Introduction

Written on a folded piece of paper approximately 7½ inches by 4½ inches torn from a larger sheet is an undated note to Keats's publishers, John Taylor and James Hessey:

Mess^rs^ Taylor & Hessey

L.C.S.
My dear Sirs
I am very unfortunate
for I am just going out and have
not a sheet of paper handy – so I can
only beg pardon for this scrap –
and thank you for your kindness
which will be of little use for I
will steal out of town in a day
or two – excuse this shabbyaffair
Your's John Keats
(The *Letters of John Keats* (*LJK*) 1: 127)

The folds visible in the manuscript now held by the Houghton Library at Harvard University (Figure 0.1) indicate that after tearing the sheet from the larger piece, Keats made an envelope for his letter or note in the standard way: folding the sheet in half, he writes on the front page; leaving the middle pages blank in this case, he folds slightly less than one third of the fourth page back over the front page from the top; he then folds the wider lower band up, tucking the overlapping part between the two sheets of the top portion. Turning the folded paper over, he writes the names of his addressees across what is now the front of the self-enveloped letter. The back of the letter would normally be sealed with wax stamped with a personalized emblem to join the two folds. In this case, the faint mark and the tear visible in Figure 0.1 at the top and bottom left respectively (more clearly visible on the blank reverse of the unfolded sheet in the Houghton collection) seems to indicate that the letter was fastened with glue (at what had been the top right of p. 3 and the bottom left of p. 4). A wax seal was

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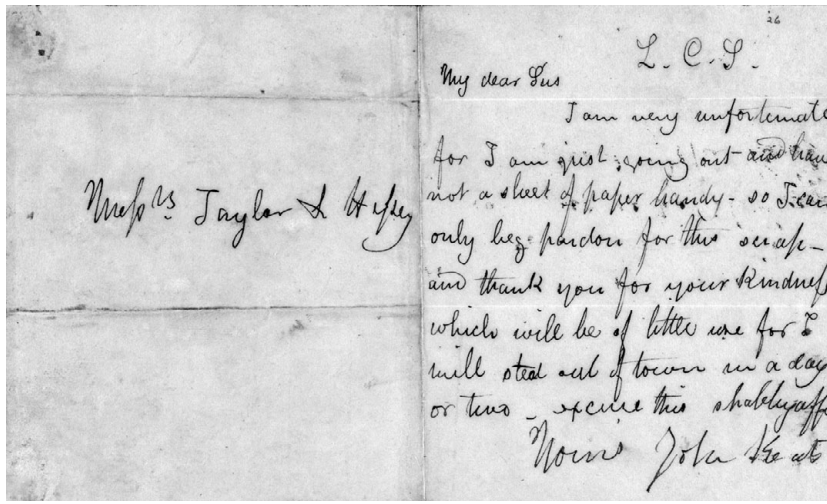


Figure 0.1 Keats to Taylor and Hessey, probably 12/13 April 1817. Image courtesy of the Houghton Library, Harvard University. MS Keats 1–6 (Box 1: 1.6).

more conventionally applied to the middle of the folded back page, and in most of Keats's letters such a seal is very clearly present. But he is not at home and is obviously in a hurry – and then the note, which anyway conveys no confidential information, is to be delivered by hand rather than posted.[1]

What can we glean or surmise from this letter or note? Since it has no post-office date stamp and no address, we know that it was either not sent or that it was sent by messenger. We can assume that Keats was writing from the home of his friend John Hamilton Reynolds at 19 Lamb's Conduit Street by the initials 'L.C.S.' at the top right of the sheet, and it is reasonable to assume that the note was indeed sent and that it was hand delivered to his publishers at their premises a mile away in Fleet Street. Since he doesn't need to spell out his own (temporary) address, we can infer that the note is a reply to a letter from Taylor and Hessey that had been hand delivered to Keats at that address: the torn bottom edge of the sheet seems to indicate that, not having any other paper to hand, Keats used the blank part of his publishers' note to scribble a reply.[2]

But when was it written? Although the note is undated, from the time of its first publication by Amy Lowell in her biography of the poet in 1925, critics have taken it to be soon after Keats first met John Taylor, probably in March 1817, and just before he left for the Isle of Wight on 14 April.[3] And we can be sure that it was written before January 1818, when the

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Reynolds family moved from Lamb's Conduit Street to one of the masters' houses at Christ's Hospital school in Little Britain after John's father, George, took up the position of head writing master at the school.[4] The dating of 12 or 13 April works because Keats talks about leaving town a day or two later, and we know from a letter that he wrote to his brothers from Southampton on the 15th that he left for the Isle of Wight on the evening of the 14th (*LJK* 1: 128). If it is the case that the note was written on 12 or 13 April, we also happen to know (from a letter from Taylor to his father that was posted on the 15th) that this was an important moment for Keats in terms of his publishing future since Taylor and Hessey had recently agreed to publish Keats's second book, and his note certainly seems to indicate Keats's sense of indebtedness to the firm.[5] Robert Gittings goes so far as to assume that Keats's note was a 'brief but warm note of thanks' for the publishers' astute act of foresight in agreeing to publish him, although this seems questionable since the 'kindness' for which Keats expresses his gratitude is more local and immediate: his temporary absence from London, he says, will prevent him from accepting the offer – whether an invitation to a social event, an introduction of some kind, or something more practical, it will be 'of little use', Keats explains, since he is about to leave town.[6]

And yet, while universally accepted by critics, Amy Lowell's dating is less certain than it might appear. Her claim that the note was written just before the Isle of Wight trip appears to rely on the observation that the 'collective and formal address' ('My dear Sirs') indicates that Keats's acquaintance with Taylor and Hessey was 'a very recent thing': 'it is therefore this journey to which the note must refer', she asserts.[7] But in addition to this letter, there are four other surviving letters from Keats to Taylor and Hessey jointly over the next two years (dated 16 May 1817; 10 June 1817; 21 March 1818; and May 1819), all of which use the same greeting, so it is difficult to draw any firm conclusion about the dating of the note from the way he addresses his publishers.[8] Although Lowell doesn't comment on it, the sign-off of the 'scrap' is also notable for its informality. While Keats often signs off his letters with 'Yours' ('. . . sincerely' or '. . . affectionately', or in one notable case '. . . like a Pyramid' (*LJK* 1: 149)), with or without the superfluous apostrophe, this is the only missive to survive that has the notably casual 'Your's' on its own.[9] As it happens, all of the other valedictions in letters to Taylor and Hessey are distinctly formal and warm: 'Your Obedient Serv[t] and Friend' (*LJK* 1: 147); 'Your obliged friend' (1: 148); 'Your's very sincerely' (1: 253); 'Yours truly' (2: 111).

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On further investigation, the reference to leaving town also begins to look somewhat less conclusive as evidence for the dating. The Reynolds family moved out of Lamb's Conduit Street in January 1818, but Keats made two other trips out of London in 1817 (to stay with Benjamin Bailey in Oxford for five weeks between 3 September and 3 October, and to Burford Bridge near Dorking in Surrey from 21 or 22 November to 5 December), so it is possible that the note was written later in the year. Since we know that Keats visited Reynolds in Holborn in late August, shortly before his visit to Oxford, we at least need to allow for the possibility that the letter was written in August rather than April.[10] And given the rather informal, even casual way of writing, including the brisk sign-off, it might be more credible to date it from later in the year, once he has had time to get to know his new publishers better.

But aside from what can be gleaned about the facts of the letter-note's provenance, dating, and context, what are we to make of this 'little undated scrap of a note'?[11] Does it warrant any detailed attention? Why should it interest us?

'Excuse this shabby affair', Keats ends his note, with the words 'shabby affair' squeezed awkwardly and shabbily into the end of the line to ensure that there is space below for the valediction.[12] It's not much of a letter, no more than a note – not exactly life-changing or profound, and not much more than an apology for itself, after all. And yet, context-dependent and context-rich as it is, the note exemplifies, in limited scope, many of the issues raised by the focus and subject-matter of the present book – reading Keats's letters – as well as by a Keatsian epistolary poetics that may be said to arise out of and be necessitated by such an endeavour. Fired off as Keats is leaving his friend's house and as his addressees' messenger waits for a reply (we are assuming), the note has attracted almost no critical interest from the abundant commentary that Keats's life and work – including his letters – have attracted. But elements of a person or personality are visible even here, in this brief, casual note: there is a certain social awkwardness; a keen awareness of and need to apologize for the nature of the note; a refreshing informality in diction, syntax, and punctuation (which is entirely absent, aside from three dashes, themselves characteristic of Keats's epistolary style); a marked sense of a person speaking or writing 'to the moment'; as well as the kind of dignity, generosity, and grace that we often encounter in Keats's fuller and sometimes more formal letters. Most of all, though, the note evokes a sense of the immediacy, presence, and urgency that inhabits much of Keats's letter-writing: we get the impression of a missive thrown off amidst the rush and bustle of life,

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a supplement or distraction from the stuff of living that is, at the same time, itself part of what constitutes a full life. Since it is an important part of the stuff of life that, being written, survives, the note to Keats's publishers allows us a glimpse of the person, and – perhaps no less important – a sense of a vibrant, complex, conflicted relationship with others in all its awkward, apologetic, scrappy but warmly friendly actuality. For all its casual infelicities, and for all our doubts about its dating and the specific circumstances of its writing, the note is richly evocative in its decorous apology for itself, and in its graceful informality. Not so shabby after all, it is, we might say, worthy of our attention.

Letters have their own weight and shape, their own textual heft, specific texture, and form. They occupy a certain space, and they constrain and limit writing through that spatiality, that place on the posted page. Letters are material – paper, ink, usually wax, sometimes string or ribbon (especially for longer, international letters bound up as packages) – and they have a weight and a presence that come to bear on their composition as well as on how they are read. At the same time, letters respond, are responsive, and are responded to – intellectually and affectively, to be sure, but also in practical terms by means of other letters or in actions that follow from them. As well as reflecting on the world, letters have effects in that world, and on it; they are consequential just as they are consequence-driven – aleatory, contingent, and contextual. And like other forms of writing, but in ways that reflect their individuality, letters are at once singular or specific instances and rule-based, genre-driven, and intertextual.

There is no way of knowing how many letters Keats wrote during his short life. Approximately 250 have survived the two centuries since the poet's death in Rome in February 1821. Spanning, with one possible exception, just over four years from the summer of 1816 to November 1820, as they are collected and published today the bulk of the letters fit into a medium-sized paperback book:[13] 370 pages for the 169 letters plus notes in Jon Mee's Oxford World's Classics 'selected' edition (published in 2002 as an update of Robert Gittings's volume from 1970); 564 pages for the 191 letters (including part-letters) in John Barnard's 2014 Penguin edition, interweaved with biographical information. You can carry a copy of the letters – Keats's prosthetic life – in your coat pocket, as Keats supposedly carried individual volumes from his 'minute', three-volume edition of Cary's translation of Dante and his seven-volume edition of Shakespeare, and as Shelley is said to have been carrying Leigh Hunt's copy of Keats's *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other*

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Poems (1820) when he drowned off the coast of Italy in 1822.[14] So you can dip into Keats's letters as you wait for your bus or eat your sandwich in the park or sip your flat white in a high-street Costa. A bit like Keats, who lived shortly before the first (horse-drawn) London buses but may well have eaten a sandwich or sat in a London coffee house as he pored over Dante's account of hell, purgatory, and heavenly redemption, or read in one of his Shakespeare volumes of Troilus's tormented desire – or indeed read the eponymous Pamela's hastily written, melodramatic missives in Samuel Richardson's groundbreaking epistolary novel from 1740, or the fraught love-correspondence of Julie d'Étanges and St Preux in Rousseau's equally influential *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761).[15]

Keats was little known before his death from tuberculosis at the age of twenty-five, and his reputation as a poet grew quite slowly over the following quarter of a century until the publication of Richard Monckton Milnes's *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats* in 1848 began more decisively to insert him into the English tradition to which he aspired to belong.[16] The eighty letters that Milnes published in whole or in part made up the bulk of the two volumes (the publication is as much a 'collected letters' as a biography in a conventional sense) and helped to establish Keats as a major figure in English literature. Supplementing the power of his poems, the strangeness, wisdom, everyday banality, and rhetorical brio of the letters told a compelling story of the poet's brief life and tragically early death.[17] Thirty years later, the letters collected in Milnes's *Life* were augmented by the publication of thirty-seven hitherto unpublished letters to Keats's lover, Fanny Brawne, in a volume edited by Harry Buxton Forman. The love letters became something of a *cause celebre*, being widely denounced for offences against decorum and good taste by its editor in tactlessly publishing such private, intimate, anguished, heartfelt documents. And for some critics, what they saw as the undignified, maudlin sentimentality that Keats expressed in his passionate, often troubled and sometimes emotionally coercive letters to Fanny reinforced what writers such as Lord Byron and Thomas Carlyle had long lamented in his poetry (see *Keats: The Critical Heritage* (*KCH*) 34–6, 128–32). The letters 'ought never to have been published', opined Matthew Arnold, two years after they were – and, in this at least, agreeing with Algernon Swinburne ('of all persons', as Hyder Edward Rollins wryly puts it), who had lamented, on the letters' publication, Keats's 'piteous . . . wailing and shrieking agony', denouncing them as not 'manly': not only should they not have been published, but they 'ought never to have been written', Swinburne opines (quoted in *LJK* 1: 4). As his health declines, the

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love letters 'pass further and further into the harsh black shadows of disease': 'unbalanced, wayward, and profuse', William Michael Rossetti opines in his 1887 biography, Keats 'abandons all self-restraint, and lashes out right and left'.[18]

Nevertheless, Forman continued to publish and republish editions of the letters, including those to Fanny Brawne, and more than 190 letters were included in his 1883 edition. By the early twentieth century – partly, no doubt, in reaction to the perceived prudish censoriousness of an earlier generation – writers and critics had begun to identify the letters as 'creative events in their own right',[19] and they began to be elevated to canonical status along with the writer's greatest poems. Institutionalized by being the topic of one of A. C. Bradley's influential 'Lectures on Poetry' at Oxford University in 1909, they were subsequently lauded by T. S. Eliot in a 1933 lecture at Harvard University as 'the most notable and the most important ever written by any English poet': Keats's 'greatness', Eliot declares, appears even 'more clearly in his Letters than in his poems', while in his introduction to a 1951 selection of the letters, the influential American critic Lionel Trilling described them as being 'virtually equal' to Keats's poems in literary merit.[20] Twenty-first-century critics have only confirmed such judgments: Jonathan Ellis declares Keats to be 'arguably the greatest poet letter writer' (presumably in any language), Daniel Karlin asserts that the letters have 'equal status with the poetry', and John Barnard echoes Eliot by declaring that they might be said to constitute a '*greater* literary achievement' than that of the poems.[21]

The aim of this book is to take these assessments seriously and to consider what happens when one reads the letters as, in themselves, a body of work. While the letters have functioned as a source of literary-critical fascination ever since Keats became the subject of formal academic literary-critical study in the early twentieth century, it is only in recent decades that critics have begun to develop a vocabulary and critical approach that can fully begin to respond to the letters' intuitive, inventive rhetorical and linguistic brilliance, to what we might call their *literariness*. Building on pioneering work by critics such as Greg Kucich, Susan Wolfson, Timothy Webb, and John Barnard, the present study seeks to establish a critical framework for Keats's letters as a body of work. It asks, in effect, what it means to claim – as the back-cover blurb to Mee's Oxford World's Classics edition does – that the letters are 'great works of literature in their own right'.

The present book addresses two fundamental questions: what kind of thing is a letter, considered as a literary object? And how can we apply the

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techniques of formal close reading to the letter conceived of as such? The discipline of literary studies has always been interested in the power and cultural resonance of letter-writing as a mode or genre, and in recent decades critics and cultural historians such as Eve Tavor Bannet, Clare Brant, Louise Curran, Mary McAlpin, Bruce Redford, and Susan Whyman have given us illuminating studies of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century letters by individuals or groups of writers.[22] But such studies have tended to examine letter-writing as a cultural practice rather than to consider letters as literary objects in their own right – and perhaps with good reason: it can seem contradictory to apply the complex formal apparatus of literary criticism to writings that are often (as is Keats's note to his publishers) scrappily and speedily produced in what W. H. Auden calls 'a helter-skelter rush',[23] and composed often without much thought, attention to detail, or correction, and with little consideration to questions of form, rhetoric, genre, and style. After all, these are generally documents intended to be read by just one or two people, and even when they can be expected to be exchanged among friends, all of the readers would usually be personally known to the writer. There can be something excessive, unbalanced, and intrusive about closely reading such typically informal, ephemeral, and unpremeditated documents. And yet this is also what energizes and necessitates such a study – the complex and seemingly disjunctive relationship between the private and the personal, on the one hand, and on the other (in the case of Keats's letters) the highly self-conscious, brilliantly inventive, and literarily creative.

Arranged around a series of interlinking themes that emerge prominently from the concerns and practices of Keats's letters, each chapter of this book examines an exemplary cluster of correspondence – usually addressed to just one or two individuals – and while there is a certain degree of thematic and in some cases epistolary overlap (sometimes, I have found myself coming at a particular letter in more than one chapter from more than one direction, with more than one question to ask of it), I have tried to take into account the full chronological range of the letters, from the earliest to the latest, in all the rich thematic and stylistic diversity of this body of work. The book follows a chronological movement after two opening chapters – with the preponderance of the letters that I discuss in Chapters 3–5 coming from 1817–18 and in Chapters 6–8 from the final two years of Keats's life. The arrangement reflects the two-volume division of the standard scholarly edition of the letters, which hinges around the death of Keats's younger brother Tom at the beginning of December

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1818 – just weeks after the poet met Fanny Brawne, and five months after the departure of his other brother, George, for a new life in America. I am not the first to notice that this concatenation of 'circumstances', as Keats would call them, ushered in (and perhaps led to) the efflorescence of extraordinary and highly original poetry that was written in the first nine months of 1819. But there is also a turn at this point as Keats's attention pivots to George and his wife in America, and to his lover and later fiancée, Fanny Brawne, nearer to hand. Questions of intimacy and of epistolary distance and presence come more to the fore, while questions of friendship and literary or political allegiance, and of poetic ambition itself, tend to fade into the background.

In Chapter 1, I offer an overview of some of the larger questions that the book addresses, including especially the question of contingency. Building on Mary Favret's punning insistence that we should 'read the envelope of contingency that surrounds any letter',[24] I argue that chance or happenstance – just the sheer stuff of life – governs letters and letter-writing in multiple ways, and that what I call 'radical contingency' can be said to set letters apart from literary works more conventionally conceived. The question of contingency chimes with one of Keats's own governing ideas about life – with what he repeatedly refers to in the letters, usually with a poignant sense of its essential tragedy, as life's 'circumstances', 'chance', or 'accidents'.

In Chapter 2, I look in detail at some of the ways in which Keats directly confronts the nature of letter-writing and the sense that he can even be seen to develop something like an epistolary poetics within his correspondence. Particularly alert to the material circumstances and practical dimensions of epistolarity, Keats's letters are studded by moments that foreground his interest in what letters are and how they work – including what they are made of and the tools and materials that circumscribe them, their material circumstances or contingencies – as well as his impulse to push against the generic and formal limits of the letter.

In Chapter 3, I focus in on a small number of letters from Keats to his poet-friend John Hamilton Reynolds that were written in the first few months of their friendship in late 1817 and early 1818. I examine the ways in which some of the main tenets of Keats's conceptual or theoretical position on both letter-writing and literary criticism arise, ad hoc, out of the interchange of letters with a poet with whom he actively and competitively collaborated. My larger argument in this chapter is that letter-writing is, or can be, intrinsically collaborative, but that the attention that Keats pays in his letters to Reynolds to questions of literature can shed light on the collaborative or corresponding dimensions of literary criticism as such.

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Chapter 4 explores the ways in which letters help to construct and perform poetic selfhood – and how, in part through the happenstance of letter-writing itself, John Keats becomes a poet. It is in and through letters as much as through the writing of poems that Keats invented for himself a poetic identity (a 'poetical Character', as he would call it (*LJK* 1: 386)). In this chapter, I begin by examining Keats's construction of a poetic self in a number of letters written between April and May 1817 to two mentor-friends, Leigh Hunt and Benjamin Robert Haydon, before moving on to discuss a cluster of formative letters to and from Keats in the late summer and autumn of 1818, culminating in the presentation of his idea of the poet as 'camelion' – as responding to circumstances and changing environments, and ideally as having no 'identity' – in a rightly famous letter of October 1818 to his friend and his publishers' legal and literary advisor, Richard Woodhouse.

In Chapter 5, I address the question of friendship – one of the founding principles of, and one of the main reasons for writing, the 'familial' letter.[25] I suggest that the exchange of letters between Keats and his friend the artist Benjamin Robert Haydon itself sustained but also threatened the friendship because of its engagement with the paradoxical logic of reciprocity. I pay particular attention to the inherent contingency of epistolary friendship – friendship that is supplemented or sustained by epistolary contact – in the case of Keats's mutually flattering but sometimes difficult relationship with a man who shared the poet's sense of artistic ambition while lacking his talent and genius. I argue that, as a kind of gift exchange, the interchange of letters between two people may be said to be governed by the economics of an implicit but ultimately impossible reciprocity.

Chapter 6 moves to the letters written primarily in 1819, beginning with some of those to Keats's brother George and sister-in-law Georgiana after they embark on a new life in America in the summer of 1818. I explore the paradox that letters can at times generate a sense of intimacy not so much in spite of distance but *because* of it. Keats often seems to find the presence of other people oppressive (they 'press' on him) and to value the prosthetic presence that a letter allows – the space it offers for a different kind of intimacy. I also consider some of the ways in which letters can be said to be 'touching' (contingent in that sense) – the way they can touch a person emotionally by being, themselves, material, tactile, and touchable. For obvious reasons, perhaps, the question of touching letters is particularly acute when it comes to those most intimate of missives, letters written to a lover. In his love letters, Keats is particularly attuned to the physical touch of the letter, and to the touching of it, as well

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as to the way that a letter can be emotionally 'touching' precisely by being distanced, mediated, and delayed – by being virtual or prosthetic.

Building on but in some ways reversing this analysis, I examine in Chapter 7 some of the thirty-nine surviving letters from Keats to Fanny Brawne from the perspective of their distancing function. Keats's often distinctly fraught and sometimes emotionally coercive letters and notes to Fanny mostly date from the summer and early autumn of 1819, when he was away from London on a writing retreat, and from February to March 1820, when he was living right next door to the Brawne family at Wentworth Place in Hampstead but was often too unwell to see her. I explore the ways in which Keats's love letters are informed and, in some ways, instructed by the writers he happens to be reading. I argue that this is itself part of a strategy whereby a letter can distance the writer from the recipient as much as bring the two together: Keats's amorous intertextuality – his deployment of specific literary traditions in his love letters – itself distances the writer from the object of his desire.

In the final chapter of the book, I look at a critical moment in Keats's life and career and trace the ways in which his letters work through a crucial decision about his future. Focusing on the letters written during a single week in September 1819, I look at Keats's sense, at this point, that he is, or will be, 'unpoeted' – that he can no longer be a poet. Alone in the small city of Winchester, Keats writes a series of interlinked and sometimes overlapping letters that ultimately move him towards a decision concerning whether or not to end his career as a poet. I align the specific circumstances of the limited space of the cathedral city to which Keats has moved temporarily to write poetry with the limited space of the letter page itself in order to examine the consequences of working out a critical life choice in and through correspondence.

The book ends with a brief postscript on not reading letters. I look at the way that, at the end of his life – dying in Rome, having effectively stopped writing poetry more than a year earlier – Keats is no longer able to read, let alone write, even letters; and I look at the way that this epistolary stoppage has itself fed into the cultural reception of the life and work of a poet who has become admired, respected, and loved for his correspondence as much as for his poems.

In the reading and the writing of them, letters offered Keats joy, laughter, contact, intimacy as well as distance, vital sources of support, crucial information, poetry, friendship, love, and compassion. But whether considered as material objects or as more abstract, conceptual, or affective, letters were also a source of anxiety and uncertainty and even of distrust,

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crisis, and despair. Letters played many roles in Keats's life and fulfilled many functions, and as we shall see they were instrumental in relation to and inextricably bound up in his development as a poet. But this book is also concerned with the ways in which Keats's letters can be considered works as such – and can be read and celebrated as often brilliant, witty, inventive, and surprising – while also being understood as embedded or entangled in networks of relationship, in immediate cultural and political events, in the multiple happenstances of living, and in the unpredictable, the quotidian, and the ineluctably circumstantial.

Notes

1 Such a seal is clearly in evidence in the next letter held by the Houghton Library, for example, to Benjamin Robert Haydon, 10–11 May 1817 (Houghton Library, Harvard University MS Keats 1.7 (p. 4)). As it happens, Keats's first formal letter to his publishers in the Houghton collection is also and more obviously sealed to one corner (see letter to Taylor and Hessey, 10 June 1817, MS Keats 1.9). For a standard letter, on larger paper, the back of the sheet was usually also partly folded in from the sides, allowing for large margins that were themselves often written on and enclosed within the enveloped letter (as is the case for MS Keats 1.7).

2 There is at least one other Keats letter to Taylor and Hessey posted from when he was staying at the Reynolds house: date stamped 10 June 1817, it was sent by two-penny post and also stamped 'unpaid' and 'LambsConduit St' (*LJK* 1: 147). For a speculative account of the circumstances of Keats's first meeting with his new publishers, see Amy Lowell, *John Keats*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1925), vol. 1: pp. 286–7. We might wonder whether either the writer or the recipients registered the resonant initials of the address – whether the London Corresponding Society, the banned radical federation from the 1790s, whose very name may be said to evoke the potential subversive power of letter-writing, was noted. For a brief account of the long tradition of letter-writing as a potentially 'subversive political tool', see Nichola Deane, 'Reading Romantic Letters: Charlotte Smith at the Huntington', *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 66: 3/4 (2003): 393–410 (394–7).

3 Edmund Blunden cites a letter from John Taylor's brother of 26 March that almost certainly replies to a letter from Taylor describing his first meeting with Keats, presumably a few days earlier (*Keats's Publisher: A Memoir of John Taylor (1781–1864)* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936), p. 41). Biographers assume that Keats was introduced to Taylor and Hessey by J. H. Reynolds (whose *The Naiad* was published by the firm in 1816), or by his close friend Benjamin Bailey (himself a friend of Taylor).

4 Leonidas M. Jones, *The Life of John Hamilton Reynolds* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1984), pp. 123, 130. As Jones explains, although the Reynolds family had the use of the Christ's Hospital house from May 1817,

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they were unable to move there until January 1818 (p. 123). Jones also notes that Keats did not visit Reynolds in Lamb's Conduit Street before 6 November 1816 (p. 98).

5 See Tim Chilcott, *A Publisher and His Circle: The Life and Work of John Taylor, Keats's Publisher* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 25; and see *LJK* 1: 127n. Lowell calls Keats's meeting with Taylor 'one of the most fortunate steps in his life' (*John Keats*, vol. 1: p. 287).

6 Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 193; see also R. S. White, *John Keats: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 72, for a similar assumption. Lowell suggests that Taylor and Hessey had 'given him some standing invitation, or offered him some privilege' (*John Keats*, vol. 1: p. 295).

7 Lowell, *John Keats*, vol. 1: p. 295.

8 Hyder Edward Rollins's edition of the letters also includes a one-line note to Keats's publishers asking for some books to be sent to Fanny Keats from June 1820 (*LJK* 2: 302), and a legal assignment of copyright from 16 September 1820 (*LJK* 2: 334–6): neither document names its addressees or is a letter in the conventional sense.

9 Just in 1817, we find 'Your's most sincerely' (*LJK* 1: 124), 'Your sincere Friend' (1: 134) 'ever & ever yours' (1: 136), 'Your sincere friend' (1: 140), 'Your's truly' (1: 151), 'Yours sincerely' (1: 157), 'Yours faithfully' (1: 166), 'Yours eternally' (1: 168), 'your sincere friend and brother' (1: 171), 'your affectionate friend' (1: 175), and 'your sincere and affectionate friend' (1: 182).

10 We also know that he was at the Reynolds's home on 2 November 1817, although this is, so far as we know, not just 'a day or two' before leaving London on another trip (see *LJK* 1: 181).

11 Lowell, *John Keats*, vol. 1: p. 295.

12 This is not the only time he uses 'shabby' to describe his letters/the paper on which they are written: in two letters to his sister Fanny, from 22 December 1819 and 12 April 1820, he apologizes for his 'shabby' writing (*LJK* 2: 239, 285); he also playfully scolds his sister-in-law Georgiana in the part of a letter dated September 1819 for sending him 'such a shabby sheet of paper', which is, he says, 'in some degree made up for by the beautiful impression of the seal' (*LJK* 2: 213).

13 There are 250 letters by Keats in the two-volume standard scholarly edition edited by Hyder Edward Rollins in 1958, give or take (this excludes a legal note signed by the Keats brothers but includes jointly written letters with Charles Brown and mere scraps of notes). Two more – a letter to his brothers dated 30 January 1818, and one to William Haslam of 2 November 1819 – have since come to light. For the first, see Dearing Lewis, 'A John Keats Letter Rediscovered', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 47 (1998): 14–18; the letter is printed in Grant F. Scott, ed., *Selected Letters of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 82–4, and in John Barnard, ed., *John Keats: Selected Letters* (London: Penguin, 2014), pp. 102–4. For the second (from which Rollins was only able to print two sentences), see Scott, *Selected Letters*,

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p. 393. The locations of the manuscripts and transcriptions of Keats's letters are detailed in Rollins's edition, with more recent updates in, successively, Jack Stillinger, 'The Manuscripts of Keats's Letters: An Update', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 36 (1987): 16–19; Barbara Rosenbaum, 'John Keats', in *Index of English Literary Manuscript, Volume IV, 1800–1900*, 3 vols. (London: Mansell, 1990), vol. 2: pp. 342–3; and Grant F. Scott, 'New Keats Letters: An Update', *Keats-Shelley Journal* 51 (2002): 21–9. The possible exception mentioned here is the 'epistolary poem' addressed to G. F. Mathew, discussed in Chapter 1, which survives from November 1815 – this is partly itself a problem of definition, including the sub-definitional question of whether the poem was ever intended to be posted or was ever written *as* a letter in the conventional sense (see *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (*OED*), 'letter', n.1, II.4.a: 'A written communication addressed to a person, organization, or other body, *esp.* one sent by post or messenger; an epistle'). So the precise number of letters that survive either in manuscript form or as a transcript depends on what is counted as a letter, and whether one counts as a letter a note or legal document signed by Keats, such that the figures given can never be definitive. Robert Gittings, for example, counts 'a little over two hundred and forty' letters (Gittings, ed., *Letters of John Keats: A Selection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. xxi). And then there are letters that have not survived, some of which we know about. Rollins helpfully lists sixty-seven 'lost letters' (sometimes just brief notes, sometimes parts of letters where other parts have survived) specifically mentioned by Keats or others but not preserved (*LJK* 1: 9–13). As he comments, 'If by some miracle every letter that Keats wrote had been preserved, biographers would have practically a day-by-day chronicle of his life in 1816–1820' (*LJK* 1: 14).

14 See *LJK* 1: 294, where Keats tells Benjamin Bailey that if he is to take any book on his upcoming Scottish tour 'it shall be those minute volumes of carey for they will go into the aptest corner'; see also *LJK* 1: 343. Ernest de Selincourt refers to Cary's so-called pocket edition of Dante as 'the pocket companion of Keats upon his Scotch tour' ('Review of R. W. King, *The Translator of Dante: The Life, Work, and Friendships of Henry Francis Cary (1772–1844)*', *Review of English Studies* 2: 8 (1926): 486), and at 16mo (6 ¾ inches x 4 inches) and about 200 pages each, one or more volumes would certainly have been accommodated in an average-size coat pocket. John Barnard claims, not unreasonably, that the three small volumes were carried in Keats's knapsack on his Scottish tour ('Keats, Burns, and Scotland: "Blind in Mist"', in Katie Garner and Nicholas Roe, eds., *John Keats and Romantic Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 89), but we can be reasonably sure that, at any one time, one or more of the volumes would have been tucked into a pocket for easy access. On Keats's Shakespeare volumes, see Caroline Spurgeon's description of Keats's 1814, 12mo edition of Shakespeare: 'a set of seven stocky and rather attractive little volumes, chosen, one would imagine, chiefly for their handy pocket size (4 ¾" x 3")' (*Keats's Shakespeare: A Descriptive Study Based on New Material*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), p. 1).

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15 The first London bus started operating in 1829: www.londonbusmuseum.com/george-shillibeer-father-of-the-london-bus/. Keats mentions visiting coffee houses (although not specifically to drink coffee: on the first occasion to dance and the second to drink claret) at *LJK* 1: 206 and 2: 64, and he also mentions them at *LJK* 2: 92. The first entry in the *OED* for 'sandwich' in the familiar sense is from 1762 (see *OED*, 'sandwich', n. 2). For more on Keats's interest in and identification with Troilus, especially the Shakespeare version of the character, see Chapter 7.

16 G. M. Matthews comments that it is 'an appropriate convention' to take Milnes's *Life* 'as the dividing-line between Keats's obscurity and his fame' (*KCH* 31); Nicholas Roe argues that Milnes's volumes were 'decisive' in establishing Keats as 'among the English poets' (*John Keats and the Perils of Posterity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), p. 221). Roe's richly detailed study offers an authoritative account of Keats's reception through the nineteenth century.

17 For an analysis of the contents of Milnes's biography, which also included a total of seventy-seven poems in whole or part, see Roe, *Perils of Posterity*, pp. 212–21. As Jennifer Wallace points out, Milnes's biography 'propagated a new image of Keats which still has force today . . . of Keats the letter writer' such that his letters 'are now considered to be an integral part of his oeuvre' (Wallace, ed., *Lives of the Great Romantics, Part II, Volume 1: Keats* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1997), pp. xviii–xix). See Donald Reiman's comment that what is uniquely compelling about Keats's letters has to do with them being so often 'open, candid, uncalculating, ingenuous [and] self-revealing' (Reiman, ed., *Shelley and His Circle, Volume V, 1773–1822* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), p. 436).

18 William Michael Rossetti, *Life of John Keats* (London: Walter Scott, 1887), pp. 45–6. For a brief account of the early reception of the publication of the Fanny Brawne letters, see Francis O'Gorman, 'Critical Reception, 1821–1900', in Michael O'Neill, ed., *John Keats in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 324–9.

19 Susan J. Wolfson, 'Keats the Letter-Writer: Epistolary Poetics', *Romanticism Past and Present* 6: 2 (1982): 43–61 (44). Wolfson is one of relatively few critics to have sought to develop (primarily via considerations of thinking and speculation, performance, absence, and self-scrutiny) an analysis of Keats's 'epistolary poetics': for others, see Chapter 1. (pp. 26–7)

20 A. C. Bradley, 'The Letters of Keats', in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1909), pp. 209–46; T. S. Eliot, 'Shelley and Keats', in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 100; Lionel Trilling, 'The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters', in *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1955), p. 3.

21 Jonathan Ellis, 'Last Letters: Keats, Bishop and Hughes', in Jonathan Ellis, ed., *Letter Writing among the Poets: From William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 231; Daniel Karlin, 'Editing Poems in Letters', in Ellis, *Letter Writing*, p. 45n (Karlin lists Emily Dickinson,

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Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Elizabeth Bishop as other such poets); John Barnard, 'Keats's Letters: Remembrancing and Enchaining', in Susan J. Wolfson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 121 (italics added). As Nichola Deane suggests, Keats's letters have 'with some exceptions, been seen as almost the ideal literary letters' ('Letters, Journals and Diaries', in Nicholas Roe, ed., *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 584.

22 See Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-Century Letters and British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Louise Curran, *Samuel Richardson and the Art of Letter-Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Mary McAlpin, *Gender, Authenticity, and the Missive Letter in Eighteenth-Century France: Marie-Anne de La Tour, Rousseau's Real-Life Julie* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006); Bruce Redford, *The Converse of the Pen: Acts of Intimacy in the Eighteenth-Century Familiar Letter* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986); Susan Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660–1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); see also Sarah Goldsmith, Sheryllynne Haggerty, and Karen Harvey, eds., *Letters and the Body, 1700–1830: Writing and Embodiment* (London: Routledge, 2023). On the interaction between ordinary letters and the letter as a literary source or model, see Mary Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). On the interaction of manuscript with print in eighteenth-century epistolary culture, see Melanie Bigold, *Women of Letters, Manuscript Circulation and Print Afterlives in the Eighteenth Century: Elizabeth Rowe, Catharine Cockburn, and Elizabeth Carter* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and for a wide-ranging account of pre-1700 letter-writing, see Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500–1700* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

23 W. H. Auden, 'Keats in His Letters', *Partisan Review* 18: 6 (1951): 701–6 (705). According to Auden, 'Keats's peculiar epistolary style' is quite different from the poems: 'no one who had read the Odes, so calm and majestic in pace, so skilfully and tightly organized, could possibly foresee the helter-skelter rush of the letters in which the thoughts tumble over each other, defying the laws of grammar, spelling and punctuation', he writes in his review of Trilling's edition.

24 Favret, *Romantic Correspondence*, p. 56.

25 As it happens, Charles Brown – Keats's closest of friends and recipient of the last surviving (and probably the last in general) letter that the poet wrote – argues in an essay on 'Letter-Writing', published in *The Liberal* in 1823, that 'friendship can best express itself by the pen; from which alone the closest friendships have sometimes originated' (Maurice Buxton Forman, ed., *Some Letters & Miscellanea of Charles Brown, The Friend of John Keats and Thomas Richards* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 115).

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