman's Homer" and *Sleep and Poetry* are the stage of youthful dynamic potential that sets in motion the process (or progress?) toward the poet's ultimate responsibility as the transcriber and translator of social knowledge. What looms as the next part of this journey, however, further details and extends the conflation of reception and production, dramatized by "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn," where Keats explores the need to find coherence or configurative meaning out of and against the gaps and discrepancies in what one reads--be that a text, an art object like a sculpture or urn, the cycle of the seasons, or history.

Notes

1. For a similar understanding, see Goellnicht, "'Delicious'" 192-93.
2. For another discussion of the verse epistle to Clarke, see Holstein 331.

3. As William Keach notes, the influence of Leigh Hunt and the "Tory attacks on Keats's 'Cockney style'" connected to *Poems* and *Endymion* "make it possible to reconstruct a more detailed political context for this poetry than for any other text or moment in Keats's career" (182).

4. Stuart Sperry also notes Keats's focus on production in his early poetry, but treats the issue more sympathetically than Levinson and with a view to the concerns of reception and production I explore in this chapter. "Especially at the outset," writes Sperry, "it was understandable that he [Keats] should find his mode of composition emerging as the subject of his verse. Up to a point the two were inseparable" (74).

5. Nicholas Roe portrays well the mood and anxiety of reviewers like Lockhart:

> Reviews of *Poems* and *Endymion* described the poetry as "indistinct," "indiscriminate," and "confused"--but they also acknowledged the disturbing force of Keats's imagination. . . . Keats's poetry here is "changeful," "novel," a challenge to received literary values and specifically to the neo-classical ideal of stylistic and intellectual "decorum" ("Lisping" 46).

The "challenge" Roe mentions here is discussed below in relation to "Chapman's Homer" and *Sleep and Poetry*.

6. Susan Wolfson offers a somewhat similar understanding: ". . . the observing, scanning, and searching of the Keatsian eye across the vistas of the early poems is often a reading eye . . . [so that] it seems inevitable that the 'reader' should emerge as an early and ongoing Keatsian figure for the engagement of the eye with its object" (*The Questioning Presence* 223-24; hereafter abbreviated as *QP*).

7. "When the sonnet makes the reader feel he is in the presence of something new and great," writes Jamey Hecht along an analogous tack, "it occurs to the reader that this feeling is itself the very subject of the sonnet. Thus the poem poses the question, whether its own poetic spell is of the same order as that spell which it discovers in the reading of Chapman" (104).

8. All citations of Keats's poems are from Stillinger, with line numbers noted in parenthesis within the text.

9. For a similar reading, see Hecht 109.

10. Bate suggests Robertson's *History of America* and Bonnycastle's *Introduction to Astronomy* as part of the immediate context of "Chapman's Homer" (88). See also Finney 1.122-27.

11. The inspiration for some of this discussion appears in Hecht 105.

12. Kandl offers an analogous reading to Levinson, stating that "the production of sonnets, or of any 'private' literary expression, for a young poet like Keats, could become a way into the conversation, an inroad into the political-power mechanisms that dominated the public sphere of the time" (86). Where he differs from Levinson is that he effectively shows that Keats's "way in" was through Hunt's use of "Chapman's Homer" to speak for his own liberal, reformist ideals (88), not through a fetishized wish for "Authority."

13. Bate tells how Keats wrote the sonnet "in the four or five hours that followed" his reading of Chapman with Clarke (85).

14. For the occasion of Keats actually reading Chapman's translation of Homer, see Bate 84-86.

15. Stuart Sperry feels these lines begin the "crucial passage" of *Sleep and Poetry*, which ends with the fleeing of the vision of the charioteer at line 162 (84).

16. Wolfson explains well this discrepancy in the "charioteer": "If this figure symbolizes Keats's ambitions, it is significant that Keats's poet cannot summon terms of description that would mark a real advance in vision and perception over what obtains in the world of Flora and Pan. The charioteer seems merely to repeat the ardent posturings of the poet who beholds him" (*QP* 209).

17. For other discussions of the chariot and charioteer, see Bloom 564; Elledge 140-42; Finney 1.163; Jones 47-48, 56; Sperry 84-85.

18. Paul de Man terms this "Keats's humanitarian dream," where "poetry is a redeeming force, oriented toward others in a concern that is moral but altogether spontaneous" (185, 182).

19. "The nature of closure accomplished," writes Wolfson in similar terms, "is chiefly formal; the mood of closure remains emphatically provisional" (*QP* 225).

20. See Elledge for a detailed discussion of this line and the themes of fatherhood and sonship throughout *Sleep and Poetry*.

CHAPTER THREE
Reading is Writing, Writing Reading: "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn"

"The Odes," wrote Eliot of Keats, "are enough for his reputation" (91). Such a comment by Eliot displays a common attitude toward Keats's Odes that sees them as the height of his artistic achievement. Stuart Sperry recognizes in this view a tendency in critics to isolate the Odes from their place within Keats's development as a whole (243). From this isolation arises the debate over whether the Odes form a sequence--a related series--or whether they should be treated separately. Written during May 1819--except for "To Autumn," written in September 1819--Keats's great Odes present a number of productions that not only work with the same poetic genre/form, but actually repeat images and words from each other, expand and reassess each other. Helen Vendler's *The Odes of John Keats*, perhaps the most impressive total study of the Odes to date, proceeds on just these assumptions of definite links to offer the strongest argument for treating the Odes together as a sequence. "I believe," she states, "that the most important context for each of the odes is the totality of the other odes, that the odes enjoy a special relation to each other, and that Keats, whenever he returned to the form of the ode, recalled his previous efforts and used every new ode as a way of commenting on earlier ones" (6).[1] Aware of and in agreement with this, I choose here, however, to focus specifically on "Ode to a Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn." These odes best continue the themes developed in the previous chapter; as well, they hold great importance in Keats's pre-history of Iser's reader-response theory and with New Historicism.

These two Odes of Keats's dramatize the reader's confrontation with gaps and

indeterminacy necessary to trigger the activity of the imagination, and the subsequent striving after "coherence" or "configurative meaning." Chapter One showed that the New Historicism of McGann and Levinson takes the greater part of its energy and inspiration in reading for the socio-historical evasions and elisions and occlusions of Romantic poems, which Iser recognizes as essential to the reading process in general, for "without the elements of indeterminacy, the gaps in the text, we should not be able to use our imagination" ("RP" 58). In the story of reading that Keats's poems supply, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn" offer a Keats more attuned to those "gaps in the text" as well as to the activity of establishing "coherence." His response is not as immediate as in "Chapman's Homer" or as roaming as in *Sleep and Poetry*, because now he asks direct questions of the object under observation (an urn) and interprets that object (a season). The moment of reception now involves a more extended breathing, a more focused watching; the moment of production provides what can be called a "reading" of the object, a critical interpretation and understanding. Keats, in these Odes, *reads for* what will illuminate and "sooth" and "lift" and ease the heart as he continues to reflect upon the responsibilities of the poet and what sort of poet he wants to be to best achieve his goal of "doing some good for the World" (1.271).

O Bride of Indeterminacy

Approximately a month after finishing *Endymion*, on 27 December 1817 Keats wrote a letter to his brothers Tom and George that contains perhaps his most famous speculation about the poet and poetry: the singular mention of "*Negative Capability*" (1.193). His revelation, he tells his brothers, came during a "disquisition" (a formal discussion) with a friend "on various

subjects," when "several things dovetailed in [his] mind," and

> at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously--I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason-- . . . . (1.193)

Immediately apparent is that "*Negative Capability*" is an attribute of potentiality characterized by the ability to be "in" gaps, indeterminacies, discrepancies. This attribute, for Keats, represents here the ideal activity of the imagination "in Literature," an activity energized by tension and contradiction so as to remain virtual instead of completed by "fact & reason." By this revelation of the "quality" that distinguishes poets like "Shakespeare," Keats focuses a recurring concern with the type of poet he desires to be--a poet able to derive energy from indeterminacy without imposing the "fact & reason" of his/her own self over such virtuality, and so a poet essentially without self.

As he writes ten months later, "the poetical Character . . . is not itself--it has no self--it is everything and nothing--It has no character-- . . . It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen" (1.387). "A Poet," he continues, "is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity--he is continually in for--and filling some other Body" (1.387); ultimately, a liminal position that can move in the "dark side of things" or the "light," the result always "speculation" (1.387). This poet of "no self," which Shakespeare exemplifies, Keats sets against what he calls "the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime" (1.387), where poetry "has a palpable design upon us" instead of remaining "great and unobtrusive" (1.224). In light of the double possibility of "poesy," Keats's poet of "no character" maintains this ability in both

reception and production, where the poet's "quality" of experiencing and receiving in a negatively capable way thus characterizes what s/he produces as not blatantly or manifestly intending to change his/her reader. We have early examples of this in Keats, especially in the verse epistle to Clarke and "Chapman's Homer": with the former, Keats expresses the desire that his poetry allow the imagination a similar "wine" to taste as he and Clarke found in Tasso or Spenser; with the latter, Keats pulls the reader of the sonnet into the very understanding of the nature of reading itself, as we "breathe" his sonnet just as he "breathe[d]" "Homer" through "Chapman." Through the distinct absence of "character" and "self," then, Keats's negatively capable poet receives and produces without "design," affording the individual reader the freedom of a "wide expanse" within which to have his/her imagination travel. Gaps and indeterminacies--"uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts"--thus energize reception, and the "unobtrusive" poet best allows reception to take its own journey toward "speculation," toward the "dark" as well as the "light."

"Ode on a Grecian Urn," once again a production inspired by Keats's observation or reading of an object of art, thrives on gaps and indeterminacies and even leaves us there, pondering its famous epigram "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (49).[2] Unlike "Chapman's Homer" or *Sleep and Poetry*, however, the point of convergence with the "Urn" lies outside or behind the poem, so that now we have Keats instead *reading* the "Urn" as if it were a text, questioning the "leaf-fring'd legend" that "haunts about [its] shape" (5)--engaging it dynamically as a negatively capable poet.[3] Keats here presents himself more intensely at each point as the observer, the audience; he fills the "Urn" with his questions of "What . . .?" and "Who . . .?" and "Why . . .," so as to dynamically (re)produce the "Urn" and not simply an experience of it. Such questioning, actually, brings Keats to reflect critically at the end upon the point of convergence behind the

poem, to know it: "Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!" (44-45). "Grecian Urn," ultimately, is the record of that teasing, that coaxing "out of thought" and into "speculation."

What seems most to have "tease[d]" Keats about the "Urn" are the "uncertainties" and "Mysteries" of its "legend"; specifically, the uncertainties and Mysteries created by the Urn's inability to speak, by its coldness as finally a physical and material text that requires a reader. "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness," he calls the Urn; "Thou foster-child of silence and slow time" (1-2). Telescoping in upon that "quietness" and "silence," Keats asks the questions that take him into a reading of the "Urn":

> What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
> Of deities or mortals, or of both,
> In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
> What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
> What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
> What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (5-10)

Helen Vendler indicates that "the constitutive trope" of Keats's ode "is interrogation, that trope of the perplexed mind" (118), and the poet's perplexity here reaches a feverish pitch by the time "ecstasy" arrives. Keats's perplexed, ecstatic interrogation of the Urn dramatizes--or, proves aesthetically--Iser's concept that in the reading process it is the "very presence" of "discrepancies" that entice and pull us "into the text" ("RP" 64). The Urn thus assumes the role of "poesy" from *Sleep and Poetry* as what inspires the poet toward a writing inspired by questions, only now those questions are not rhetorical but penetrating and focussed solely on the object under observation.

In other words, the "unwritten" parts of the "Urn"--its "quietness" and "silence"--energizes the poet's attempt to know those "Mysteries" by nearly succumbing to the suggestion of an "ecstasy" in the "leaf fring'd legend." By this dramatization of how "discrepancies" ecstatically draw the reader into the text, the poet of "Grecian Urn" therefore dramatizes or enacts "*Negative Capability*."[4]

What "reading" of the "Urn" the poet-observer arrives at out of this negatively capable "interrogation" produces its essence: that, despite its physical, material reality as a "silent form" (an aesthetic object) and thus despite its ultimate stasis or inactivity, the "Urn" harbours an eternal dynamic potentiality to be released by its reader or spectator. At all points, actually, its "legend" balances precariously between stasis and potentiality--a sort of liminal "ecstasy" that Keats's poet-observer recognizes intensely and thus takes up as his guiding subject.

"Grecian Urn," then, does not so much answer questions like "What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?"; rather, it penetrates the mysterious, "unheard" (11) energies of such questions and revels in their indeterminacy. "Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone" (14), implores the poet-observer of the "pipes." A "reading" of those "silent" notes ensues:

> Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
> Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
> Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
> Though winning near the goal--yet, do not grieve;
> She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
> For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (15-20)

"Yet, do not grieve": the poet-observer's direct address here to the "Fair youth" effectively

signals his entrance into the "legend" of the "Urn," relieving the pressure of "canst not" and "nor ever can" and "never, never canst" by turning the always unfulfilled "pursuit" into the positive dynamics of liminality and stasis--"She cannot fade . . . For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!" Earl Wasserman describes this as "Keats's empathic entrance into the life of the frieze, the vital core of the urn" (24), where "empathic" captures the essence of the action of "*Negative Capability*" to imaginatively infuse the aesthetic object with subjectivity. "Do not grieve" for the "pursuit," the poet-observer *consoles* the "Fair youth," as his "love" and the beauty of his beloved "never, never canst" "leave." And, this exclamatory "For ever" continues on into stanza 3, where "boughs" (21) and "songs" (24) and "love" (25) all become "happy" (21) occasions of indeterminate, dynamic stasis whose "ecstasy" leaves the poet-observer with a "burning forehead" and parched "tongue" (30): the "boughs" always have the energy of "spring" (22); the "songs" are "for ever new" (24); "love" will be "For ever warm . . . For ever panting, and for ever young" (26-27). Indeterminacy here does not imply a lack of knowledge or an absence of insight for Keats's poet-observer, because instead it makes for a highly active reader who can empathically know the aesthetic object in its essence. "Grecian Urn" dramatizes this most potently at its exemplary moment of empathy in stanza 4: the procession to "the sacrifice" (31) becomes a "little town . . . emptied of this folk" (35-37), its "streets for evermore . . .silent" and "desolate" (38-40). Most potently, because no "little town" actually appears on the "Urn," and by looking back through the ode it becomes possible to see the poet-observer everywhere actively imagining histories for the "Urn" within its "uncertainties" and "Mysteries," repopulating it with "struggle" and "ecstasy" and "love" and "songs." The poet-observer's journey through the Urn's "legend" releases its dynamic "self," and fills its "Body" not to a stasis of completion but to a stasis of

potential.[5]

That potential is realized in the revelatory epigram that the "Urn" speaks at the end of the ode: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." It is a realization that seeks to fulfill the hope voiced in *Sleep and Poetry* that "Poesy" "be a friend / To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man," as the poet-observer finally addresses the "Urn" directly:

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

That the Urn speaks the epigram proves significant in terms of the poet-observer's role as the reader of the text that is the Urn. In effect, the Urn releases its own answer to the original question "What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape . . . ?" through the poet-observer's reading of its indeterminacies and "Mysteries." Iser, as noted in Chapter One, understands that the engagement with the "unwritten" parts of the text ultimately produces a reading that "fulfill[s] the intention of the text" ("Indeterminacy" 43) because that reading arises from the materials offered by the text. In a profound negatively capable act, Keats's poet-observer thus unobtrusively "fulfill[s]" (i.e., discovers) the "intention" of the "Urn" from out of its own "legend." Unobtrusively, as at all points here the poet-observer holds the focus upon the "Urn" with "Thou shalt" and "thou say'st"--and, I believe, "Ye know . . . all ye need." Sticking to the syntax of these final lines (where "Thou" and "Ye" are second-person addresses, but both singular, instead of the latter plural, and so directed toward the reader), the dash in line 49

represents perhaps the closest to the poet-observer's "I" entering the ode. Thus, the pause it asks for gives us the poet-observer taking the space to reflect upon what the "Urn" "say'st" and then keeping that epigram tied to the "Urn's" materiality. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" is all the Urn can "know on earth" in its materiality as art, but it is also "all" that it "need[s] to know" as "a friend to man" for achieving its function as art (as "Poesy") "to sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts."[6] Here, art proves vitally social in its ability to speak what it physically always already contained but needed the work of the reader's imagination to "fulfill" and release--"form" as the originary and engendering step toward social knowledge; as "a friend to man" for how it allows readers in all times of "woe" to engage history more dynamically exactly at its "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts," its "dark side" and its "light."

The Materials of a Season

"The excellence of every Art," wrote Keats in the "*Negative Capability*" letter, "is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth" (1.192). Keats derives this "speculation" from a critique of Benjamin West's painting "*Death on a Pale Horse*," a painting he feels provides "nothing to be intense upon; no women one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality" (1.192). Significantly, this critique of West comes before "*Negative Capability*" and so actually reiterates the aesthetic focus of Keats's important "speculation." Foreshadowing the poet-observer's "intense" empathetic act of reading the "Urn," Keats here bemoans "Art" that stalls or obstructs the negatively capable act of losing one's "self" or "identity." West's painting, then, offers *no* gaps or "Mysteries" or indeterminacies to draw its reader's imagination into its "reality"; it fails to communicate "Beauty and Truth," and

so fails to allow a moment of reception to become a moment of production. The Urn is thus all that West's painting is not, which the very presence of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" proves as it becomes itself "Art" for a reader to be "intense upon."

In "To Autumn," Keats directs his watching, reading eye away from "Art" to be "intense upon" instead toward a season and ultimately the "Beauty and Truth" of the nature of history. Where "Grecian Urn" enacted Keatsian "*Negative Capability*," in fact, "To Autumn" everywhere simply *is* within "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts"[7] and so nearly without any trace of the poet-observer's "self" or "identity" as it offers not the confrontation with "indeterminacy" but the result of that confrontation in the poet-observer's "coherence" or "configurative meaning" of the essence of the season he reads. The point of convergence between text (autumn) and reader (poet-observer), then, lies even further behind "To Autumn" than in "Grecian Urn"--far enough that one must turn to Keats's letter of 21 September 1819, addressed to his close friend John Hamilton Reynolds, for the poem's moment of reception:

> How beautiful the season is now--How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather--Dian skies--I never lik'd stubble fields so much as now--Aye better than the chilly green of spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm--in the same way that some pictures look warm--this struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it. (2.167)

"[T]his struck me so much . . . that I composed": Keats has told us this *in* "Chapman's Homer" and *Sleep and Poetry* and "Grecian Urn"; now, with "To Autumn," he does not engage with a specific artificial object but a whole "season," "struck" by how its "stubble plains" are "warm" like "some pictures" so that, as Geoffrey Hartman perceives, "What perplexes his imagination is a

mysterious picture rather than a mystery" ("Poem and Ideology" 144-45) and the *entire* poem reproduces (composes) that "picture" lying behind its surface. The point of convergence well preceding the poem, the confrontation with "Mystery" already assessed, Keats now turns his gaze in "To Autumn" toward giving--instead of telling about--"Beauty and Truth."

He supplies, essentially, his reading of autumn's "Beauty and Truth"--in Iser's taxonomy, his "coherence" or "individual, configurative meaning" ("RP" 59) pulled from the text that is autumn. The reader, indicates Iser, groups together "all the different aspects of a text to form the consistency" that s/he "will always be in search of"; "the reader will strive, even if unconsciously," he continues, "to fit everything together into a consistent pattern"; in other words, "By grouping together the written parts of the text, we enable them to interact, we observe the direction in which they are leading us, and we project onto them the consistency which we, as readers, require" ("RP" 58). Everywhere Keats's ode concerns itself with the "aspects" and "written parts" of autumn--the materiality of autumn--and forms them into "a consistent pattern," a reading, of the season. In the first stanza, for example, the theme of "fruitfulness" (1) and "ripeness" (6) is supported by "mists" (1), "fruit" (4), "vines" (4), "apples" that "bend . . . the moss'd cottage-trees" (5), "the gourd" (7), "hazel shells" (7), "flowers" (9), and "bees" (9). Stanza two's personification of autumn includes "a granary floor" (14), autumn's "hair" (15), "the winnowing wind" (15), "a half-reap'd furrow" (16), "the fume of poppies" (17), autumn's "hook" (17), "flowers" (18), autumn's "laden head" (20), "a brook" (20), and "a cyder-press" (21). Finally, the "music" (24) of autumn in stanza three involves "barred clouds" (25), "stubble-plains" (26), "gnats" (27), "river sallows" (28), "lambs" (30), "Hedge-crickets" (31), "The red-breast" (32), "a garden-croft" (32), and lastly "gathering swallows" (33). Under the weight of this

pervasive seasonal materiality, "To Autumn" can be said to almost be autumn. The ode thus lives up to one of Keats's "Axioms" (1.238) of poetry he explained to his publisher John Taylor over a year and half previously in a letter of 27 February 1818: "it is easier to think what Poetry should be than to write it," Keats suggests to Taylor, "and this leads me on to another axiom. That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all" (1.238-39). "To Autumn" thus "comes . . . naturally" out of the "fruit" and "bees" and "granary floor" and "cyder-press" and "stubble-plains" and "gnats" of its subject season, aesthetically dramatizing how Iser's "consistent pattern" itself should arise "naturally" from the "aspects" and "written parts" of the text.

Keats's "intense," natural awareness of autumn's "written parts" leads him to understand first how they represent the season's potentiality. "Conspiring" with "the maturing sun" (2-3), autumn works to

> load and bless
> With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
> To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
> And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core . . . . (3-6)

Verbs of potentiality and increase pervade the first stanza, where "load and bless" and "bend" and "fill" are followed by "swell" (7) and "plump" (7) and "to set budding more, / And still more" (8-9), all making for the illusion that "warm days will never cease" because "summer has o'er brimm'd" (9-10). As Helen Vendler notes, the "constitutive trope" of "To Autumn" is "enumeration, the trope of plenitude" (266). Counting as much of autumn's "ripeness" as possible, the ode in its first stanza fits together all the disparate materials of autumn and by their

interaction creates a "mysterious picture" of abundance and near-surfeit--a dynamic "swell[ing]" of activity and potentiality quite oblivious to the fact that "summer" must "cease" eventually. The silent recognition here, then, reads this "swell[ing]" of autumn as what it ultimately signifies in the cycle of the seasons, being the threshold between "summer" and winter where the "fruitfulness" of its "moss'd cottage-trees" contains the omen of its barrenness. "Awareness of change and the loss it portends," says Susan Wolfson, "are arrested in a moment of fruitful lingering just before the bourn of darker consequences" (*QP* 363). Autumn's materials, when fit into a "consistent pattern" (a reading), thus "naturally" reveal their implicit paradox of potentiality and increase but also the "darker consequences" of death. The very form of the stanza, of the entire ode, arises exclusively out of the function of those materials as "plenitude" and death, so that nowhere do we have the "self" or "identity" of the poet-observer and everywhere we have the essential character of autumn.

Stanza two deepens the "consistent pattern" of that essential character through its personification of autumn as the harvest. Like in the first stanza, only autumn appears before our eyes as the images follow one another "naturally" out the materials and functions they communicate:

> Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
> Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
> Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
> Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
> Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
> Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:

And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep

Steady thy laden head across a brook . . . . (13-20)

All actions of the autumn harvest--from the "wind" that fans the grain on the "granary floor" to the reapers in the fields to those that gather what is left in the field by the reapers--*are* Autumn. She embodies every material aspect of her season, even at a "careless" moment of repose after the "o'er brimm'd" activity of the first stanza--"asleep," drunk, and heavy from her labours as she "watches" "with patient look . . . the last oozings hours by hours" (21-22).[8] Like the poet-observer, we watch "with" Autumn as the "last . . . hours" of her season slowly flow out of the "cyder-press" and passively she knows this must be. With the cycle of the seasons momentarily paused and lingered over, we are again at a liminal point of potentiality. We receive this dynamics of stasis so as to allow us to enter Autumn's subjectivity to then give back to her the "consistent pattern" her materials always already contained. "The receiver and giver are equal in their benefits," wrote Keats to Reynolds on 19 February 1818. "The f[l]ower," he added, "I doubt not receives a fair guerdon from the Bee--its leaves blush deeper in the next spring" (1.232). By thus receiving all the materiality of Autumn, the poet-observer lets her "blush deeper" in the "consistency" of her personification, just as the Urn was given its voice to speak the answer of its "legend."

Out of this negatively capable act of reception the poet-observer comes at last to console Autumn that she has her own "music" (24). He ends the ode with the wealth of her "songs" (23) that rise at the "bloom of the soft-dying day" when the "barred clouds . . . touch the stubble-plains with a rosy hue" (25-26)--at another instant of potentiality and pause, of life and death. "Think not" of the "songs of the spring," implores the poet-observer to Autumn, for "thou hast thy music

too--" (23-24) as the "day" quietly reaches its close:

in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies. (27-33)

Now we *hear* Autumn, to the point where she and the ode are "nothing but a thin thread of sound" (Vendler 262) in the plenitude of their "music." Compared to the silence of "surmise" that ends "Chapman's Homer," we are here left within the noise of "speculation," looking toward the expanse of the "skies" as the "mists" have cleared, knowing that winter approaches after Autumn's "choir" finishes its "songs." And this noise of "speculation" ends distinctly in the present of the poet-observer and the reader, not offering a philosophic epigram or self-reflexive comment but instead leaving off in the full "*Negative Capability*" of "Beauty and Truth." Naturally, unobtrusively, without design, Autumn's very materiality has led us here to this "consistent pattern"--just as, by extension, the materiality of the text (its form) directs and leads its reader to a reading (an interpretation).

"To Autumn," actually, holds the central place in McGann's essay "Keats and the Historical Method," though he arrives at a far different understanding of the ode's materialism. The materialism McGann reads for hits upon the details of the poem's publication, because that original, "explicit social context" represents the clues to its "meaning" (1015). "To Autumn's"

appearance in Keats's 1820 volume of poetry (titled *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*) recovers how Keats's publishers and friends persuaded him to include poems that would not "provoke the reviewers to attack" as they had with *Endymion* in 1818; as a result, "The 1820 volume . . . was constructed with a profoundly conscious attitude about [the] climate of literary opinion that prevailed at the time" (1016). Specifically, Keats's poems in the 1820 volume, according to McGann, "were issued not to provoke but to allay conflict" by allowing his readers to "step aside from the conflicts and tensions which were so marked an aspect" of 1819 (1017). McGann proceeds to extend this materialism of the poem's socio-historical context into Keats's rather material reasons for writing "To Autumn": focussing on his "biographical details" (1022), McGann establishes the historicity of Keats's use of "the fine arts" (1018) to make "To Autumn" into a fictional "alternative geography" (1020) that offers an idealized autumn "that is not true" (1021) because it occludes the particularity of Keats's actual "geography"; "To Autumn" at the last is "Keats's . . . engagement with a number of large cultural and political issues which bore upon his age, and which produced equally particular effects on everyone else, and which produced equally particular responses" (1022). Thus, the ode's seeming impersonality in its abundant "*Negative Capability*" is the formalist illusion McGann wants to demystify, as "The poem is not impersonal, it is tendentious and ideological in quite specific ways" (1023). By this "historical method," then, McGann frees "To Autumn" from the formalist "prison house of language" to situate it precisely and comprehensively in its socio-historical context--in the ideological, material conditions that produced its "attempt to 'escape' the period which provides [it] with its context" (1023).

What McGann ultimately fails to acknowledge, however, is the materialism "To Autumn"

contains *within* its own "geography"; a materialism distinctly relevant to Keats's growing awareness of "the Burden of the Mystery" that is history. He takes the ode to be "true only in the context of its field of social relations" (1024), where Keats's "tendentious" purpose was to offer an idealized autumn that is like a dream which allows its reader to "step aside from the conflicts and tensions which were so marked an aspect" (1017) of that "field." Instead, as Forest Pyle suggests, when we "read for *Keats's* materialism . . . we encounter a poetic resistance, figured as the resistance of things to thought, that earns the name 'materialism'" (58; my emphasis). Pyle's astute observation of what McGann's "historical method" disguises about Keats bears special relevance for "To Autumn" because the ode shows a Keats highly aware of the cyclical process of history, from "summer" to autumn and to the persistent whisper of winter throughout all the "written parts" of autumn. The "things" of autumn in the ode everywhere resist "thought" in that they intimately connect Keats and his reader to their materiality, so that "thought" does not transcend or "'escape'" history but rather knows it more completely. (What the "Urn" said of "Beauty and Truth," it can be recalled, was all it needed to know "on earth.") McGann's "things" of bibliographical and biographical detail finally serve to situate "To Autumn" in its definite pastness and thereby its completion in that past "explicit social context." This blunts the ode's not impersonal but perpetually relevant "*Negative Capability*" to aesthetically communicate the "music" of autumn's slow, oozing process toward winter.[9] Receiving the physical text of autumn (receiving its materiality), Keats then produced a writing that is a reading (an interpretation, a "consistent pattern") of that season's physicality and particularity in comparison to summer or spring or winter. His journey of reading has thus moved from the realms of strictly aesthetic objects to the "things" of the "earth" and a clarity of historical vision that brings him, in *The Fall*

of Hyperion, to an "intense" self-reflexivity that formulates the unformulated necessity of "a World of Pains and troubles" (2.102).

Notes

1. Vendler, in effect, takes up the project as Sperry outlines it ten years earlier: "Ultimately the odes have most to tell us," indicates Sperry, "when they are taken not only together as a group but as an integral part of Keats's total achievement . . . . Very broadly, they are best considered as a series of closely related and progressive meditations on the nature of the creative process, the logical outgrowth of his involvement with Negative Capability" (243). Sperry's inclusion of "Negative Capability" here is a central issue I will treat below in relation to both "Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn."

2. As Susan Wolfson recognizes, "The phrase all but requires another legend to help us know what it means" (*QP* 326-27).

3. David Perkins sees that while the "Urn" is still an object as a "stimulus," that "stimulus" is not of the senses but of a sort of intuitive faculty that knows the object's "essential character . . . in a more satisfying and penetrating way" (229).

4. What this implies, then, is that Keats's "*Negative Capability*" is an aesthetic "speculation"--realized from his engagement with aesthetic objects (paintings; Shakespeare's plays and sonnets) and characteristic of a "Man of Achievement especially *in Literature*" (my emphasis). Thus, "*Negative Capability*" differs from what Keats came to value as the moral and ethical importance of "a complete disinterestedness of Mind" that signals "a pure desire of the

benefit of others" (2.79). For discussions of "*Negative Capability*" as an aesthetic "speculation," see Knapp and Fitzpatrick; as ethical and moral "speculation," see Bate, chap. 10.

5. Harold Bloom writes that "fulfillment for Keats is the betrayal of potential" in "Grecian Urn" (417). Several critics also identify the dynamics Keats discovers in the stasis of the "Urn": see, for example, Brooks 160; Jones 163; Perkins 233; Wasserman 43.

6. I realize that here I somewhat deviate from traditional readings of the last two lines of "Grecian Urn"--ones that either see these lines as entirely spoken by the "Urn" and so directed toward the poet-observer, or that understand "Ye know . . . ye need" to be the poet-observer addressing the reader after the "Urn" has spoken its epigram. Ultimately, it is a matter of syntax, where I feel instead that "Ye" continues the poet-observer's direct address to the "Urn" signalled by "Thou" and thus the realization by the "Urn" of its function and material limitation as art.

7. My reading of "To Autumn" as "*Negative Capability*" essentially agrees with Geoffrey Hartman, who writes that the poem "is the most negative capable of all of Keats's great poems" ("Poem and Ideology" 133).

8. That Autumn is female seems suggested by the details of personification here (i.e., the "hair soft-lifted"). Primarily, I derive this sense of Autumn as female from Bloom 433; and Vendler 233, 251.

9. Paul Fry, in his essay "History, Existence, and 'To Autumn'" which is a response to McGanns' reading of the ode, critiques McGann's politicization and historicizing of "To Autumn" as not allowing Autumn's "music" to be heard:

> The question . . . is not that we all understand that nature was invented by culture --we all do--but whether in interpreting poems like "To Autumn" we can reserve

the conviction that within culture the existential register is still sometimes more appropriate to emphasize than the historical one. (211)

CHAPTER FOUR
To Read as a God Reads: *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*

At the Heart of History

Keats's relationship to the resistance of "things"--to the materiality of the world--began much before "Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn," though by the time of their writing the subject occupied a great deal of his speculation. Two letters prove particularly significant for understanding the materialism of Keats that infuses every aspect of *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*: one, written on 3 May 1818, contains his famous "simile of human life" as a "Mansion of Many Apartments" (1.280); the second, a long letter Keats wrote from 14 February to 3 May 1819, is where he calls "the world . . . 'The vale of Soul-making'" (2.102) and then concludes upon the necessity of "a World of Pains and troubles." Both letters, in their stark recognition of the tragic materiality of life, ultimately become speculations for Keats on the function of reading to realize that materiality, and thereby to know more comprehensively the self's necessary relationship to the process of history. Keats's letters predict the themes he takes up in *The Fall* where his scene of watching, his role of poet-observer, is one of looking upon history and experiencing intensely its "agonies" and "strife." At this point in his career, then, he has come to achieve the "nobler" function of the poet he glimpsed in *Sleep and Poetry*. Now, however, poetry does not "sooth" and "lift" and "ease" so much as it dramatizes what Iser sees as reading's ability to "reflect the process by which we gain experience" and thus to uncover "an element of our being of which we are not directly conscious" ("RP" 64, 68). What Keats makes "conscious" in his "Mansion" and his "vale" is the "experience" of history that in *The Fall* is the dream where "the miseries of the world / Are misery" (1:148-49).

The "Mansion of Many Apartments" in many ways is analogous to the poet's journey of maturity in *Sleep and Poetry* that proceeded first through the "realm" of child-like fancy ("Flora, and old Pan") and then to the "nobler life" of confronting "the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts." Now, almost two years later, Keats recasts that journey as a movement through the more enclosed "realm" of a "Mansion's" several rooms, where the first stage becomes "the infant or thought-less Chamber" (1.280) and the second "the Chamber of Maiden-Thought" (1.281). In the "thought-less Chamber," then, "we do not think" (1.280); we are aware of the second "Chamber" but do not "hasten to it," until the natural process of life "imperceptibly" pulls us to it as the "thinking principle" awakens (1.280). At first we are overwhelmed by the "pleasant wonders" (1.281) of the "Chamber of Maiden-Thought," but this delight quickly fades as "one's vision"--one's ability to read--by necessity comes to see "the heart and nature of Man," a sight that eventually leaves us in the indeterminacy of "a Mist":

> one's vision . . . [convinces] one's Nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain and Sickness and oppression--whereby this Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darkened and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open--but all dark--all leading to dark passages-- . . . We are in a Mist-- . . . . (1.281)

Inevitably, thought leads us to know the harsh materiality of the human condition; finally, "the World" becomes only "dark passages" of uncertainty and doubt. This stage of realization is one that while it opens up various possibilities ("many doors") it leaves those several routes obscured and concealed by "darkness," where we cannot return to thoughtlessness once we know the pervasive suffering and "Pain" of "the World" but instead must confront and *read through* such a

"Mist." The task of the "nobler" poet, then, is to read the "dark passages" and hope subsequently to find the way beyond them.

What the realization of the "vale of Soul-making" tells Keats, however, is that in the end no "way beyond" exists and so we are all "formed by [the] circumstances" (2.103) that are written on the book of "the human heart" (2.102). A "Soul" for Keats signifies the realization of an identity fashioned and formed "by the medium of a world like this" (2.102)--"a world," of course, wracked by "Misery and Heartbreak, Pain and Sickness and oppression." His "vale," therefore, is no haven of escape but another "simile" for the materiality of the world that now looms for Keats as the inescapable condition of existence for which there is no "arbitrary interposition of God" (2.102) to relieve. The process of experience in this "vale" then becomes for Keats the very process of reading:

> I will call the *world* a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read--I will call the *human heart* the *hornBook* used in that School--and will call the *Child able to read, the Soul* made from that *school* and its *hornbook*. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand different ways! (2.102)

As Susan Wolfson says of this "vale," "one is as one reads" (*QP* 346). Keats allegorizes the process of becoming a "Soul" as like having to learn "*to read*": the "*human heart*" is the record of our learning that occurs by engaging with the world, so that the realization of "identity" is that point when we have read the "*heart*" capably enough in all its "Pains and troubles." In this way, each "Soul" bears a unique "identity" because each process of reading converges with a different

"*hornBook*" and fits together a different "consistent pattern" from any other "Soul." Here is Keats's "grander system of salvation than the chrystain religion" (2.102); a "system" where self-realization occurs precisely through engagement with the material circumstances and pressures of the world--where one achieves "identity" in the knowledge of his/her particular text of "circumstances" and "troubles."

The immediate paradox of *The Fall of Hyperion* as a poem about the "miseries of the world," then, is that it is, as its title indicates, *A Dream.* Moreover, it is the *memory* of a dream (a dream, no less, whose key figure is Moneta, the goddess of memory): the poet-observer proposes to "rehearse" his dream at first (1:16), and at the close of Canto I he pauses to "delay, and glean my memory" of Moneta's "high phrase" (1:467-68).[1] But Keats's poet-observer knows this and accedes that judgement upon his production will hinge upon the truth-value of what he remembers:

> Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse
> Be poet's or fanatic's will be known
> When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave. (1:16-18)

The Fall's point of convergence is thus outside of objects of art, the cycle of the seasons, or even apparently the world itself--to the point where the poet-observer's "text" *is* his "dream" and so Keats arrives at his most "unobtrusive" moment so far in a poem of intense self-reflexivity. Ultimately, *The Fall* is the poet-observer's "consistent pattern" that has fit together the gaps and "Mysteries" of his "dream" so that it is finally a text of his own "self." That "self," of course, is the poet.[2] The truth-value of this memory can only be known after the poet's death, because at that point perhaps it will be read and judged as only "dumb enchantment" (1:11)--or as social.

Where *The Fall* signals that it is a "poet's" "dream" and therefore social appears in its "complex allegory of human suffering and tragic knowledge" (Sperry 321). The "dream" begins essentially in "the realm . . . Of Flora and old Pan," as the poet-dreamer come across "a feast of summer fruits" (1:29) which eventually he eats "deliciously" (1:40).[3] It does not remain here long, however, for by the "full draught" (1:46) of a "cool vessel of transparent juice" (1:42) that is the "parent of [his] theme" (1:46), the poet-dreamer is sent into a sleep from which he awakens in a far different place--an "old sanctuary" (1:61) where he at last meets Moneta, receives the "tragic knowledge" of his identity as a poet, and then by Moneta's power observes the suffering inherent to the process of history. The process of the poet's journey through his dream--from a "feast" to a slow, silent and "tragic" watching of the "miseries" of history in the sleeping Saturn--is much like the process through Keats's poetry as a whole where, at the end (Keats died on 23 February 1821, and *The Fall* was his last significant production), the poet remembers and imagines history in the aesthetic form of a "dream" narrative.

Sperry's recognition of the allegory of this narrative proves crucial in that allegory--and Spenser's *Faerie Queene* offers the prime example, perhaps, in English literature--has always held a distinct social function, from its centrality in biblical exegesis to its vast potential as political critique. What allegory demands of its reader is a response to ever-deepening levels of meaning where its fiction (i.e., Spenser's Faeryland; or, here in *The Fall*, the landscape of a "dream"), its aesthetic form, serves as a pathway for the reader to a particular social, political, even ascetic knowledge. The "dream" of *The Fall*, finally, is not an evasion or escape from Keats's "explicit social context" but an aesthetic comment upon that "context" which knows intensely the "tragic" necessity of the materiality of "suffering" and "Pains." Really, in the allegory of Keats's

development as a poet that is his development as a reader, *The Fall* signals the near-inevitability of the poet's confrontation with his "self" that must "feel and suffer in a thousand different ways."[4]

To reach Moneta and receive the "tragic knowledge" of his identity as a poet, the poet-dreamer must first experience the greatest suffering: death. Approaching Moneta's "altar" (1:89, 93), the poet-observer is stopped by her pronouncing "'If thou canst not ascend / These steps, die on that marble where thou art'" (1:108). Hearing and seeing "the tyranny" of Moneta's "fierce threat" (1:119-20), the poet-observer responds:

> Prodigious seem'd the toil; the leaves were yet
> Burning,--when suddenly a palsied chill
> Struck me from the paved level up my limbs,
> And was ascending quick to put cold grasp
> Upon those streams that pulse beside the throat:
> . . .
> One minute before death, my iced foot touch'd
> The lowest stair; and as it touch'd, life seem'd
> To pour in at the toes: I mounted up . . . . (1:121-125, 132-134)

Moneta then coldly sums up the poet-dreamer's experience: "'Thou has felt / What 'tis to die and live again before / Thy fated hour'" (1:141-43). The experience of this mini-resurrection engenders a series of questions from the poet-observer that recall the energy Keats derives from questioning in *Sleep and Poetry* and "Grecian Urn." Now, though, the questions occur from within the poet's "dream" and the answers thus issue from within that same "dream"--the poet,

therefore, questions (i.e., reads) *himself*.

What answers he receives from Moneta ultimately, as Iser describes the eventual end of reading, "formulate the unformulated" of his function as a poet. Here, the theme of discovery returns from "Chapman's Homer," only now the discovery is of the "self." Iser proves of special significance at this point in that his notion of "formulate the unformulated" encapsulates the dynamic potential of self-reflexivity in reading that *The Fall* dramatizes. To recall Iser's understanding of the end of reading: it *reveals* "an element in our being" which we did not before see; it is the "*discovery* of the unformulated"; it "entails what had *previously* seemed to elude our consciousness" ("RP" 68; my emphasis). The poet's "unformulated" function, then, is connected intimately to the materiality of the world's "Pain and Sickness and oppression" for, he learns from Moneta, only "'those to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery, and will not let them rest'" (1:148-49) can ascend the steps of her "altar" and not perish. Consequently, the poet-dreamer poses a question that effectively answers why he was saved from death: "'Are there not thousands in the world . . . Who feel the giant agony of the world; / And more, like slaves to poor humanity, / Labour for mortal good?'" (1:154-59). This "agony" Keats knew in *Sleep and Poetry*; in light of his developed materialism, it has expanded to where it diminishes "humanity" and so the poet seems even more necessary than before to "sooth" and "lift." But the saying of the world's "giant agony" actually produces the harshest question of all from Moneta, who pressures the poet-dreamer by asking "'What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe, / To the great world?'" (1:167-68). She forces upon the poet the most crucial of existential dilemmas because now he cannot escape wondering "'What am I then?'" (1:193).[5] Paul de Man notes that Keats's hopeful progression as a poet "now no longer appears as a reassuring projection, since every step in [that]

progression takes on the form of a tragedy beyond redemption" (188). Despite his great desire that a poet be "'a sage; / A humanist, physician to all men'" (1:189-90), that poetry like the "Urn" be "a friend to man" now and in the future, Keats in *The Fall* has thus come to know the irony of that desire in a world which resists "redemption."

In the allegory of "suffering and tragic knowledge" here the other important theme of "Chapman's Homer" returns--that of access--as the poet-dreamer is taken by Moneta to view (to read) the sacrificial nature of history represented by the deposed, "realmless" (1:324) Saturn. Now *The Fall* intensely enters the "dark passages" branching out from the "Chamber of Maiden-Thought" as the poet-dreamer becomes the spectator, the audience, of a "shady . . . vale" (1:294) slowed to silence and stillness by Saturn and Thea's exhausted sleep. Access to this scene occurs through Moneta, who tells the poet-observer,

> "My power, which to me is a still a curse,
> Shall be to thee a wonder; for the scenes
> Still swooning vivid through my globed brain
> With an electral changing misery
> Thou shalt with those dull mortal eyes behold,
> Free from pain, if wonder pain thee not." (1:243-48)

Moneta's "power" infuses the poet-observer with the ability "To see as a God sees, and take the depth / Of things as nimbly as the outward eye / Can size and shape pervade" (1:304-6). This three-dimensional reading is perhaps the ultimate "*Negative Capability,*" for "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" no longer refers just to the "outward" aspects of "things" but to their "depth"--their "unwritten" qualities made known just as "nimbly."

The poet-observer's ensuing "eagle's watch" (1:309) of a "nerveless, listless, dead" (1:323) Saturn accesses, finally, the unformulated reality of what de Man calls "the full power of negativity" in humanity's "temporal contingency" (188, 187). Here lies the force of Keats's allegory in *The Fall*, as the "unsceptred" (1:324) and "realmless" Saturn exemplifies how humanity is subject to unforseen but necessary changes and usurpations--the powerful eventually become weak and silent and "fixed" (1:391) in their "misery." It is a "negativity" and stillness, finally, the poet-dreamer finds difficult to bear:

> Oftentimes I pray'd
> Intense, that death would take me from the vale
> And all its burthens. Gasping with despair
> Of change, hour after hour I curs'd myself . . . . (1:396-99)

Moneta's "curse" has become his own; there is no "wonder" only "pain" and "despair." "The dreamer," states Wolfson, "discovers that to see as Moneta sees is to incorporate the endless misery of her imagination" (*QP* 354).[6] Even when Saturn finally awakes and speaks, he only "feebly" (1:438) cries repeatedly "'Moan, moan, / Moan . . . moan'" (1:424-25), and announces "'I have no strength left, / Weak as the reed--weak--feeble as my voice-- / O, O, the pain, the pain of feebleness'" (1:427-29). Furthermore, when Saturn and Thea leave the "vale" they go toward yet more tragedy in those who, Moneta tells the poet-dreamer, are "'the families of grief . . . [that] waste in pain / And darkness for no hope'" (1:462-63). The access to this negative knowledge for Keats is through the allegory of a "dream" landscape that ultimately becomes social because, in essence, it (re)produces and so *remembers* (i.e., formulates) the "depth" of a reading of the "burthens" of history discovered within the poet-dreamer's own "*human heart*."[7]

Here there is no escape or elision of "circumstances" but instead a particular reading (or, watching) that knows their "darkness" and communicates it--by way of an aesthetic form that dynamically, to recall the words of Adorno, fulfills itself in the life of humanity because it breathes humanity's materiality.

By Way of Conclusion . . .

The "subject of aesthetics," feels Jane P. Tompkins, began precisely at the point during the latter half of the eighteenth century when author and audience lost their "social contact" owing to the "increase in commercial printing, and the growth of a large reading public" (214). Aesthetics made literature "both impersonal and privatized" because its reception was no longer "an event in the social world with social consequences for author and audience, but . . . an object of scholarly and scientific investigation" (214-16). Keats's speculations on reading and writing would have their origins in these late eighteenth century circumstances.

Historically, therefore, Keats represents a crucial instance of the effects of these circumstances that gave rise to "the subject of aesthetics" and, ultimately, formalism. Donald C. Goellnicht, in fact, places Keats "in the vanguard of those" who understood the "shift" in the author-audience relationship that saw poetry appeal to and require the more intense imaginative involvement of the reader ("'Delicious'" 193). As I have hopefully revealed above, in this Keats offers the pre-history to modern reader-response theories, the most significant of which is Wolfgang Iser's--so that Iser, notes Goellnicht, though he derived his theory from reading novels, "could have found many of the same issues treated by Keats in his letters and worked out in his poetry" (193). But there is a subtle difference I would like mark from Goellnicht's sense that

Keats *understood* the "shift" in the nature of response: primarily, it is to note that Keats, in his letters and poetry, *is* that "shift." By this I suggest that Keats not so much looked at the "shift" from a position perhaps like Levinson's "lucky remove," as that he experienced (i.e., breathed) it, was passionately involved in its efficacy, and so presents it in its all its dynamic potentiality. What Levinson focuses as Keats's middle class context also certainly comes into play here, for Keats not only was a poet who wrote with the reader in mind but, even more importantly, was a *reader* who approached poetry as one of the "large reading public" that swelled out of the middle class. Keats recognized, actually, that "a mighty providence subdues the mightiest minds to the service of the time being" (1.282). If he understood anything, then, it was that he was intimately formed by his historical "time being," and his poetry and letters in their story of reading offer the record of that formation.

The dynamics of that story of reading is often what gets elided or occluded by the New Historicism of McGann and Levinson because they attempt explicitly to overcome or deny the formalism it represents. It seems an amazing critical coincidence that Keats and Iser in their different times could value similarly the reader's crucial role in creating meaning, in creating a "self" through reading. It seems an even more amazing critical maneuver to deny that necessity of the reader's role, especially when such a maneuver blunts and desensitizes the ability of reading to affect the reader's present. Keats and Iser prove that the reader owns a significant part in what a text is made to mean and that every text allows for multiple readings because each reader, in effect, realizes his/her own "work" or "configurative meaning." Handcuffing reading to not just the pastness of a "work" but also to exposing the "uncritical absorptions" of critics and poets alike, McGann and Levinson can be said to almost take the reader out of reading. Morris

Dickstein suggests as much in his article "Damaged Literacy":

> Just as people who are illiterate have, quite involuntarily, lost access to the public sphere, critics and literary intellectuals who are fundamentally hostile to literature, who treat it only as linguistic or social evidence, suffer in their own way from a kind of "damaged literacy." They have opted out of the community of readers, in which critical discourse contributes to public debate. (39)

Levinson herself, Dickstein continues, has "turned her back on the common reader and common sense" because she "comes explicitly to assert the claims of public truth against private meditation; she castigates the Romantic poets for failing in their social responsibility" (39). Brook Thomas, it might be recalled from Chapter One, suggested that New Historicism suffered from a "privileged seat of judgement" much like how Dickstein here describes Levinson. Pulling New Historicism back to the formalism that enables it should thus return it in some sense to the public sphere of debate that Stephen Cole, like Dickstein, feels it cuts off and obstructs.

Keats (as a site of intense New Historicist activity), through his connection to Iser, already implicitly contains the (formalist, aesthetic) path of this return. In the story of reading from "Chapman's Homer" through to *The Fall*, Keats finally offers poetry as the proto-critical and proto-political springboard into a socio-historical awareness that places the "self" distinctly within the material reality of history. Reading is thus always in the present and always potential because that is the process by which the "self" comes to realize its historical "identity." If poetry does not at all times "sooth" and "lift" and "ease" only testifies to Keats's allowance for tension and contradiction, for the dynamics of debate that New Historicism essentially wishes to engage by reading for historical and political themes in his poetry. "Perhaps the honors paid by Man to

Man," wrote Keats, "are trifles in comparison to the Benefit done by great Works to the 'Spirit and pulse of Good' by their mere passive excellence" (1.231). Such "passive excellence," of course, is the "Romantic Ideology" McGann and Levinson strive to demystify by placing "Works" as social acts that precisely lack passivity. Yet here it is not the passivity of the "Work" that truly interests Keats *and* New Historicism: rather, the dynamic ability of the reader to release and realize the "Benefit[s]" of the "Work"--be they social, political, aesthetic, psychological, critical--rests as the final, crucial consideration. Here Keats saw his "idea of doing some good for the World" (1.271). That he chose to do so through "application study and thought" (1.271) should be no reason to deny him the achievement of a "nobler life."

Notes

1. For a similar reading, see Wolfson, *QP* 345.

2. Susan Wolfson writes that, "The protagonist of *The Fall* is authorial 'self,' but like the 'I' of the odes, it is represented without the definition of Keats's empirical 'identity'" (*QP* 344); this sense of the "*Negative Capability*" of the "self" in *The Fall* I discuss below. Also, that *The Fall* is the text of the poet's "self" makes Moneta part of that text, that dream--a point Wolfson addresses as well, noting that "the very stage [Keats] has developed for her attacks subverts her hierarchies: her existence is created by and borne within the the imagination of the dreamer whom she indicts" (*QP* 351).

3. "Keats," writes Bloom, "has re-entered Eden" (422).

4. The connections between allegory and "self" here in *The Fall* find an important

antecedent in Keats's long letter of 14 February to 3 May 1819, where he writes of a "life of Allegory": "A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory," he states, "and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life--a life like the scriptures, figurative-- . . . . Shakespeare led a life of Allegory; his works are the comments on it" (2.67).

5. As Bloom writes of the exchange between Moneta and the poet-dreamer, "Keats encounters scorn and a challenge to his right to exist" (424).

6. Furthermore, Bloom understands that *The Fall* is "a very harsh and purgatorial poem, written with the heart's blood of a poet who senses that death is all but upon him" (430).

7. It is not insignificant here, then, that Keats's first axiom of "Poetry" is that "it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance" (1.238). This of course requires a pervasively "unobtrusive" and negatively capable poet to allow "the Reader" such freedom and self-realization--a poet Keats presents in *The Fall* distinctly because of the intense self-reflexivity of its "dream."

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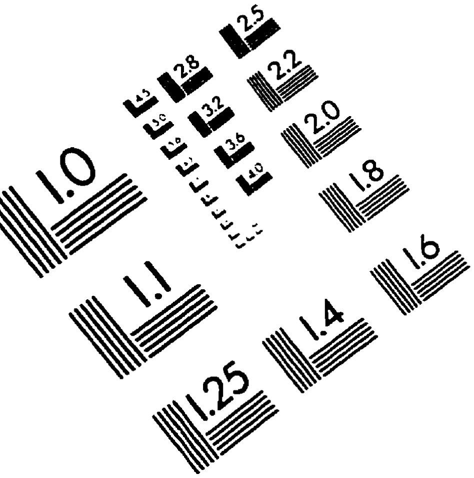

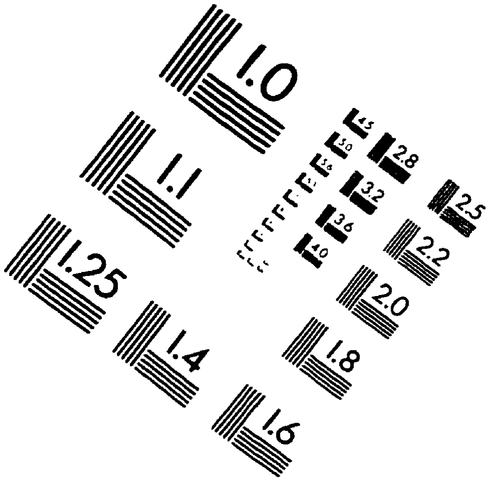

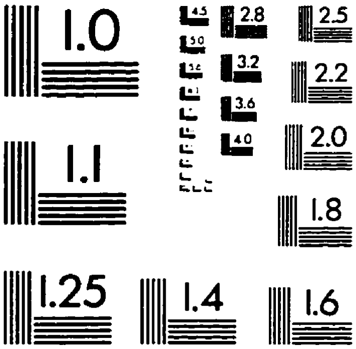

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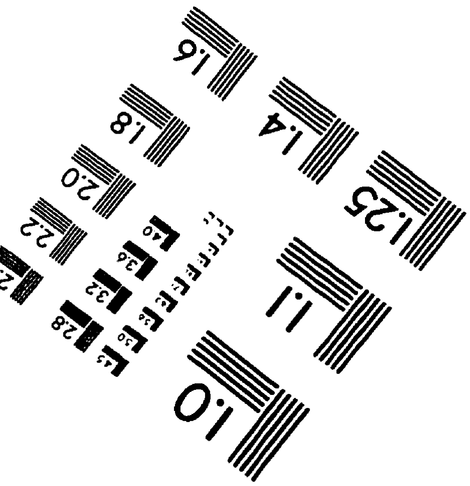

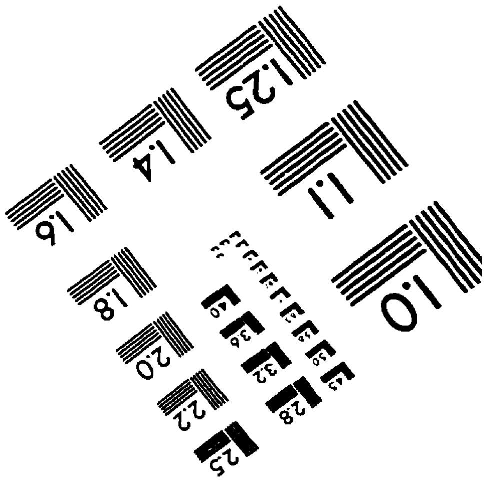

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