**Connection, Consolation, and the Power of Distance in the Letters of John Keats**

John Keats had a genius for long-distance communication. In his lengthy journal letters to George and Georgiana, who emigrated to America in June 1818, Keats appropriated the specific cultures and forms of letter writing to overcome the problem of distance. However, not only do his letters forge a uniquely powerful connection across distance, they express an awareness that, in some cases, distance is not a problem; in fact, his letters often demonstrate how writing at a distance from one’s recipient can be uniquely advantageous. Keats’s awareness of this advantage invites further speculation: is there a particular kind of connection or consolation to be found because of distance, rather than in spite of it? And what external factors might trigger a kind of epistolary connection that thrives off separation? These are questions I will begin to consider here.

\*\*\*

On 14 October 1818, Keats began writing the first of his lengthy journal letters to George and Georgiana. As John Barnard puts it, the ‘family’s physical separation and the yawning gaps in communication meant that Keats used the open form of the long journal letter to try to overcome this distance’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Michael Allen agrees, noting how ‘the conscious exercise of social sympathy’ evident in these letters ‘can overcome distance’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Timothy Webb writes that ‘the long letter is presented as a counterforce to the dissolving effects of time and distance’[[3]](#footnote-3) and Heidi Thomson underlines how, in his letters, Keats ‘works towards minimizing the ‘interval’ of temporal and physical distance between himself and his correspondent’.[[4]](#footnote-4) For Keats, the long-distance letter can begin to replicate something like the immediacy of conversation, and in his letters to George and Georgiana we see ‘the desire’, as Thomson puts it, ‘to bridge that separation by various rhetorical figurations of closeness’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Barnard, Allen, Webb, and Thomson draw from a variety of examples to illustrate how, despite the distance between himself and George and Georgiana, Keats creates a sense of present intimacy in his letter writing. Writing in the winter of 1818-19, the letter becomes a way to overcome the temporal discrepancy between himself and George as they make plans to read a passage of Shakespeare ‘at the same time’ to ‘be as near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room’.[[6]](#footnote-6) This is an incredibly intimate metaphor that stresses physical proximity. It suggests that if one sense is disabled (in this case sight), others (like physical touch) can become more powerful. Keats pushes the mind, and the power of imagination, towards the physical and immediate, or as Shahidha Bari puts it, towards generating a kind of presence that is ‘intimate, immanent, almost extra-sensory’ or ‘super-sensuous’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Equally, when he uses humour to connect, it has roots in the physical:

in all the most lively and titterly parts of my Letter you must not fail to imagine me as the epic poets say – now here, now there, now with one foot pointed at the ceiling, now with another – now with my pen on my ear, now with my elbow in my mouth (II. p. 205).

Unlike the tender implications of his ‘blind bodies’ metaphor, here Keats uses his body to stage a clownish performance for George and Georgiana. Its purpose, to ensure his brother and sister-in-law do ‘not fail to imagine me’, rests on the exuberant physicality of his movement. There is a readiness in these letters to replicate, if not create, not only an emotional or intellectual connection, but a physical one, too.

For Keats, then, the impact of distance can be ‘overcome’, ‘minimised’, or ‘bridge[d]’ by writing letters. These kinds of qualifications automatically imply that distance is a problem, a difficulty, or an obstacle that must be dealt with. Which, in essence, it is. The culture of Sensibility, so much a background for the Romantics, stressed physical proximity.[[8]](#footnote-8) Maintaining relationships across great distances was a concern for many Romantic writers, and an increase in continental travel after the Napoleonic Wars led to an inevitable increase in long-distance letter writing.[[9]](#footnote-9) Many of Keats’s contemporaries figured distance as a problem to be ‘overcome’ through epistolary communication. Consider the way Byron signs off his letter to John Cam Hobhouse:

I shall scribble no further – I believe the best way is to write frequently & briefly – both on account of *weight –*& the *chance*of letters reaching their destination – *you*must forgive repetitions (as uncertainty induces them) and amongst others the *repetition*of my being

very much & ever yrs.

                                                                                                 Byron.[[10]](#footnote-10)

According to William Decker, it was not uncommon for a letter writer ‘to write five [of the same] letter […] on the chance that one might reach the addressee’.[[11]](#footnote-11) This is not dissimilar to the kind of solution to the problem of distance that Byron proposes. Unlike Keats, who prefers a ‘good long letter’ (II. p. 208) to ‘overcome’ distance, Byron requests short letters sent frequently as a preventative measure. Equally, the way Byron writes about distance – as part of a rhetorical flourish that is both witty and a commitment to friendship – also helps to ease the problem.

If Byron takes a practical approach to overcoming distance in the letter, Charles Lamb’s 1822 essay ‘Distant Correspondents’ initially seems to surrender to the problem. Lamb laments how distance irrecoverably alters the three topics that ‘usually compriseth’ epistolary communication, ‘news, sentiment, and puns’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Most problematic, perhaps, is that ‘truth, in these long intervals, [will] un-essence herself’:[[13]](#footnote-13)

For instance, our mutual friend P. is at this present writing -- my Now -- in good health, and enjoys a fair share of worldly reputation […] But at this present reading -- your Now -- he may possibly be in the Bench, or going to be hanged.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Lamb, rather hopelessly, highlights the inevitable inadequacy and inaccuracy of long-distance letter writing. But it is in his choice of form that Lamb offers a way of overcoming the problem of distance: ‘Distant Correspondents’ is not a letter at all, but an essay framed as a letter, developed in turn from a letter Lamb wrote to Baron Field five years earlier.[[15]](#footnote-15) Lamb addresses his multiple readers as an individual recipient, fabricating what feels like a personal relationship: ‘Come back, before I am grown into a very old man, so as you shall hardly know me’.[[16]](#footnote-16) His mock-intimacy leaves us wondering how serious he is being, and by the essay’s close we are no closer to an answer. With so much left uncertain, Lamb’s highly critical approach to the very real problems of long-distance letter writing is somewhat thrown into relief. By highlighting the problem as part of a parody, Lamb eases the threat posed by distance.

\*\*\*

Keats, like Byron and Lamb, adopts practical and comical techniques to overcome the problem of distance. But distance is not always a problem to be overcome. On 1 December 1818, Tom Keats, the youngest of the three Keats brothers, died from consumption. Two weeks later, on 16 December, Keats wrote to George and Georgiana:

You will have been prepared, before this reaches you for the worst news you could have, nay if Haslam’s letter arrives in proper time, I have a consolation in thinking the first shock will be past before you receive this. The last days of poor Tom were of the most distressing nature; but his last moments were not so painful, and his very last was without a pang (II. p. 4).

Keats announces the death of Tom, the youngest of the three brothers. He notes that Tom’s ‘very last’ moments were comfortingly pain-free, touching on the circumstances of his brother’s death. But this narrative is disrupted as he notices and considers a key epistolary predicament: the slowness and unreliability of the international mail service. Contrary to what we might expect, the practical problems that come with long-distance letter writing offer a possibility of comfort. Keats hopes that George and Georgiana will have already received the news of Tom’s death because then, by the time his letter arrives, the first blow of grief will be past. Keats uses the temporal dislocation of the letter to generate what he terms ‘a consolation’, both for his recipients and himself, and by engaging with this aspect of the letter form begins to dilute the anguish of the present.

            After sending the letter, Keats did not hear from George and Georgiana for several months. It is unclear whether it was Haslam’s letter or Keats’s that first communicated the news of Tom’s death, or whether the passage of time between sending and receiving did indeed result in comfort for either party. What we can discern is that the act of writing a letter brings Keats a kind of present comfort when faced with tragedy. This is an instance of how the culture and forms of letter writing become, themselves, part of the importance of Keats’s letters. His awareness of the practicalities of letter writing means he can use the letter to manage his present circumstances by looking towards an imagined future. Distance separates, isolates, irrecoverably alters fact and truth, and for Byron and Lamb, this is ultimately problematic. But for Keats, an altered truth becomes essential for surviving the misery of his brother’s death: it provides him with a unique – and unexpected – form of consolation.

If death can make clear to Keats the benefits of writing at a distance from his correspondents, it also highlights the detrimental effects of being in close proximity to those he loves. Over the next two years Keats is forced to deal with the unpromising circumstances of his own worsening consumption. In early 1820 he writes to Fanny Brawne, ‘my very health will not suffer me to make any great exertion. I am recommended not even to read poetry much less write it’ (II. p. 257). Not long after, and on the advice of his doctor, Keats isolates himself in his half of Wentworth Place, eventually limiting his contact with Brawne to writing letters. This makes for a unique epistolary exchange that is very different to the one he shares with George and Georgiana. Rather than communicating across thousands of miles, Keats is so near to Brawne that they can sustain an epistolary connection over shared sensory experience: ‘There’s the Thrush again – I can’t afford it – he’ll run me up a pretty bill for music’ (II. p. 278) Keats writes to Brawne in March 1820. A few days earlier he asks her, ‘Do you hear the Thrush singing over the field?’ (II. p. 265). Writing in such close proximity to each other means Keats and Brawne can share certain sights or sounds typically unavailable to letter writers.

Certainly, Keats can take some consolation by sharing in bird song with Brawne. Her very literal physical nearness eliminates the issue of temporal dislocation he faces with George. From his ‘pleasant prison’ (II. p. 250) Keats can use his brief interactions with Brawne to form a composite image of her daily life: ‘Pray do not stop so long up stairs – it makes me uneasy – come every now and then and stop a half minute’ (II. p. 273). Not only can Keats and Brawne hear the same thrush singing in the garden, it would seem he can hear her through the walls well enough to determine where she is in the house. When he does not know where she is, his intimate awareness of her daily routine helps him to imaginatively fill in the blanks: ‘I imagine you now sitting in your new black dress which I like so much’ (II. p. 281). And even when she leaves Wentworth Place, he can both monitor her movements and imaginatively involve himself in them: ‘You will have a pleasant walk to day’, he writes on the 29th February, ‘I shall see you pass. I shall follow you with my eyes over the Heath’ (II. p. 269).

But it is Brawne’s nearness that eventually comes to exacerbate Keats’s suffering. Certainly, Keats would repeatedly express his sorrow over being separated from Brawne after leaving for Rome in September 1820. But before he leaves and as the summer wears on, it becomes evident that proximity to the woman he loves is equally tormenting. As Anthony Howe writes, using the letter to replicate physical closeness ‘smacks of desperation in its bare bones’.[[17]](#footnote-17) The way Keats writes these letters is unhealthy. There is something sickly in his feverish commands, in the way he uses the letter to engineer the parts of Brawne’s life he cannot control, in the way he watches her from afar. Keats becomes a voyeur, and we are reminded of Porphyro spying on Madeleine in *The Eve of St Agnes:*

  Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;

       Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;

       Loosens her fragrant boddice; by degrees

      Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees.[[18]](#footnote-18)

What Porphyro can see, he lingers on; what he can’t see, he smells or hears. His senses help him make up a full, vivid picture of Madeleine. We get this same non-consensual voyeurism in Keats’s letters; but in *The Eve of St Agnes,* Porphyro, finally overwhelmed by Madeleine, ‘from the closet crept’ (l. 249). Keats cannot do this. Unlike Porphyro, who, as Christopher Ricks observes, has an ‘unfair advantage’ over the sleeping Madeleine, Keats is a voyeur by circumstance, not by choice.[[19]](#footnote-19) If anything, it is Brawne who has the advantage, able to move about the house – and, indeed, leave it – as she pleases. Letter writing, then, becomes something very different for Keats as he endures his confinement: rather than a powerful connector over great distance, writing letters in such close proximity becomes a marker of his impotence and a cruel reminder of the life he is powerless to maintain; so close – on the other side of the wall, in fact – but always just out of reach.

As Keats’s consumption worsens, jealousy and suffering replace any kind of tenderness. In only five months the letter goes from facilitating their meetings at the window, to detailing the excruciating impact her nearness has on his suffering: ‘I see you come down in the morning: I see you meet me at the Window – I see everything over again eternally that I ever have seen’ (II. p. 292). Keats’s proximity to Brawne has become something like purgatory. She is never far from his mind; she is never far from him physically. But he cannot have her, and he is doomed to relive this truth ‘over again eternally’. Keats repeats this sentiment in a later letter, written from Naples after having left Brawne to journey to Rome with Joseph Severn. He writes to Charles Brown from on board the Maria Crowther: ‘The thought of leaving Miss Brawne is beyond everything horrible – the sense of darkness coming over me – I eternally see her figure eternally vanishing’ (II. p. 345). Certainly, this sense of an endless haunting suggests something of the suffering Keats goes through. In what Nicholas Roe calls ‘another strange, Keatsian reversal’, Brawne ‘has become Eurydice, consigned forever to the underworld as Orpheus gazes helplessly after her’.[[20]](#footnote-20) We cannot help but be reminded of a perhaps more fortunate pair of lovers: Madeleine and Porphyro who ‘like phantoms […] fled away into the storm’ (ll. 361-72). Unlike his ghostly protagonists, Keats and Brawne are doomed to be forever separate.

But, separated from Brawne, at a distance from his family and friends, Keats finds a kind of consolation by relating to Brawne in this odd, almost supernatural way. If he mythologises her or turns her into a spectre-like figure, Keats removes the qualities that make her real. By denaturing Brawne, he maintains a protective distance; and he does something similar with his family members. He dismisses thoughts of George and Georgiana: ‘I seldom think of my Brother and Sister in america’ (II. p. 345). He makes a shade of his sister, ‘who walks about my imagination like a ghost – she is so like Tom’ (II. p. 360). Keats takes Brawne, George, Georgiana, Tom, and Fanny and turns them ‘into ideas personified, or not even personified’.[[21]](#footnote-21) If Keats once used the letter to cultivate a shared sense of physical immediacy with his recipients as a means of connection, now, faced with the imminence of his own death, he does exactly the opposite. To offset his loss, Keats eliminates their physicality by removing the details and qualities that make them human or reimagining them as distant and discarnate. We cannot deny that distance pains Keats in other ways; but, equally, it becomes a way of restoring at least a sense of control over his ever-worsening situation.

In the wake of Tom’s death, and in the months leading up to his own, distance becomes a way for Keats to manage – and perhaps ease – his painful circumstances. Conversely, being in close proximity to the woman he loves comes to exacerbate his suffering. Death, it would seem, can reverse the idea that distance is a problem to be ‘overcome’. As well as replicating a sense of immediate connection or a closeness akin to physical proximity, Keats’s letters demonstrate how distance can function as a means of protection. Whether Keats seeks to protect his brother and sister-in-law from the news of Tom’s death or protect himself from the pain of leaving behind those he loves, in his most difficult moments distance offers Keats a unique means of consolation.

**Bibliography**

Allen, Michael Patrick, ‘A Distant Idea of Proximity’: How Keats Handled Beauty’, *The Keats-Shelley Review,* vol. 31 (2017)

Baker, David, ‘Corresponding Keats’, *The Kenyon Review,* vol. 33 (2011)

Bari, Shahidha, *Keats and Philosophy: The Life of Sensations* (New York: Routledge, 2012)

Barnard, John, ‘Keats’s Letters: “Remembrancing and Enchaining”’, *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats,* ed. by Susan Wolfson (Cambridge: CUP, 2001)

*Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols. (London: John Murray, 1980-94)

Colbert, Benjamin, *Shelley’s Eye* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2005).

Decker, William Merrill, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1998)

Howe, Anthony, ‘‘don’t imagine in an a propos des bottes’: Keats, the Letter and the Poem’, *Romanticism and the Letter,* ed. by Madeleine Callaghan and Anthony Howe (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020)

*John Keats: The Major Works,* ed. by Elizabeth Cook(Oxford: OUP, 2008)

Lamb, Charles, ‘Distant Correspondents’, *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb,* ed. by E. V. Lucas (London: Methuen, 1903)

*The Letters of John Keats,* ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: CUP, 2011)

Nagle, Christopher, *Sexuality and the Culture of Sensibility in the British Romantic Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2007)

Ricks, Christopher, *Keats and Embarrassment,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974)

Roe, Nicholas, John Keats: A New Life (Cornwall: Yale University Press, 2013)

Stewart, David G., ‘Charles Lamb’s “Distant Correspondents”: Speech, Writing and Readers in Regency Magazine Writing’, *Keats-Shelley Journal,* vol. 57 (2008)

Thomson, Heidi, ‘Keats's Letters: ‘A Wilful and Dramatic Exercise of Our Minds Towards Each Other’ *The Keats Shelley Review,* vol. 25 (2011)

Webb, Timothy, ‘‘Cutting Figures’: Rhetorical Strategies in Keats’s Letters’, *Keats: Bicentenary Readings* ed. by Michael O’Neill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997)

1. John Barnard, ‘Keats’s Letters: “Remembrancing and Enchaining”’, *The Cambridge Companion to John Keats,* ed. by Susan Wolfson (Cambridge: CUP, 2001) p. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Patrick Allen, ‘A Distant Idea of Proximity’: How Keats Handled Beauty’, *The Keats-Shelley Review,* vol. 31 (2017)pp. 77-86 (p. 84). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Timothy Webb, ‘‘Cutting Figures’: Rhetorical Strategies in Keats’s Letters’, *Keats: Bicentenary Readings* ed. by Michael O’Neill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Heidi Thomson, ‘Keats's Letters: 'A Wilful and Dramatic Exercise of Our Minds Towards Each Other’ *The Keats Shelley Review,* vol. 25 (2011) pp. 160-74 (p. 165). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Thomson, p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Letters of John Keats,* ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: CUP, 2011) vol. 2, p. 5. (All further quotations will be from this edition; volume number and page number will follow quotation in parentheses). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Shahidha Bari, *Keats and Philosophy: The Life of Sensations* (New York: Routledge, 2012) pp. 32-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For an in depth consideration of the relationship between Sensibility and Romanticism, see Christopher Nagle, *Sexuality and the Culture of Sensibility in the British Romantic Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a detailed examination of the impact of the Napoleonic Wars on travel and writing, see Benjamin Colbert *Shelley’s Eye* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand (London: John Murray, 1980-94) vol. 5, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) p. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Charles Lamb, ‘Distant Correspondents’, *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb,* ed. by E. V. Lucas (London: Methuen, 1903) vol. 2, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lamb, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Lamb, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For more information about Lamb and letter writing, see David G. Stewart, ‘Charles Lamb’s “Distant Correspondents”: Speech, Writing and Readers in Regency Magazine Writing’, *Keats-Shelley Journal,* vol. 57 (2008) pp. 89-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Lamb, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Anthony Howe, ‘‘don’t imagine in an a propos des bottes’: Keats, the Letter and the Poem’, *Romanticism and the Letter,* ed. by Madeleine Callaghan and Anthony Howe (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. John Keats, ‘The Eve of St Agnes’, *John Keats: The Major Works,* ed. by Elizabeth Cook(Oxford: OUP, 2008) p. 260, ll. 227-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nicholas Roe, John Keats: A New Life (Cornwall: Yale University Press, 2013) p. 381. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. David Baker, ‘Corresponding Keats’, *The Kenyon Review,* vol. 33 (2011) pp. 151-60 (p. 156). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)