Keats and food: language of the edible in John Keats's letters and poems

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KEATS AND FOOD: LANGUAGE OF THE EDIBLE IN JOHN KEATS’S LETTERS AND POEMS

By

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Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the language of food and drink in the letters and poetry of John Keats. In sifting through his letters, famous for his unselfconscious thoughts on the nature of poetry and poetic composition, it is possible to construct the details of his culinary life not only as it pertains to daily eating habits but also in how he uses the language of food to articulate the sensations achieved in the course of writing and reading poetry. Keats frequently adapted this language to describe these activities because for him, the way food is consumed and synthesized to nourish the body is parallel to the consumption of poetry and its subsequent nourishing effect on a soul. Throughout the letters this is seen most often in metaphors where poetry is transformed into a literary morsel and is offered via the page to a reader. Such readable crumbs usually preface, in letters or poems, an intellectual shift or journey into another space or imagined consciousness. The presence of edible objects designates that shift as emotionally and symbolically important.
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**Introduction**

In several biographies of John Keats one finds an account describing the earliest days of his arrival in Rome with Joseph Severn in which Keats throws, among cauliflower and macaroni, a cooked chicken out of a window onto the steps below. Allegedly this was in protest of the “very bad dinners” (Severn, 27) and it is noted that subsequent meals showed a vast improvement in quality. The first mention of this strange and amusing event appears in *The Life and Letters of Joseph Severn* as compiled by William Sharp in 1892 though it seems clear that Sharp embellished Severn’s own account of the incident. That first-hand version, written many years after the journey ended with Keats’s death in February 1821, includes a defenestrated meal but the contents are unidentified. This anecdote is one of several curious incidents that influence the Keatsian legacy as preoccupied with the edible. Lionel Trilling describes Keats as “unique among poets in the extensiveness of his reference to eating and drinking and to its pleasurable or distasteful sensations” (Trilling, 234). These references are not limited to his poetry, although that is certainly full of morsels described with sensuous imagery, but surface throughout his correspondence. A rich culinary life arises not just in the most famous moments—as when he was a guest at the ‘Immortal Dinner’ dining with, among others, Wordsworth—but in the mundane packets of daily life immortalized by the page. Convalescing in Wentworth Place after the violent hemorrhage that signaled for certain that tuberculosis had a foothold in his lungs, Keats writes to Fanny Brawne:

> These last lines are in a much better style of penmanship [though] a little disfigured by the smear of black currant jelly; which has made a little mark on one of the Pages of Brown’s Ben Johnson, the very best book he has. I have lick’d it but it remains very purple (letters: II, 262)

The jam was no doubt one of the “many presents of jam and jellies” sent as get-well tokens so numerous they “reach[ed] side by side the length of the sideboard” (letters: II, 256). This is an
essential Keats moment full of the strange charm that marks many of his letters: a habit of eating while reading or writing leads to a blob of jam on a page and he licks it. Would a napkin not have been satisfactory? It certainly wouldn’t be as funny, but aside from that desire to seem in high spirits and to entertain a beloved, Keats’s interaction with poetic text as something eaten is apparent throughout his theories on writing and reading poetry: the chameleon poet, outlined in an 1818 letter, “does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright” (letters: I, 387). The language of eating and tasting is particularly noticeable in Keats’s discussions of his own reading habits. “I long to feast upon old Homer as we have upon Shakespeare” (letters: I, 274) he writes, and expresses a ravenous appetite for poetry itself. Presenting the works of formative authors as feasts further articulates that the works and words in poems retain a power to nourish a hungry intellect, conceptualizing the reading experience as a meal and gesturing towards the social implications contained in the space of a shared table. By attempting to understand the world through the senses Keats turns to the language of food to express his ideas about how poetry works physically in the body to contribute to the development of a soul. Often, eating and drinking appear as activities in Keats’s poems before a sustained imaginative experience so that the textual meal functions as a nourishing force that enables a reader, and the writer, to move into imagined realms where the poetic thought manifests physically in the body.

That poetry sustains is a concept Keats articulated early in his poetic life. When he writes “I find that I cannot exist without poetry,” (letters: I, 133) he prematurely envisions a future of annihilated existence due to the absence of poetic activity: “I have a habitual feeling of my real life having passed, and that I am leading a posthumous existence” (letters: II, 359). Unable to eat and unable to write, as he is forbidden to read or write poetry for fear of the exertion it causes
mind and body, the poet articulates the problem of a declining body and undiminished soul. What would sustain him intellectually and spiritually causes extreme pain physically and threatens to destroy the living body of the poet. His hunger is twofold: actual physical hunger for food exists alongside the craving and necessity for poetry and poetic sensation.

While considering the nature of biological and ephemeral sustenance in Keats’s poetic works and letters, I find several parallels in Brillat-Savarin’s The Physiology of Taste. This work, which allegedly has never been out of print since its posthumous publication in 1826 (Keats and Savarin, though literarily active in approximately the same time, most likely did not have any knowledge of each other), discusses the pleasures of the table from a vaguely scientific vantage point to explore those moments and realms of edible experience suspended between the basest biological processes and an aesthetic artful experience. Keats’s letters and poems and The Physiology of Taste contain echoes of each other regarding edible consumption. The now famous aphorism ‘you are what you eat’ finds its origins in Savarin’s work: “Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are” (Savarin, 1). This illustrates that the eating habits of an individual have a physical manifestation, but also alludes to the geographical, economic, and other various aspects of a person that can be teased out of personal preferences of the table. Keats worried about much of these aspects almost constantly and he unknowingly mirrors that yet-to-be famous line of Savarin when he writes, in a letter to Richard Woodhouse, “I eat to persuade myself that I

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1 Savarin himself declares that discourse on the table are a science although it is clear that he does not use any methods of traditional scientific discovery in his aphorisms and axioms. The full title is Physiologie du Goût, ou Méditations de Gastronomie Transcendante; ouvrage théorique, historique et à l’ordre du jour, dédié aux Gastronomes parisiens, par un Professeur, membre de plusieurs sociétés littéraires et savants (translated by M.K. Fisher as The Physiology of Taste, or, Meditations of Transcendent Gastronomy; a theoretical, historical and topical work, dedicated to the gastronomes of Paris by a professor, member of several literary and scholarly societies).
am somebody” (Letters II, 169). This statement is situated in one of the more lighthearted moments of the letter, in which he is describing his personal habits of eating in transit (“You don’t eat traveling—you’re wrong” he writes to Woodhouse), and specifically concerns Keats’s feeling as though “one is nothing” (Letters II, 169) driving with a ‘good looking coachman’. This is one of Keats’s less serious moments of self-deprecation and yet even considered no more than a clever quip the statement expresses an innate belief, shared by Savarin, that eating sustains and validates identity alongside the certainty of physical existence.

This mention of eating habits prefaces the largest section of the letter made up of an early draft of To Autumn (several sections of the second iteration of Keats’s Hyperion poem, The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream are also included). Throughout his letters, Keats employs the language of food and eating alongside, and often shortly before, discussions of poetry and the creation of poetic works. This pattern, evident in both his letters and poems, indicates that in the language of the edible Keats finds a method to access poetic sensation while preparing the reader for and imaginative journey or leap. Often, the sensations as they are written contain not only the beauty that Keats’s poetry is famous for but also encapsulates the tension between the necessary processes for survival (obtaining and consuming food) and the temporary nature intrinsic to the pleasure of taste.

Among critical texts focused on Keats’s predilection to insert food and drink into his works, Augus Graham-Campbell’s 2003 lecture for The Keats-Shelley Review ‘O For a Draught of Vintage’: Keats, Food and Wine frequently surfaces. Campbell situates Keats’s eating habits as “thoroughly rooted in Regency common sense and reality” (42) especially compared to those of the somewhat gastronomically strange and “eccentrically aesthetic Shelly
or the libidinous Byron” (42). Keats’s diet seems to have been relatively healthy, enjoying food and drink without excessive deprivation or gluttony, and marked by an awareness of the senses activated by eating that is evident in his writing. The guiding point of this lecture, aside from an amusing investigation of Keats’s meal preferences, is that the beauty and truth of poetry are “all that was meat and drink to Keats” (Campbell, 60). Aligning with friends and chroniclers of Keats, contemporary critics frequently take notice that for Keats poetry was not just a sensual physical experience, but also a source of sustenance effecting both mind and body.

The notion that poetry for Keats is “something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry” (Oliver, 122) is further complicated when considered alongside his own philosophies on the role of the poet and the required experience of pain throughout life to properly articulate and form a soul. Poetry, like food, might be employed as a comforting tonic on the lives of readers struggling against the pains of existence and yet the very act of creating (and reading) is ultimately detrimental to the poet’s physical survival. Loredana Mihani, in an article published in an edition of The Keats-Shelley Review, argues that while Keats’s idea of the poet evolves in his later poems “his celebration of the poet or poetry is [...] rooted in a profound belief in the power of literature to reach out and elevate the human soul above sorrow and loss” (Mihani, 93) and is trying to entwine poetry and the lives of people. Keats knows, and feels, that poetry is not only necessary for his own continued survival as a human in the world but that it is also the vehicle by

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2 While Byron’s tastes and habits have been remembered as archetypically excessive, Shelly had “extreme and eccentric views on food” (Campbell, 53) largely based around his belief that “man was never intended to eat meat” and was naturally vegetarian. He extends this theory into the allegorical and argues that the fall from grace of Adam and Eve stems from an unnatural diet (that which was forbidden), and that the connection between Prometheus bringing fire (a necessary implement to cooking) and the creatures that continuously dine on his own organs are “the vultures of indigestion and disease brought about by his new carnivorous diet” (‘O For a Draught of Vintage’: Keats, Food and Wine, 54). Comparatively, Keats’s ruminations on diet read more normal (he explores vegetarianism briefly, first for the benefit of the mind, and later is forced to do so under doctor’s orders).
which the human soul can be developed and coached through the sufferings and pangs of mortal existence.

About to embark on the great poetic feats of writing that will serve mankind as the tools of a physician-poet, Keats sets his poetry with feasts or images of the edible world, pointing not only to the communal ingestion that transforms reading into a collective experience but also reminds us that “there is death in the act of eating—both the destruction of that which is eaten and the impermanent pleasures that foreshadow the ultimate death of the diner” (Korsmeyer, 188). Taste, an experience of the senses, is as temporary as living, and Keats’s poetry is imbued with this painful truth of mortality even as it works to sustain us through the beauty of the text in part through his use of edible language.
Chapter I: Letters

A.) A Life of Sensations: Edible Language in Keats’s Letters

Keats’s experience of the edible world is entwined with his experience of poetry and this articulation of the edible in the poetic is apparent throughout the rich culinary life expressed in both his letters and poetry. The letters often include musings on meals of the day, food available to him on various journeys (generally noted with some tone of dissatisfaction), poems metaphorically described as food objects, and litanies of edible products that are evidently written for the enjoyment of language itself. Scholarship on Keats frequently invokes his time studying medicine at Guy’s Hospital, as well as his personal interactions with the terminal illnesses of his mother and brother, as one of the seminal influences on his poetry; but such medical training also points to a general interest in healthy eating and diet’s effect on the intellect. Dabbling in vegetarianism, Keats writes: “I tell you I have left off animal food that my brains may never henceforth be in a greater mist than is theirs by nature” (letters: II, 225). This brief dietary experiment shows that for Keats what or how one eats influences the inner workings of the mind and imagination.

In November 1817 Keats wrote a letter to Benjamin Bailey containing a much-discussed proclamation: “O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!” (letters: I, 185). Critics generally do not agree on what Keats meant by ‘sensations.’ Whether the meaning lies in the realm of bodily sensory experience or “a mode of knowing which is higher than reason” (Beyer, 124) that has limited interaction with the physical body is a debate that extends throughout commentary on Keats’s correspondence. The reluctance of critics in ascribing bodily definition

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3 In *Keats and the Daemon King*, Werner W. Beyer states that this line “has nothing to do with the sensory delight of popular misconception” (125). Newell F. Ford says that in the 32 times Keats uses the word ‘sensation’ (found in both letters and poems) it refers to “a state of bodily feeling” (*The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats*, 104).
to Keats’s use of ‘sensations’ extends especially to categories of food and taste: “So closely are
taste and eating tied to the necessities of existence that taste is frequently cataloged as one of the
lower functions of sense perception, operating on a primitive, near instinctual level”
(Korsemeyer, 1). However, Keats himself does not dismiss physical sensation in his writings as
being less integral to the development of a mind but that sensory activity experienced through
the vehicle of the imagination is essential to thinking about personal development. Even the
language used by Keats’s contemporaries to describe his personality and habits draws from the
world of food and drink. Several biographies of Keats characterize his proclivity for frequent
reading with the phrase “devoured rather than read”⁴. This phrase categorizes Keats’s appetite
for the literary as not limited to an enjoyment of the written word but a fulfillment of an
instinctual, preternatural need so that for Keats physical experience is essential to poetry. The
bodily aspect in defining ‘sensations’ cannot be ignored and ascribed to conceptions that are
limited to the high-minded and ethereal. Keats’s ‘sensations’ refer to a change in the physical
senses that are stimulated by an engaged imagination. Often the best way to mobilize this change
is by engaging the language of the edible world to describe the poetic experience.

There are several instances in Keats’s letters when he uses the word ‘delicious’ to
describe something that he consumes but that is not food. One example is again found in the
sensations letter:

Have you never by being surprised with an old Melody—in a delicious
place—by a delicious voice fe[ll]t over again your very speculations and
surmises at the time it first operated on your soul—do you not remember
forming to yourself the singer’s face more beautiful […] that the Prototype must
be here after—that delicious face you will see (letters: I, 185).

⁴ Generally, this anecdote is attributed to Charles Cowden Clarke, as Anthony Hecht references in Keats’s Appetite,
but I have been unable to find the quotation of Clarke’s. The phrase seems to originate from Life, Letters, and
Literary Remains of John Keats (1848) but it is uncertain as to whether Clarke said this or if it is a biographer’s
own description of the amount of texts Keats was borrowing from friends (during his time as student at Guy’s
Hospital), a habit that continued frequently, and in great volume, until his terminal journey to Italy.
This is a moment of physical emotion or feeling elicited by the activated senses through an interaction with an aesthetic object. The object can be a ‘melody’, a ‘place’, a ‘voice’ and ‘face’ that awakens the senses. This awakening is identified by choice of the adjective “delicious” indicating a pleasing sensory experience. The second notable time Keats uses the word to describe a non-food object is in a short letter to B.R. Haydon. He begins, “I have read your delicious Poem,” (letters: I, 136) and here the word delicious implies that Keats has not only read the verse, but has ingested it, feasted upon it, and found it to be functionally excellent as well as full of an “exquisite enjoyment” (letters: 1, 136). ‘Delicious’ alludes to delight in a feeling of nourishing fulfillment, a kind of consumption that denotes not only gustatory enjoyment but an aesthetic hunger that is satiated. Keats’s propensity for the word confirms that the sensuousness of his writing is a symptom of poetic hunger and a desire to bring the exterior world of beauty into his soul by ingestible means. Keats opts for the language of the edible to describe the activities of reading and writing poetry because for him, the way we ingest and synthesize food and drink to physically nourish the body is also how one may consume and use poetry to nourish a soul.

In some instances, Keats employs language that is designed to evoke the experience of eating an edible object by activating the senses. Angus Graham-Campbell describes in his lecture ‘O For a Draught of Vintage’: Keats, Food, and Wine, that Keats “could write mouth-wateringly about” (45) food, but points out that he does not always choose to do so. These are textual moments when Keats is attempting to recreate the experience of a meal or food object and not simply to represent something edible in the text as a metaphor. One of the clearest examples of this is in a September 22, 1819 letter to C.W. Dilke, in which Keats interrupts himself to describe the experience of eating a nectarine. This excerpt, a bit of food writing that encapsulates the
incandescent joy of eating, leads the reader to their own imagined version of the edible sensation:

Talking of Pleasure, this moment I was writing with one hand, and with the other holding to my Mouth a Nectarine—good god how fine—it went down soft pulpy, slushy, oozy—all its delicious embonpoint melted down my throat like a large beatified Strawberry. (letters: II, 179)

Keats’s experience of the nectarine as detailed in this letter follows the distinct kinds of sensation described by Brillat-Savarin in *The Physiology of Taste*. Taste causes a specific mode of sensations (following a linear trajectory of states he names direct, complete, and reflective) and Savarin uses a peach⁵ to illustrate that movement of change along the senses:

He puts a piece of it into his mouth, and enjoys a sensation of tart freshness which invites him to continue; but it is not until the instant of swallowing, when the mouthful passes under his nasal channel, that the full aroma is revealed to him; and this completes the sensation which a peach can cause. Finally, it is not until it has been swallowed that the man, considering what he has just experienced, will say to himself, “Now there is something really delicious!” (Savarin, 40)

The act of eating while writing the letter prompts this exact series of events described by Savarin, even in mapping the journey of the fruit “until it has been swallowed” (Savarin, 40) paralleled by Keats’s phrase “melted down my throat” (letters: II, 179). The physical experience prompts writing and the resulting textual works contain layers of sensation and meaning that reflect the physical sense of taste which “can be double, and even multiple in succession, so that in a single mouthful a second and sometimes third sensation can be realized; they fade gradually, and are called aftertaste, perfume, or aroma” (Savarin, 41). The physical sense of taste, made up of several layers of itself, mimics a poetic reading that conveys layers of information transmitted in tasting-reading.

These individual tastes are an important facet in considering those parallel activities of

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⁵ According to Oregon State University, “it appears from various studies that the nectarine is a simple genetic variant of the peach”. (http://people.oregonstate.edu/~calverta/learn/faq/faq_nectarine2.html)
eating and reading. “How we taste things, as well as the exact makeup of our saliva, may be as individual as our fingerprints” (Ackerman, 128) so that this unique sense of taste, both considered in the physical and the mystical poetic interpretations of sensations garnered from artistic works, shows that the unique point of view intrinsic to each reader is required to properly experience poetic sensations. The experience of poetry is intensely personal, a soulful offering represented in the physical world that feeds the individual’s body and soul so that “just as a particular painting or poem must be actually experienced before it can evoke the subjective response […] so must food be chewed and swallowed in one’s own mouth […] tongue” (Korsmeyer, 43). The nectarine text as it exists in the letter serves a specific purpose, it is an appeal to the sense of taste and physical well-being of every individual, a moment of sensational reverie that connects the ethereal (a transformed, consecrated, literary strawberry) to the physical. Keats attempts to record his own unique sensory experience of the nectarine, and the reader does the same as they consume the text and the imagination is engaged.

In this moment, Keats is offering the nectarine as a literary facsimile, a momentary meal, to remind the reader of the selves that are corresponding because “the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one” (Douglas, 61). By placing this poetic description of consuming a nectarine in a letter Keats references a communal act of meal-sharing that links the reader and author. Immediately after this descriptive, pulpy interlude Keats returns to the letter’s original concern: “Now I come to my request. Should you like me for a neighbor again?” (letters: I, 179). His tone stays friendly and light, but this query in a matter of real-life necessity is of great importance to the poet, and the question itself is somewhat awkward—asking for assistance
procuring a place to live⁶. The lines on the nectarine are a moment of poetic oasis amid the request, and in this moment it works as a reminder of the bonds of friendship that exist between the Keats and Dilke families: “If an event is meant to matter emotionally, symbolically, or mystically, food will be close at hand to sanctify and bind it” (Ackerman, 127). Food offered and eaten symbolically contains this contract of experience even when the food is only represented by text. Keats’s nectarine passage points to meal-sharing and invokes a reference to physical well-being; as he nourishes a friend with the poeticized fruit, he entreats that friend to take part in protecting Keats’s physical existence.

In discussing the innately social aspect that comes with the sense of taste Diane Ackerman proposes that cooperative meal-taking creates an empathetic gateway: “We prefer to talk in person, as if we could temporarily slide into their feelings. Our friend first offers us food, drink. It is a symbolic act, a gesture that says: This food will nourish your body as I will nourish your soul” (Ackerman, 130). Unable to talk in person, the page (as it so often does in correspondence) stands in for the physical self and reaches towards the reader to offer not only a sensational experience but a representation of the self.

This move to temporarily slide into another person’s feelings is akin to Keats’s description, in another letter to Woodhouse, of the chameleon poet: “A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body—the Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women” (letters 1, 387). The identity of the poet is found then in mutability, in the empathetic metaphysical movement of the

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⁶ During the spring 1819 Keats received worrying news from his brother George and considered taking up a non-poetical profession; on June 17th he asked B.R. Haydon for a return on a loan Keats had provided only two months earlier. His financial situation is, as it routinely was, becoming quite dire and by the date of this letter (September 22, 1819) Keats is in urgent need of income (Table of Dates. John Keats: The Complete Poems, 26). The letter’s tone is dour except for the moment of nectarine bliss.
By writing descriptive text about an object of nourishment, Keats creates the gateway through which this movement can occur when the reader consumes the text and a movement of identities occurs. To create this gateway, Keats must offer a literary imitation of what is edible so that the effects will be like those of a physically ingestible object. Keats achieves this by deploying poetic tools to interrupt the regular text and leave a recreated textual nectarine kept by the page.

This recreated nectarine exists on the page largely due to the poetic tools Keats uses to interrupt the regular text. This mention of the fruit is not merely in passing but is a significant portion of text that pauses to alight on description. Visually the interruption does not appear different but is set off by alliterative moves -- "good god" -- and unabashed onomatopoeia--“pulpy slushy, oozy” --that gushes into the middle of a letter that deals with a mundane re-life difficulty. The impulse to describe the fruit is inescapable, as though the poetic thought occurs without a moment of pause between the page and the thought. It is the recalling of a sensation even as it is happening for Keats, and an edible offering for Dilke (the letter’s recipient). The nectarine is not enough to represent itself and is transformed into a consecrated strawberry—an attempt to bridge the gap between the physical object he can feel and a description on the page—solidifying the weight of this kind of literary communion and edible contemplation to appeal to the separate soul of the reader and leave behind a reminder of personhood.

An offering of food through text occurs routinely throughout Keats’s letters. In the nectarine letter Keats transforms text into something that can be interpreted as ingestible by using poetic tools and lyricism to awaken the senses of a reader and provides a facsimile of meal-sharing. In another letter, Keats uses an item of food as a metaphorical stand-in for poetic works. He answers a letter from J.H. Reynolds by beginning “I thank you for your dish of
filberts” (letters: I, 223) in reference to poems written and sent by Reynolds⁷. Keats extends this metaphor for the length of the letter: “about the nuts being worth cracking, all I can say is where there are a throng of delightful Images ready drawn simplicity is the only thing” (letters: I, 223), and in the penultimate lines offers: “in return for your dish of filberts, I have gathered a few Catkins” (letters: II, 225)⁸. It is a charming and amusing note, but the impulse to call the sonnets written and sent by a friend ‘filberts’ (hazelnuts) points to Keats’s view of poetry as a consumable item that can be manipulated and crafted so that it is better suited to the needs and tastes of a reader. Cracking a poem, read as a nut, is as natural to these friends who are writers as it is to squirrels and “ethereal Pigs” (letters: I, 223) that feed on such morsels because it is their need and nature. Poetry exists to nourish, and the working out of the meaning of a poem happens as naturally as animals in earth (squirrels and pigs being animals traversing, digging, searching, burying in the dirt of the earth itself).

Keats wants his poems to provide this kind of naturally occurring affective sensation. He proclaims “poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul, and does not startle or amaze it with itself but with its subject” (letters: II, 102). Poetry for Keats must be an experience that transcends thought, and that has a permeable quality enabling it to ‘enter into one’s soul’. Poetry, or poetic thought, could do this in the same way that the selves of others press upon Keats in the October 1818 letter. Simultaneously ‘great’ and ‘unobtrusive’, poetry in the form that Keats attempts to create is taken in to the self—it is ingested, eaten—and sits directly in the same space as the soul (even closer as it is inside the body, not beside) where it

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⁷ Richard Woodhouse, in his compiling of Keats’s correspondence, notes that this is referencing two sonnets, about Robin Hood, Reynolds sent to Keats earlier that week (The Letters of John Keats Volume I, 223).

⁸ Catkins is a word that covers many varieties of petal-free flowers, some of which seem to be edible although it does not seem that Keats meant the ones in his metaphor to be anything but decorative (https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/choose-catkins-for-early-spring-colour-hj3rwp5xz)
might nourish through the ‘nuts being worth cracking’ or, the opening up and experience of poetic sensations.

That Keats uses filberts as a metaphor for poetry and draws an inedible object into the nourishing sphere is not unusual. It is a similar move when he describes poems, melodies, and surroundings as ‘delicious’. He routinely weaves the world of the literary with that of the senses so that words themselves are physically affective. The instances of food in the poems serves a purpose to activate the senses and involve the body in a reading process (a kind of textual table-setting where the mouthfuls are transformed text. This parallel is strengthened when the poems are read aloud so that the word-morsels exist in the same place where tasting occurs) that will influence the most internal part of a person, the soul, while also indicating through representations of eating, food, and meals, that a poem is a nourishing force.


B.) The Pains of Existence

The statement for “a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts” indicates that the former is more pleasant, even easier, than the latter. Sensations can be varied, and in his early letters I do not believe Keats is suggesting that all sensations are pleasurable but that the uncomplicated life that stays enfolded in a world of sensations devoid of thought is unaware of the pains of existence and is thus unbothered by them. This concept speaks to Keats’s later letter in May 1818 on the ‘Mansion of Many Apartments’ in which he engages a metaphor for the developmental stages of consciousness. He notes that after some time spent in the “infant or thoughtless Chamber” (letters: I, 280) we enter “the Chamber of Maiden-thought,” where “we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight” (letters: I, 281). An inclination to remain in this state of unperturbed delight reminds readers of the Life of Sensations and expresses that letter’s enthusiastic sentiment. When writing the sensations letter Keats “was still happy in more or less unmixed sensuous enjoyment” and had “not reached the reflexive stage” (Ford, 104) that he describes as when “This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darkened” (letters: I, 281) and one is plunged into a darkness that should be explored so we “make discoveries, and shed light in them” (letters: I, 218).

Inevitably, this theory evolves as Keats is confronted by the physical realities of a declining body (his brother Tom’s and then his own), financial difficulties that dog him throughout his professional life, and the anxieties of romantic love. Such painful truths of reality become more integral and important to Keats’s idea in the role of the poet as he matures and experiences all of these tragedies of life—his interest is no longer with what is only beautiful, but with that which contains both beauty and knowledge of suffering. When Keats writes that “the
faint conceptions I have of poems to come brings the blood frequently to my forehead” (letters I, 388), it is simply the idea of poems, their shadows and suggestions, of thinking he might not have a lifetime to compose⁹, that threatens his physical being and causes actual pain. The existence of a poem can produce the physical effect of a sensation that is separate from those Keats purposefully inserts into his works to evoke sensory aesthetic feeling. If only ever the conception of a poem’s existence can influence a body, the intellectual work required to compose taxes with equal force and yet that intensity is integral to being a poet who adopts the pains of the world in fulfillment of the goal of “doing the world some good” (letters: I, 387).

If the role of the poet is in part to be aware of the losses and woes of life, and to use the tools and methods of poetic form to assuage those painful facets of existence, it also harbors an awareness that those pains are essential to the assembling of a self: “Do you not see how necessary a World of troubles is to school and Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!” (letters: II, 159). Thus, the difficulties of existence, both physical and emotional, are inseparable from the process of soulful growth and evolution of poetic thought towards maturity. However, towards the end of Keats’s life writing letters becomes a painful task not only because it requires a revisiting of memory, of moments of life before his extreme physical suffering, but also that the hunger of a soul craving literary nourishment and the body that cannot withstand the physicality of thought necessary to produce such writing, are in opposing states and cannot exist simultaneously at this point: “and now—the

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⁹ This letter is addressed to Richard Woodhouse in October 1818. Up to this point Keats’s health has been relatively good, except for an occasional sore throat. Two months later Tom succumbs to tuberculosis, and so John’s worry that he may not survive youth to the “work of mature years” (letters: I, 387) is probably influenced by his experience caring for his brother. It is not for another year, in February 1820 that Keats has the severe hemorrhage that signals the severity, and kind, of his illness. Given his medical and personal experience it is possible Keats suspected that he contracted the disease but avoided any serious considerations until the spots of “arterial blood” asserted themselves and the knowledge was unavoidable.
knowledge of contrast, feelings from light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem are great enemies to the recovery of the stomach” (letters; II 360). He writes to Charles Armitage Brown that “‘Tis the most difficult thing in the world to me to write a letter. My stomach continues so bad, that I feel it worse on opening any book” (letters: II, 259). It is as his body declines that the sensations achieved through poetry are too painful to sustain and he feels himself “leading a posthumous existence” (letters: II, 359), existing as a ghostly self, unable to nourish either body or soul because that which sustains an undiminished soul debilitates the declining body trapped in biology.
Chapter 2: Two Odes

A.) Ode to a Nightingale: Intoxicating Poetry

Up to this point I have used Keats’s letters to track mentions of food and ingestion to investigate his relationship with food as it connects to his composition and reading of poetry. In reading his personal correspondence, I found that Keats’s enjoyment of food was an integral part of his life. I now turn to several of his poems to inspect the appearances of food as a tool of metaphor, in which the representation usually references poetry, or as a moment in a poem signaling that a subject is on the precipice of imaginative experience. Though several of the Great Odes contain mentions of food or drink, I will discuss two that contain some of Keats’s most well-known references to ingestion.

The first of these, Ode to a Nightingale, is an exploration of the life of sensations versus thoughts, that Keats detailed two years earlier, in poetic form. During the months between writing that letter and his prolific spring of 1819 (he produced all the major odes in April and May of 1819) Keats had been the primary caretaker for his younger brother Tom throughout his decline and eventual death. Though his medical training at Guy’s Hospital and time spent caring for his mother (who also died of tuberculosis) would have exposed Keats to all manner of people suffering from physical ailments and disease, witnessing the intimate details of Tom’s wasting youth had a profound effect on the poet. In addition to the loss of his brother, hardships that seemed to entrammel Keats in the earlier years of his poetic career clung to him more fervently; his financial situation was becoming increasingly dire, contemporary critical responses towards his published poems a year before were still mixed, and though his romance with Fanny Brawne blossomed it brought with it all the anxieties expected for a financially insecure (and otherwise socially anxious) twenty-something young man.
The desire to escape the world of reality and enter one fashioned entirely out of sensations, even imagined ones, is woven throughout the ode. It overflows with lush, intoxicating imagery. This poem contains one of Keats’s most famous references to wine, an image that continues the length of the poem for all but two of eight stanzas. Keats wrote frequently about wine in his letters, and he certainly enjoyed it, although “not that Keats was a particularly heavy drinker by Regency standards” (Graham-Campbell, 47). Brillat-Savarin describes alcohol as “the king of potables” (Savarin, 143) and the desire for this variety of liquid is found in “every climate and in every kind of human creature” (Savarin, 143). He claims that good wine is an integral part of a meal. Using Savarin’s classification of wine for representations of the edible in Keats I consider it to be part of a category of liquids that make up a portion of the normal human diet given its reach across cultures.

_Ode to a Nightingale_ submerges the reader into a fugue of sensations that are hinged on the pleasant and painful. The opening lines, “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains/ My sense” (1-2), immediately press the poem’s atmosphere upon the senses as if to subdue them. This seeming repression does not prevent their activation to invoke the oddly soothing, yet forgetful mood permeating the opening stanza. A pained sensation results from the bird’s song, compared to a “dull opiate” (3), and delivers the speaker into a drowsy haze. The language of the pleasant is coupled with the discordant because the changing of a physical state arises in being “being too happy in thine happiness” (6). With delicious voice, and apparent joy, the nightingale delights the speaker and yet the sensational emotions produce an exquisite heartache.

Keats’s reference to ingestion in the first stanza is that of poison, the pain felt is “as though of hemlock I had drunk” (2), whereas in the second the speaker craves a potable liquid:

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10 Good wine is one of four conditions necessary to the “enjoyment of the pleasures of the table […] food at least passable, good wine, agreeable companions, and enough time” (The Physiology of Taste, 184).
wine. Savarin notes that several alcohols, but wine especially, have a marked effect on a tired or otherwise incapacitated person. He advises “to a tired man [give] a glass of wine or brandy, and in an instant he feels better and you will see him come to life again” (Savarin, 141). This drink then, can revive or awaken the senses. Wine is different from regular food or drink in that it is concentrated and left to develop a more complex flavor resulting in a series of effects on the body and mind that are more intense than the average beverage or meal. Keats was particularly interested in these effects of wine on the imagination and the nightingale ode explores the possibilities of such an effect in conjunction with the possible escapist qualities of poetry. As though to revive the poison-laden speaker, Keats dedicates the second stanza to wine:

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cooled a long age in the deep-delvèd earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stainèd mouth,
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim—

Most apparent in the description of this imagined ‘draught of vintage’ is a referenced location found within a flavor. Several places are identified by tastes which are themselves made of an intangible conjuration of far-flung climates and, as in ‘Hippocrene’, mythological fonts of poetic inspiration. It is cooled in the earth and yet contains a ‘sunburnt’ emotion and ‘the warm south’. A delightfully Keatsian deployment of poetic device lurks in the line ‘beaded bubbles winking at the brim’; alliteration brings a verbal reading to the tip of the lips, while a silent reading visually trundles over the B’s that mimic bubble shapes while the I’s in ‘winking’ glitter on the page. The lines here work to thoroughly evoke the sipping experience but this drink is a theoretical one. The brim is imagined and the contents are left un-drunk. For the reader however, the experience of a beaker of wine is almost occurring through the poetic devices at work.
Keats’s speaker does not take this drink because the sensory experience has already occurred for them by an imagined leap. Sensations in the stanza are projected and envisaged; a potential encapsulated in the word ‘might’. The imagining has allowed the speaker to consume as the reader consumes by reading. The second stanza is a conglomeration of imagined refreshments that contain places, multiple temperatures, and is at once both a rose-hued ‘blushful’ and darker ‘purple’, referencing several color variations of wine at once. This is an improbable drink because it exists in the realm of imagination where for Keats, sensation is “more beautiful [than]\(^\text{11}\) it was possible” (letters: 1, 185) to conceive.

Instead of drinking and escaping through literal ingestion and describing that experience, the third stanza confronts truths of reality. It is the first stanza of two in the ode that does not make any reference to gustatory consumption. The vehicle that would have allowed the speaker to “fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget” (21) is the wine left in the previous stanza. There is no escape from the insistence of time on bodily frailty: in contrast to the transportive ability of the drink, the speaker remains “here” (24) in the world defined by “The weariness, the fever, and the fret” (24). The afflictions listed in this section are usually attributed to the lengthy illness and eventual loss of Tom Keats from tuberculosis the previous December 1818, particularly the line “Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies” (26). Men may “sit and hear each other groan” (24) throughout the weariness of life but the prevailing tragedy of a wasting youth is so gently heart-wrenching in its inclusion that it is hard not to imagine the youngest Keats brother being referenced in these lines. This is the most poignant moment of encapsulated misery in the ode, but it is not the height of all human suffering. Keats provides a litany of inescapable worldly pains that ends with “Where but to think is to be full of sorrow” (27); ultimate sorrow culminates

\(^{11}\) In the original text of the letter Keats wrote “more beautiful that it was possible”.

in consciousness itself. This assertion is situated between lines on youth’s inescapable march towards death and those stating, “where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes” (29). Even were youth to survive disease the loss only postponed, and these thoughts the very definition of sorrow.

However, just as the speaker does not indulge in the wine of the second stanza he does not linger in this realm of thought in the third. There is a sudden movement, “Away! away! for I will fly to thee” (31), and a rejection of the obliterating promise offered by wine. The vehicle of imaginative transportation is “Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards, / But on the viewless wings of Poesy” (31-33). Poetry is represented ostensibly by the bird’s song and Keats ascribes intoxicating qualities to such poetry by offering it as a superior substitution to something drunk; one that is more successful at achieving imagined sensation than wine. In an early letter he describes that a person may be quite content to “read a certain Page of full Poesy or distilled Prose” (letters: I, 231), and this notion that some compositions are a distilled essence, or more powerful than regular words, implies that sensations experienced as a result of poetry are more beautiful and fulfilling than wine.

Despite this difference in method, the effect on the imagination is same. The movement initiated in ‘Away! Away!’ is arguably one towards the nightingale, ‘already with thee’, and is away from both the self and the realm of reality. Poetic ingestion has occurred when the speaker forgoes liquid drink for poetry, and this ingestion preludes the imaginative experience of joining the nightingale into the bower-night. This leap is facilitated by employing the imagination to envision the bird’s realm as though alongside its self: “he is continually in for - and filling some

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12 Cynthia Chase discusses the difference in interpretation in Viewless Wings: Keats’s Ode to a Nightingale. The possibilities lie in the punctuation given for the third “Away!” of the stanza: “A mute mark stands at the place which is either an exclamation at arrival or a statement of distance. The punctuation mark doesn’t tell us how to hear it” (66).
other Body” (letters: I, 387) was Keats’s theory on the poet’s ability to abandon their own being to fill in for, and be filled by, the selves of other entities. Through the language and metaphors of food poetry is equated with edible consumable objects, and so the poem operates the way the textually represented nectarine in Keats’s early letter did to facilitate the same mutability of selves through a movement achieved with the metaphysical gateway manifested by the communion intrinsic to meal or drink-sharing.

The ‘viewless wings’ in this stanza are an invisible mode of transportation illustrating the notion that “poetry traffics in some way between the world and mankind” (Douglas, 70), and they recall the “Wings of Imagination” (letters: I, 185) mentioned in the 1817 sensations letter. Poetry retains an ability to remind and transport the individual by describing sensation with the goal of replicating that sensation as a physical emotion. This is a quality shared by food, that flavor and taste interact to recall remembered times or even ones we have not had not imagine. Keats proposes that the sensations procured by poetry are more intense than those found in a wine lacking a poetic component. The speaker in the nightingale ode turns away from the physically edible towards poetry because it can offer more effective results than something actually swallowed. Though her chapter on the nightingale ode centers on music and the sense of hearing, Helen Vendler explains that in this ode ‘Posey’ carries a specific meaning with regard to the abandonment of wine:

‘Posey’ seems to mean here a state of pure sensation, comparable to the ecstasy afforded the senses by wine, which has been dismissed not because it is not a boon to sensation, but because the wings of posey are more efficacious as sensation than wine can ever be (Vendler, 90)

Briefly the speaker doubts the abilities of the imagination to complete this task: “Though the dull brain perplexes and retards” (34). Nevertheless, a transportation has already taken place as the speaker is “Already with thee!” (35), the nightingale, in a forest of “verdurous glooms and
winding moss ways” (40), devoid of light. Sight, which has been employed to this point, is interrupted by darkness, “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet” (41) and in the absence of that sense others are invoked to identify new surroundings. The language is imbued with a kind of humid greenhouse verdure: “embalmed darkness” (43) echoes the ‘drowsy numbness’ that smothered sense in the ode’s opening lines but now a claustrophobic sensation arises from the surrounding abundant vegetation filling the boundaries of the poem. Numerous plantings are described as “each sweet” (43), so that they are interpreted generally pleasing and delightful, full of nectar or an otherwise confectionary ‘sweet’ smell alluding to flavor. The senses are once again activated in a specific order, as detailed in Savarin and now paralleled several times when Keats invokes each sense before ending with taste. This leaning in towards a taste that is sipped is reinforced by “The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine” (49). That the wine is ‘dewy’ promotes it to a fantasy liquid. It sounds like a lovely idea but has little basis in a real drink for anything but a nightingale. It is not a wine of the temporal universe but a drink that exists in the realm of poesy offered in a rose cup—completing the fairy-glen setting—that is interrupted by the singularly carrion themed sound, “the murmurous haunt of flies” (50) heralding the stanza to the language of death: a floral ripeness that edges into rot. The taste is fleeting, and its dissipation coupled with the buzzing of flies bring the edible bits of this poem to the confrontation of death.

This death is not the kind identified as the endpoint of human suffering in the third stanza rather, it is death that leans on the the edge of poetic sensation. The speaker, having flown into this “darkling” (51) landscape via an intense sense-perception aroused by poetry, finds death is welcoming. “I have been half in love with easeful Death” (52), and this affectionate tone references again the earliest lines of the ode in which the speaker feels poisoned yet does not
thrash or fight against the quieting senses. In this ode death and taste are inextricably linked. A potential for death without pain, “to take into the air my quiet breath;/ Now more than ever seems it rich to die” (64-65), amid glorious sensation is interrupted by a reminder of the bird’s song.

Helen Vendler’s reading of the nightingale ode dictates that “at the moment of near acquiescence in dissolution, Keats chooses life, and thought” (Vendler, 93). This is a poetic articulation of the complex mind of the sensations letter. Such a mind, Keats writes, “would exist partly on sensation and partly on thought” (letters: I, 186). To ‘exist on’ sounds as though the complex mind is fueled by these two modes of perception as the body is fueled by nutrition. The return to thought is signaled in the last lines when the speaker realizes that if he were to die the nightingale would continue singing and the human would “to thy high requiem become a sod” (60). The nightingale ode has pictured regions of imagination and reality and the speaker’s traversing through each only to turn back to the other shows that a life of sensations or thoughts alone is impossible. The nightingale continues in “pouring forth thy soul” (57) a gesture of pouring that continues the thematic image of drink. It was a glittering imagined liquid that began the journey, and now late in the poem drink is compared to the artistic melody of the bird. A poem is what is poured out of one soul’s sensational experience, into the cup of the page, where it can be ingested by a reader.

The speaker makes another not-centric choice—he does not die, but remains and names the bird immortal in contrast to his own corporal human form. The nightingale’s song remains consistent in contrast to the “hungry generations” (62) that “tramples its forebears under-foot” (Vendler, 94) signaling an unending passing of mortal, human, time. This is the moment in the poem when the imagery of ingestion transitions away from drink and toward ‘hunger’. There is
no liquid of forgetfulness, no delicate wine from a realm of fancy to distract away from the truths of reality. It is hunger, not appetite, a word that describes a bodily need to ensure survival. The generations are an unsympathetic symbol for passage of time. Time itself is hungry and requires mortality to ensure its own survival.

The final stanza is the second that does not contain any representation of ingestion. The word “Forlorn!” (71) sends the speaker “back to my sole self” (72) while the nightingale and its song fade away across the landscape, creating a sense that the speaker has traveled and is now returning. The speaker’s moment of leaving the ‘sole self’ was back in the fourth stanza, where it was left to allow the imagination’s flight to the nightingale. The sensations experienced in that abandonment of self were impossible in the previous location. The fantasy escape, to the world of sensations, cannot be sustained on its own. This tension between the two realms is an unsolved problem for Keats is partially expressed in the final lines: “Do I wake or sleep?” (80). The ode ends with a questioning of the validity of the sensations experienced: is it “a vision, or a waking dream” (79). This uncertainty of realness articulates the qualities of poetic sensation to be just as, or occasionally more than, those produced in the real, natural, world.
B.) Glut thy Sorrow: Ode on Melancholy

As *Ode to Nightingale* attempts to reconcile the tension between a world of fantasy and one of reality, *Ode on Melancholy* offers a prescription for sadness that derives from being too much in the world of thoughts. Helen Vendler writes that Keats makes this “his ode on the sense of taste” (180), based on later edits that referenced the sense more frequently\(^\text{13}\) though the poem is not full of sensuous imagery or a deployment of poetic devices that entice sense experience. Instead, this poem focuses on methods of ingestion by referencing the process of eating. This activity is described to conceptualize the integration of sensations and thoughts that will result in meeting Keats’s new goal\(^\text{14}\) of “a more peaceable and healthy spirit” (letters: II, 106) by recognizing the painful aspects of existence alongside the joys and pleasures. Keats engages the language of ingestion “because eating is a repetitive and transient experience, because food does not last but spoils, because it not only nourishes but poisons, eating is a small exercise in mortality. Rather than transcend time […] food succumbs to time—as we do ourselves. This perhaps is the final reflection that tasting prompts: not just that it is pleasurable but that it fades so quickly” (Korsmeyer, 145). Throughout the *Ode on Melancholy*, the action of consuming what is beautifully pleasing is coupled with a sadness that stems from contemplations on mortality.

Immediately a voice in the first line calls out: “No, no, go not to Lethe” (1) is an instruction that demands intellectual presence. Rather than offer intoxicating substances that effect perception this ode is full of “poisonous wine” (2) and the “ruby grape of Proserpine” (4),

\(^{13}\) In The Odes of John Keats, Vendler notes that the original drafts show a line as “the rainbow of the dashing wave” but Keats revised it in the final version “in order to include the sense of taste explicitly” (314).

\(^{14}\) In a letter to George and Georgiana Keats dated April 30th, 1819 John included several early versions of some of the great odes and noted that these poems were, “for the most part dash’d […] in a hurry” that they read “more the richly for it” (letters: II, 106) and that he hoped such writing would lend itself to a more peaceable spirit.
liquids and morsels that are emblems of death. It is a suicidal oblivion where food and drink are poison, morsels and sips that are not a vehicle of escape into a world of imagined lyrical bliss but are things that when ingested “drown the wakeful anguish of the soul” (10). Though they are metaphorical the objects in this first stanza have a direct sensory link, when ingested, to the nourishment or detriment of the soul; that which is consumed may threaten intellectual acuity. This ode offers an alternative indulgence that will not muffle the brain’s exactness. Exquisite heartache is not to be quashed or escaped, and the ode offers instruction for coping with melancholy. One ought to temper the effects with objects of natural aesthetic beauty:

Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globèd peonies;
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

There is no moderation in this stanza. To glut involves excessive intemperance, an eating beyond satiation or bodily need. The manner of ingestion is not through eating directly, as there is no edible object here, but to ‘glut’ or ‘feed’ through sight. The cliché to ‘eat with the eyes first’ is taken up in this stanza as the method of ingestion. In feeding the mind, or the mood, the advice of the poem is to stare, an action reminiscent of reading, as a method of eating. Nourishment here comes from the visual considerations of beautiful, natural, objects. These are not offered as a distraction away from the melancholic pains that “fall/ Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud” (11-12) but as an opportunity to recognize beauty alongside sorrow.

The third and final stanza contains a more direct reference to eating and the sense of taste. Poison bookends the poem: ‘poisonous wine’ is provided at the opening lines while the close contains a textual mutation wherein pleasure transforms to poison “while the bee-mouth sips” (24). This change happens in the same moment as the words are read: “there is no
distillable sweet tincture of pure Pleasure; all pleasure is metabolized to poison not after, but during, the moment of the ingestion of that pleasure” (Vendler, 161). The poetic chemical change occurs in same instant when eating becomes poisoning. The “poisonous wine” (2) of the first stanza remains an un-drunk possibility whereas the nectar of the final lines is taken. A shadow of chemical processes happens on the page, a representation of the physical process presented poetically, a change that cannot occur until the point of ingestion. This is the same moment as when the lines are read and transformed into a new liquid. This change into poison that happens alongside reading is the physical synthesis of a “beauty offered by poetry must be a beauty of pain as well as pleasure” (Pladek, 408). The forbidden intoxicants presented at the start of the poem, a kind of behind-glass feast of unhealthy possibilities, are replaced by the textual sip that will “make readers better without making them feel better” (Pladek, 408).

Keats references the process of eating in the most physical way in the last lines of the short ode: “save him whose strenuous tongue/ Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine” (27-28). The tongue, an organ integral to the sense of taste, “plays an important role in the mechanics of tasting: endowed as it is with a fairly powerful muscular force, it helps to moisten, mash, churn about, and swallow the food” (Savarin, 35). In the previously discussed nightingale ode, references to the sense of taste center on an ability to contain multitudes of space but does not discuss bodily aspects of the sense. There was no chewing or moment of nutritious dissolution because the eating was theoretical, ethereal, and now in the Ode on Melancholy it has returned to the ‘lower sense’ of taste by representing the organ most integral to that sense and gesturing towards the necessary process of actual, biological eating. The grape is offered and eaten, broken down, metabolized on the page.
This process is not only physical. It is “Joy’s grape” (27), an edible object imbued with otherworldly meaning. In breaking the grape one’s “soul shall taste the sadness of her might” (29). The language is of the physical world, but the effects are on the soul, eternal and apart from an earthly universe. However, this taste, the “sadness of her might” (29), is not available to everyone as it is “seen of none” (27) except those who have “a palate fine” (28). That is, those who can reconcile the pains of existence with the pleasures and not only accept but contemplate that sadness are ultimately rewarded with a power of vision that transcends regular experience. The melancholy ode speaks almost directly to Keats’s Vale of Soul-Making letter where he writes “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 diverse ways!” (letters: II, 102). This is that kind of thinking poetically, of complex eating that occurs when a mind is aware of varying depths of flavor, that synthesizes the life of sensations and thoughts, allowing the poetic individual to transcend the regular and “be among her cloudy trophies hung” (30).

Taste in this ode is not a reference to flavor itself or the physical experience transferred into text. The final stanza contains several references to ingestion (sips, the bursting tongue and palate fine, and at last taste) that are not tied only to a physical sensory experience. The “soul shall taste the sadness” (29) rather than the body. Keats employs the tongue and palate as metaphors for mind and imagination working on the soul, so that “the taste becomes a spiritual one, experienced by the soul, rather than the sensual taste” (Vendler, 188). For Keats, who understands thoughts via sensation, the language of food and drink reflect the pleasurable sensory aspect of eating while also addressing the intrinsic sadness in the exceptionally temporary nature of taste.
Chapter 3: The Uneaten Feast of St. Agnes

Mentions of food or ingestion are numerous in Keats’s poems, but there are also several important feasts that take place in some of his longer works. These moments of eating and drinking occur within a specific set of parameters that dictate the order of the table setting and menu. In Deciphering a Meal, Mary Douglas parallels the formal structure of poetic order with those of certain cultural meals to investigate the intrinsic code that exists in table settings. Meals, including feasts, have “a social component, as well as a biological one” (Douglas, 61). The poetically represented meal follows both structures of verse as well as those “rules of the menu” (Douglas, 80) that contain clues and codes inherent to the function of the taking of food through reading. For Keats, this poetically represented feast functions both as an environmental setting in a poem as well as to address the social component of meal-taking by requiring reader participation. First, I will examine how the midnight feast in The Eve of St. Agnes functions as a poetic food moment that influences the audience, rather than the subjects in the poem.

Keats’s Spencerian poem The Eve of St. Agnes details the mystical events surrounding a folk-belief that if a young unmarried girl participates in a specific set of ritual actions on The Eve of Saint Agnes, she will be visited by a vision of her future husband or lover. During the center action of this poem Porphyro hides in his beloved’s (Madeline’s) chamber and when she disrobes and falls asleep he inexplicably produces a feast from his hiding place and proceeds to set an elaborate table. After it is set neither of the lovers notice the extravagant feast for the remainder of the poem.

15In Robert Burton’s The Anatomy of Melancholy there are two ways a woman may be granted this vision. The first is “a kind of divination with Onions laid on the Altar on Christmas eve,” while the second is simply “fasting on St Agnes’ Eve or night, to know who shall be their first husband” (pp.207). St. Agnes Eve takes place on January 20th. Either ritual involves food in some capacity, even if only in its lack, but Keats chooses the clearly more seductive of the two methods of the ritual.
This uneaten feast is a curious mention of food—it is not only a series of edible objects appearing in the poem, but also the action of a feast being set—in the middle of the events in the poem for its outstanding poetic description:

And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,
In blanchèd linen, smooth, and lavendered,
While he from forth the closet brought a heap
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd,
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
And lucent syrups, tinet with cinnamon;
Manna and dates, in argosy transferred
From Fez; and spicèd dainties, every one,
From silken Samarkand to cedared Lebanon.

Keats is fond of this kind of litany—he writes similar lists in several letters that are abundant in objects as well as clever and pleasing to the ear and eye, with a purpose to amuse the recipients, and in this poem the carefully selected and arranged uneaten feast works to transport and intoxicate the reader in preparation for the remainder of the poem. Angus Graham-Campbell, in his lecture on Keats, food, and wine, argues that “the midnight feast in The Eve of St Agnes was stage dressing for a Romance, a sensuous prop to eroticism, a mood enhancer, an appetizer to other more sexual sensations” (Graham-Campbell, 43). For Porphyro and Madeline (who has retired without food as the rules of the prophetic magic dictate) it is part of the latter’s seduction and perhaps an aesthetic distraction that leads her to believe she is awakening into a dream rather than having exited sleep to the arms of a real Porphyro. The lovers are otherwise occupied and the feast is forgotten: Porphyro ignores it as soon as he places the last “golden dishes” and “baskets bright” (272) with “glowing hand” (271) and Madeline never acknowledges it at all (not that she ever has a moment to glance in its direction). That this offering exists in the parameters of the poem as a meal for the reader, rather than the subjects is apparent in the contents of the feast and the manner of its description.

The midnight feast does not rely on the pleasure of eating, defined as “the actual and
direct sensation of satisfying a need” (Savarin, 183), but on the pleasures of the table: “a reflective sensation which is borne from the various circumstances of place, time, things, and people who make up the surroundings of the meal” (Savarin, 183). Porphyro’s feast is not written to satiate a bodily need to replace caloric losses that have been sustained in the course of living, rather to entice a ‘reflective sensation’ that focuses on the environment. They are foods presented to overwhelm with sweetness and color, ‘jellies soother’ and ‘lucent syrups’ that gleam with viscosity while ‘candied apple, quince, and plum’ carry the jeweled heaviness of stone fruit that weigh the stanza down with ripeness. The language relies on a melodious litany of drawn-out sounds that require a pause-filled, languid reading. This array of delicacies is chosen to elicit a series of reflective sensations brought about by a participation in the feast through reading. In this way the reader can construct the location of the poem.

Despite these luscious poetic devices the sustenance provided on this table would not, upon culinary inspection, meet the qualifications for a proper meal by either the medieval setting’s requirements nor those of Keats’s era. Instead it has the qualities of a feast that would be better attributed to a fairy tale: delicacies that exist to hypnotize and delight. These are other worldly items, morsels that travel ‘in argosy transferred’ referencing distant lands. It is a feast that leads to intoxication without alcohol because of the atmosphere it produces, but it is set for the reader, in order that one might participate in the edible literary moment. This engagement of

16 Angus Graham-Campbell discusses the ‘Immortal Dinner’ attended by Keats, Haydon, Wordsworth, and several others in December 1817 and while the contents of the menu are unknown there are many speculations to be made based on the typical dinners taken at the time: “à la français” versus “à la russe”—the latter usually involving a footman or other servant carrying each course around to individuals—and it seems most likely that the diners in December 1817 would have participated in the former. The general organization of either kind of meal would have varied, offering different ways of interacting socially at the table, but the dishes would have been similar and included: a roast rib of beef, quails, veal in cream sauce, a whole salmon, a vegetable pie, herb pudding, juggled potatoes and white mushroom fricassee, lemon carrots, a ragoo of celery, apricot ice-cream, trifle, and a solid syllabub, among many others during the several courses provided (Keats, Food, and Wine, 57). Certainly, this is a much more well-balanced, if perhaps excessive in volume, meal compared to Porphyro’s choices.
the senses activates remembered meals to conjure the necessary poetic sensations. This process influences the body for “memory recalls dishes that have pleased the taste; imagination pretends to see them; there is something dreamlike about the whole process.” (Savarin, 57). The foods described do not make for a pleasing meal in the actual eating, but the description evokes one that is. The table setting is written into the poem not only to provide the environment with an aesthetic of “perfume light” (275), a kind of stage dressing or prop, but to sensationally transport the reader to a state of being that will more readily accept the next events of the poem. Reading is a form of participation in the feast that prepares a reader to enter the dreamlike state that results from a piqued appetite. This dreamlike mood is empathetic to the state Madeline experiences and thus a reader is more willing to accept her belief that she is interacting with an unreal Porphyro.

Despite taking place on a feast night, this stanza is the first mention of food excepting a note on the requirement that Madeline must fast for the ritual to be successful. The description of the meal signals a shift in the poem not only toward the lover’s consummation but also to the dream-like consciousness into which Madeline awakens. Experiencing the pleasures of the table in their fullness results in a bodily state wherein “both soul and body enjoy an especial well-being. Physically, at the same time that a diner’s brain awakens […] his spirit grows more perceptive, his imagination flowers, and clever phrases fly to his lips” (Savarin, 184). A physically edible meal influences the spirit and mind by acting on the body; a poetic meal does too. The interactive meal that the reader participates in mimics the physical activity of consuming the pleasures of the table. This causes the imagination to blossom and be more receptive to the mysteries of the poem. The Eve of St. Agnes contains an example of a moment when a meal preempts an intellectual shift into a different state of consciousness for the
subject(s) the audience is tasked with embarking on the same shift to understand the events of the poem. The stanza describing the feast stands apart from the rest of the poem not only because of the subject matter, but also for being perhaps the most Keatsian of them all. It is an interruption set with utmost care and ear and eye to catch the senses of a reader, in the same manner his textual nectarine provides in the letter, with beauty to precipitate a metaphysical imaginative questioning on the nature of imagination.
Chapter 4: The Feast Eaten in The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream

It is necessary to investigate *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* in detailing instances of feasts in Keats’s poetry. In this fragment, a feast is at once eaten, currently eaten, and uneaten. The poem opens with a rumination on poetry’s potential to exist in “every man whose soul is not a clod” (13). Following this the dreamer-narrator describes his entrance to an other-worldly environment dense with vegetation. He promptly takes inventory of the surroundings as each of his senses are activated: seeing “trees of every clime” (19) before hearing “the noise/ Soft-showering in mine ears” (22-23). Touch and smell are subsequently called upon in almost the same instant; they are combined in the line “the touch/ Of scent, not far from roses” (23-24). Taste is not mentioned as a sense for several lines. This follows, once again, the pattern set forth by Savarin on the order of the senses activation. The feast that has been left behind, largely unfinished, is recounted instead:

```plaintext
Before its wreathèd doorway, on a mound
Of moss, was spread a feast of summer fruits,
Which, nearer seen, seemed refuse of a meal
By angel tasted, or our Mother Eve:
For empty shells were scattered on the grass,
And grape-stalks but half bare, and remnants more,
Sweet-smelling, whose pure kinds I could not know.
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This feast is sketched out in language that first references only sight: in this way it appears as a table setting at a distance so that the emphasis is on its presentation rather than initial effect on the body. It is a meal described in otherworldly terms, having been tasted by celestial figures, that has been eaten outside the vision of the poem except for what is left behind. The sense of smell moves the dreamer to interact directly with the edible. This is not entirely unexpected as the olfactory sense plays such an integral role in perceiving flavor that Savarin insists “there is no full act of tasting without the participation of the sense of smell” (Savarin, 39). The remaining plates are ‘sweet-smelling, whose pure kinds I could not know,’ alluding to a
sensation experienced physically and known to the mind even before the emotions elicited are articulated. Often, Keats “knew what he intended before he found a language in which to say it properly” (Vendler, 165) and in many instances, he uses a language of the senses to understand and articulate those emotional sensations. Though the leftovers are called ‘refuse’, they are not particularly repulsive or garbage-like. Certainly, they are not un-appetizing to the dreamer, who proceeds to eat with gusto as though on the brink of starvation. The part-way indulged feast is more appealing because it has been abandoned; there is still enough left behind to seem abundant enough that the dreamer helps himself:

And appetite
More yearning than on earth I ever felt
Growing within, I ate deliciously; (38-40)

This meal, this entire setting, does not take place on earth and yet exists in a realm where appetite (as distinguished from hunger, though the two are often compatriots in gastronomy) is felt as deeply as if the place were real. He eats ‘deliciously’, a word Keats employs often for things that are not traditionally considered edible, to encapsulate the sensation of aesthetic consumption. In Keats things that are ‘delicious’ are often overwhelmingly poetic in description. They engage several, sometimes all, the senses through a virtual experience. Looking back to his letters there are ‘delicious poems’, a ‘delicious voice’, and other intangible yet physical objects, like melodies, that succeed in intoxicating the consumer with sensational delight. In this text it is not the meal itself, the objects that can be eaten, described as delicious, but the act of eating. Physical taste alone does not dictate what is delicious but involves each of the senses in turn to “be double, and even multiple, in succession, so that in a single mouthful a second and sometimes a third sensation can be realized” (Savarin, 41). The moment of eating deliciously—of glutting, even, to borrow from the Melancholy ode—in this Hyperion fragment functions as a way of expressing a taste experience as type of reading.
This ‘delicious’ taste experience is followed by a drink. He pairs the happenstance-feast with “transparent juice, / Sipped by the wandered bee”, an echo of one of his many personal observations on claret noted for a description of cool temperature and mention of the bee:

For really, ‘t is so fine—it fills the mouth one’s mouth with a gushing freshness—then it goes down cool and feverless—then you do not feel it quarreling with your liver—no it is rather a Peace maker and lies as quiet as it did in the grape—then it is as fragrant as the Queen Bee; and the more ethereal Part of it mounts into the brain (letters II, 64)

These kinds of alcoholic liquids are written as akin to nectars, an element of the natural world tended by bees, a ‘transparent juice’ marked by ‘gushing freshness’ that ultimately leads to a reawakening influence on the brain. The liquid delivers the dreamer into a sleep bordering on death: it is even compared to “poison gendered in close monkish cell” (49) and outright named a “domineering potion” (54) submerging the narrator into a sleep from which he will awaken into a new scene devoid of anything edible. This is another example in Keats of a liquid metabolizing in the space of a line from drink to poison. It is not until the reading during the same instant the speaker drinks that the effect takes hold and what seemed a ‘transparent juice’ is transformed.

This feast, and the drink which sends the narrator off into seemingly dreamless slumber, is a predecessor to actions that will inspire verses on the role of the poet. “That full draught is parent of my theme” (46) points to imbibing as the moment from which the rest of the poem will blossom and it is appetite, a desire to consume for want of flavor, that leads to the movement of the dreamer to an ethereal realm. The appetite does not grow until after the narrator has described the feast upon the moss. A sense of taste is “excited by appetite, hunger, and thirst” (Savarin, 34) for the narrator literally, and for the author and reader by the textual presence and re-description of sensory activation in the poem. At this early moment in the fragment Keats presents a meal on the page because taste “is the basis for several operations which result in a man’s growth and development […] and in the general repairs to his body of losses” (Savarin, 34). Existence of this
feast, these edible objects as textual offerings, on the page allows the dreamer to illustrate the necessity of nourishment in preparation for the physical task that follows while serving as a virtual meal from which the soul can be repaired and strengthened to more readily reach extreme heights of imagination. In Keats’s writing eating and drinking regularly precipitate intense imaginative experience and while the Hyperion fragment functions as a less-sensational example of this (it does not retain the gustatory glow of the previously discovered poems) it is perhaps the most clearly articulated example of the purposefully set feast occurring immediately before the subject embarks on a strenuous imagined journey.

The activation and interaction of the poetic sensations in succession are represented in this organized way to simulate those of the physical senses in the temporal world outside the poem. In *The Physiology of Taste*, Savarin details that the senses activated facilitate an opening up of self that, I speculate, invites the desire for and creation of poetry:

Physically, at the same time that a diner’s brain awakens, his face grows animated, his color heightens, his eyes shine, […] Morally, his spirit grows more perceptive, his imagination flowers, and clever phrases fly to his lips (Savarin, 183)

Following an inventory of the visual components of a meal “his hearing catches the sounds about him” (Savarin, 32) and “his sense of smell next explores these objects” (Savarin, 33). These senses are also activated in this order in the poem before taste is asserted through the description of an “appetite/ more yearning than on earth” (38-39) and prompts the dreamer to indulge in the feast.

The ‘yearning’ felt is described as beyond earthly sensation, beyond a realm that is known; it is a desire that requires nourishment transcendent of earthly space. The meal itself is presented to readers through each of the senses, alarming and soothing with a poetic sensory experience. This walking through and experiencing of each sense culminates in the “cloudy swoon” (55) felt by both the reader and dreamer. Transport occurs by imaginative sensation to
the ethereal realm in the time between this swoon and the next awakening.

Brillat-Savarin writes that a complex eating experience results in a state of being during which “unfamiliar languor creeps over him, objects fade, his body grows limp, his eyes close; everything disappears, and his senses fall into a complete repose” (Savarin, 33). In the poem such a languor and inability to remain conscious stems from a combination of meal and drink.

Post-ingestion, the “senses fall into a complete repose” (Savarin, 33), signaling a moment of submersion towards dream-like poetic state that facilitates movement of the mind towards thinking poetically (this shift can also be of physical orientation, as it is for the poet-narrator who awakens and finds himself in a citadel of marble rather than a landscape of copses and mogshade). By presenting a feast in the text Keats writes to recreate the process of sensations intrinsic to the act of eating; each sense is called in the poem before the experience culminates in the moment of ‘delicious’ feasting. He “fuses the physical and the imaginary, the earthly and the visionary” (Mihani, 100) by grounding the early sections of the poem in a physical experience, a meal ingested through the senses, to place the reader alongside the narrator for the subsequent imaginative journey.

Though this feast is ingested by the subject, in contrast to the midnight feast in *The Eve of St Agnes*, it is not described in any particularly lush poetic terms that would evoke the food described. Keats’s nectarine oozes in the letter to Woodhouse and bubbles glitter in the *Nightingale* ode while in this meal the senses are brought to the forefront simply by being mentioned: sight, noise, and scent occur in quick succession but the poem is full of images of the feast focused on volume rather than individual flavors—taste remains at bay. It remains suspended between two active feast-ers: the first abandoned grouping and the second of the poet-narrator. It has already begun and been abandoned yet there is still “more plenty than the fabled
horn/ Thrice emptied could pour forth at banqueting” (35-36). The food centric language is focused on stage-setting, a meal placed on “a mound/Of moss” (28-29), situated between the “trees of every clime” (19) and the constructed monument that eventually replaces the environment of forested repose when the speaker awakens. The feast and meal-taking exist in the poem to function first in reference of sensation and second as signal towards a poetic shift into a new imagined location where the poem’s larger action unfolds.

Upon waking the poet-narrator sees that the setting has changed and he is instructed, demanded even, to ascend a stair or else surrender to a negative existence; that is, one not just of death but where he is entirely forgotten to past, present, and future. It has not yet been established that this speaker is a poet but the subsequent debate in the poem clearly defines him as one. The notion that he will not only die, but be forgotten entirely with no record of life echoes the sentiments from the poem’s start: there have been many who could have become poets were their dreams recorded.

It is significant that this obliteration of life would occur specifically from lack of nourishment. The unidentified voice that insists he climb confirms that failing to do so will cause his body to: “parch for lack of nutriment” (110). The physical being itself will fail what nourishes, and “bones/ Will wither in few years, and vanish so/ That not the quickest eye could find a grain/ Of what thou now art” (110-113). This is complete annihilation of self. Without nourishment, the body not only dies but the remaining husk is eradicated with no evidence of existence. If unable to traverse through realms of ultimate suffering the theoretical poet in the poem could not reach the next altar of poetic vision, and would be another of the dreamers left without written evidence confirming a physical existence: “But bare of laurel they live, dream, and die” (6). Poetry cements the firmament of historical existence by being text, and a
requirement of that process is to be “well nurtured in his mother tongue” (15). The articulation and skill of the poet’s language is a nourishing, nurturing process that is used to leave physical evidence of the soul that “is not a clod” (13) and that can transcend the limits of the body’s temporality.

Following the voice’s warning that a failure to “ascend these steps” (107) will lead to death, the poet is subjected to a cold that causes various painful sensations so intense that he feels “One minute before death” (132). He overcomes and, after successfully climbing the stairs, engages with a veiled figure, eventually revealed as Moneta, with whom a discussion on the role of the poet and poetry begins. This debate follows a thread found in Keats’s early poem *Sleep and Poetry*. It contains a set of lines articulating the purpose of poetry and role of the poet: “Poesy, that it should be a friend/ To soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man” (246-247). Though his theories on what poetry should deliver have evolved by the time he writes this unfinished poem, the core belief that poetry should be that which ‘soothes’ while elevating and rousing the intellect is a theme that remains.

This Hyperion poem explores that concept while extending it to include the heights of suffering that poets must experience to write poetry that achieves those goals. The poet-speaker asserts that “a poet is a sage, / A humanist, physician to all men” (189-190). Poetry’s ability to soothe is then not limited in scope but can reach to ‘every man’ if the poet aims to do so. Detailing Keats’s early poetic vision, Loredana Mihani argues that Keats wants to produce poetry that is integrated into the lives of regular people: to “bridge the way between poetry and society” (Mihani, 103). Keats’s works do not center on solitary existence but on the relationship forged between reader and poet as “an environment of exchange and companionship” that “fosters a strong sense of social unity and cohesion” (Mihani, 103). Just as Keats inserts the
nectarine into his letter and uses poetic tools to recreate the experience of it in a gesture that reflects “the pleasure of convocation with friends” (Mihani, 103), the found feast in *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* exists to reference the sensations one may feel upon taking such a meal and thus be prepared to accept the imaginative poetic concepts that follow. The inclusion of a feast references that “to invite people to dine with us is to make ourselves responsible for their well-being” (Savarin, 4). Keats uses the meal and language of the senses as they interact with the edible to preface an imaginative leap into the realm of Moneta (and the Titans in the later sections) and to recognize a responsibility for the spiritual nourishment of readers found in poetry. Keats invites the reader to participate in eating alongside the narrator and uses a symbolic gesture of meal-taking to engender fellowship between poet and reader. As a poet who must be “a sage,/ a humanist, a physician ” (189-190) Keats is concerned with the well-being of “all men” (190). The textual feast exists to represent the fellowship that happens in meal-sharing also occurs during reading. The poet-speaker feels it his duty, and his plight, to be one of the many

Who love their fellows even to the death;/
Who feel the giant agony of the world;
And more, like slaves to poor humanity,
Labour for mortal good” (156-159).

In chapter one I explored how the chameleon-poet of Keats’s letters can travel on an empathic pathway to imagine the selves of other objects or people. That poet is now given another descriptive title: “physician to all men” (190). The ‘labour for mortal good’ is the task of this poet-physician but to do it he must become acquainted with the agonies of the world. It is the kind of poetry that explores depths of earthly misery that will be assimilated “into the culture and lives of the people” (Mihani, 103) and be “a balm upon the world” (201).

The debate that follows confirms this. The poet must ascend to heights of poetic thought, participating in and understanding sorrows of the world, to more richly and accurately represent
that experience. This stems from a desire to do some good in the world, a sentiment Keats shared in a letter after the harsh criticisms of *Endymion* were printed\(^\text{17}\), as well as one to leave behind some evidence of a poetic life.

Moneta’s reply to this proclamation draws a distinction between what is healing and what is agitating:

‘Art thou not of the dreamer tribe?  
The poet and the dreamer are distinct,  
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.  
The one pours out a balm upon the world,  
The other vexes it (18-22)

The ordering of phrases would logically connect the poet to the balm and the dreamer as a vexation. However, as detailed in the Keats’s letter on the making of a soul, it is necessary and preferable that an undeveloped soul “must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways” (letters: II, 158). This suffering is coupled with a recognition of beauty contributes to the nourishment and growth of an individual self. The importance is not in the distinction between the poet and the dreamer, between the balm and the vexation, but in the coupling of those activities.

The poet who strives to understand and record these diverse feelings of suffering by encapsulating the experience in poetry is participating in the creation of a “beauty offered by poetry [that is] a beauty of pain as well as pleasure […] Poetry might make readers better without making them feel better” (Pladek, 408). The poet must combine the pains of existence with the pleasurable and beautiful to contribute to soul-making for his own self and those of readers. Keats’s craving for poetry, the devoured rather than read quality ascribed to his literary

\(^{17}\) This letter is from October 1818, and is also the letter in which Keats names the ‘Chamelion Poet’. In it he writes “I will speak of my views, and of the life I purpose to myself—I am ambitious of doing the world some good: if I should be spared that may be the work of maturer years—in the interval I will assay to reach as high a summit in Poetry as the nerve bestowed upon me will suffer” (letters: I, 387).
practices, encapsulates the necessary experience of suffering in the poetic process for the writer. Readers who are invited to the feasts presented in the poem, particularly in the Hyperion fragment, are invited to partake of the literary feast that will contribute to the nourishment of their own souls. However, just as one organism is destroyed by being consumed in the act of eating, the poet that composes these feasts suffers from a loss of identity that stems from sustaining others. It is a recognition of that ecstatic decay that allows for the language of the table and the edible to encapsulate the beauty and pains of existence so that they might be better understood.
Conclusion

In Keats poetry is corporeal. As a writer and poet, he feels a hunger for writing that stems from a realization that “poetry is what makes us human. On a moral level, it becomes a necessary activity for the nurture of a person’s mind and soul” (Mihani, 103). The poet-physician become the figure who supplies humanity with the nourishing objects that elevate the soul amidst loss and temporal suffering. As a reader of poetry Keats draws sustenance from those works he holds as formative to his thinking about personhood.

In addition to the individual ingestion of poetic works, the nature of poetry fosters an environment of solidarity between a network of readers and authors that collapses the boundaries of time and place into the packet of mind and soul enduring on the page. This parallels the pleasure of communion that arises from the basest kinds of meal-taking: any form of sharing food, of taking on the nutritive responsibility of another creates an inherent bond that forges a bridge of social unity whether the morsel is a sip, a nectarine, or a feast. The meals themselves are varied and provide a specific set of sensations unique to the aesthetic or tone of each text, but the ultimate accomplishment is the same: the food of poetry works on the body and soul of a reader.

Keats’s most simply articulated wish of ‘doing the world some good’ is achieved with poetry that traffics between the physical realm of bodily sensations and the mystical space of the soul. The concentrated effort to hone a poetic voice, and the prodigious poetic output achieved in a comparatively small period, which can bring poetry into the lives of people is evident in Keats’s letters and in each poem. Through these texts, Keats strives to reconcile the beauty of life and imagination with the pains and struggles intrinsic to being a person. Though this careful attention to the dichotomies of living would have certainly produced a physician or surgeon of
the most careful and able kind, in poetry Keats provides sustenance that nurtures the intellect and soul beyond the reaches of the physical realm.
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