
“Population Thinking”: Keats and the Romance of Public Opinion

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In *Ecological Literary Criticism* (1994) Karl Kroeber coins the phrase “population thinking” to describe an imaginative capacity to “think in terms of populations” that is, he argues, shared by such different Romantic thinkers as Percy Bysshe Shelley and Thomas Malthus (82-83). “Population thinking” is a useful phrase for reconsidering another line of imagining that gathers force in the Romantic period as well: the idea that populations, as distinct from individuals, think and believe. The development of this idea is marked by the burgeoning discourse on public opinion and by the eighteenth-century coinage of that term. But “public opinion” has been a misleading term: while “public” sidelines multiplicity, “opinion” under-rates the multifarious processes of thinking, claiming, liking, hating, fearing, not knowing, and going with the flow that publics do.¹ If one considers “population thinking” as “done by” rather than “in terms of” populations, then the term is structurally parallel with “public opinion” but less restrictive and suggestive of process. It is then useful not as an alternative to “public opinion,” but as a label for the social/mental activity from which public opinion is abstracted. The present essay explores the ways that a romance of public opinion coincides with critical reflection on population thinking in the Romantic period.

Modern historians and contemporary sources refer to public opinion as both a new term and “a new phenomenon” in the later eighteenth century.² “[P]ublic opinion in the

strict sense” is first invoked in Parliament in 1792 (Habermas 65-66); the earliest monograph on public opinion, by the British MP William Mackinnon, is published in 1828; and around or between these dates one finds not only disquisitions on the subject by Jacques Necker, Jeremy Bentham, William Godwin, William Hazlitt, and others, but also active discussion of public opinion in the pamphlets, journals, and parliamentary debates—often as asides within other discussions.³ “The power of public opinion” was a cliché as early as 1859, when John Stuart Mill declared it “almost a triviality to say that public opinion now rules the world” (123).

But in the Romantic period public opinion was romantic. For it involved two wonders: first, that something so amorphous as a public should have something so definite as an opinion; and second, that mere opinion might do something. Jeremy Bentham refers to public opinion in 1780 as “that tutelary power . . . by which so much is done” (25n). In 1816, as a way of rationalizing idealist attributions of world-historical events such as political and commercial revolutions to “the visions of recluse genius,” Coleridge connects them through public opinion: “the true proximate cause” of such events, he says, is “the predominant state of public opinion” (13-14). Thus he claims that “the words of the apostle are literally and philosophically true: WE (that is, the human race) LIVE BY FAITH” (17-18). In formulations like these, public opinion figures both as a quasi-magical power and as

an empirically and rationally explicable one—a sociological if not a natural supernaturalism. It thus becomes a perfect medium for what Northrop Frye calls the “displacement” of romance into more respectable modes of thought (36).⁴ While political writers frequently use the frame of romance to demonize or deify “public opinion,” the romance of the same period may turn to public opinion to supply “believable marvels.” My examples come from Keats.⁵

In the late 18th century, “public opinion” was commonly represented with romance motifs—e.g., as invisible or magical agency or as triumphant underdog. In 1784, Jacques Necker, minister of Finance to Louis XVI and one of the first theorists of public opinion, describes its power in France: “a great many foreigners . . . cannot have a just notion of the authority that is exercised in France, by public opinion. They cannot comprehend the notion of an invisible power, which, destitute of treasures, of guards, and armies, dictates its laws in the capital, in the court, and even in the king’s palace” (1:lviiii)⁶ The statement is a tiny romance: like a fairy-tale hero, opinion conquers the king against all odds. In 1805, John Foster, a contemporary theorist observed, “One of the most obvious distinctions of the works of romance is an utter violation of all the relations between ends and means” (197). In this case all the usual material means—treasury, body-guard, army—are expressly excluded to magnify the wonder of the triumph of opinion. Opinion does not have power in this account; it is a power. And this power is both might and right; it brings not violence but “laws.” Its bloodless coup therefore points less to revolution than to revelation: that opinion dictates laws to the king reveals either that he is not king in the first place, or that it is God—*vox populi vox dei*.⁷

Even where magic is not directly invoked, the force of publicity is exaggerated and mystified by opponents and admirers alike. Arthur Young tells of traveling the French countryside in July, 1789, and finding belief in the “news” that Marie Antoinette “had a plot. . .to blow up the National Assembly.” “Thus it is in revolutions,” he complains: “one rascal writes, and an hundred thousand fools believe” (143). Though Young acknowledges the journalist’s role, his hyperbole renders it miraculous. Even while blaming the radical press (103-4, 113-14, 122-23, 127, 143), he complains of “a revolution effected by a sort of magic” (144). A corresponding idealization appears when he laments the French government’s neglect of counter-propaganda: “That universal circulation of intelligence, which in England transmits the least vibration of feeling or alarm, with electric sensibility, from one end of the kingdom to another, . . . has no existence in France” (147). “Electric sensibility” figures publicity as a nervous system, the public as an organism, with an exaggerated sense of coordination and unity that typifies contemporary public-opinion thinking. If the terms “public opinion” and “*vox populi*” predicate a single opinion or voice of multitudes, the unitary assumptions go further in organic terms like “the public mind,” “public spirit,” “public ear,” and “public eye,” which are even more peculiar to the later

eighteenth century.⁸ The “public mind” is a reification of, and perhaps a philosophical back-formation from, “public opinion.” A “public opinion,” if it exists, is no more than an effectively unitary object of thought; a “public mind” would be a unitary subject.

Yet the early romance of public opinion is misunderstood if one focusses only on the mystifications—a tendency among moderns who survey the scene after the Great War. *Public Opinion* (1922), Walter Lippmann complains that “[D]emocracies have made a mystery out of public opinion” and enskyed it among “the uncanny forces” (138). To show that a “popular will” can be explained “without the help of the oversoul in any of its disguises” (107), Lippmann invokes instead “the manufacture of consent” (135) by “a central machine managed by a very few people” (124). Lippmann is not the first to see through “manufacture” of public opinion. Anti-Jacobin writers, for instance, represent enlightenment philosophers, educators, and the popular press as ventriloquizing the public or pulling its strings, and the figure of the “wire-puller” has been associated with public opinion at least since the 1830s (s.v. *OED*). This figure is implicit in Young’s complaint that “one rascal writes, and an hundred thousand fools believe,” but even Voltaire affirms that people are right to “cry out against the *philosophes*”—“for if opinion is the Queen of the World, the *philosophes* govern this queen” (qtd. P. Palmer 234). The leading of public opinion is commonly acknowledged by opponents and by would-be leaders and cheer-leaders. *The Anti-Jacobin* (1797) presents itself to readers as a resource “for forming their opinion” (“Prospectus” 1). James Mackintosh calls print “a channel by which the opinions of the learned pass insensibly into the popular mind,” the press “that engine, which has subjected the powerful to the wise, by governing the opinion of mankind” (54-55). For him, as for Young, invoking “the popular mind” is consistent with viewing it as a puppet of less popular minds.

The early public opinion of public opinion is characterized, in sum, by a curious duplicity. On the one hand the frequently used terms “public opinion” and “public mind” have unitary implications, and public opinion receives, as Lippmann suggests, a reverence, or lip-service, once reserved for oracles. On the other hand there is clear awareness of public opinion as a construct. It is both fetishized and held in suspicion as a fetish—contradictory as that seems. Arthur Aspinall asks, “Did the Press govern, or did it reflect, public opinion?” (4). In the Romantic era the answer is yes: both the press and the government reflect and govern public opinion—and are seen to do both. Opinion is a subject of romance, but also of irony.

During Keats’s lifetime, the power of literary reviews, whether real or imagined, meant that no writer with professional aspirations was unaware of the power of public opinion or uninterested in the dynamics of its construction. The opinions disseminated by the reviews were seen as projections of an influential few and at the same time feared as

“public opinion.” This ambivalence is marked in a proleptic defence of Keats, published in *The Champion* (June, 1818) after Lockhart’s first essay on “the Cockney School” (October, 1817) conveyed that an attack on Keats was imminent. The anonymous writer appeals publicly to the leaders of opinion, “our great critical authorities,” to treat *Endymion* fairly:

the conduct that may be pursued by these reviews will have its influence, and a great influence, on public opinion; but, excepting as to the effect that opinion may have on the poet himself, we care not two straws for it. Public opinion is not a comprehensive or comprehending thing; it is neither a wit nor a wise man: a poet nor a philosopher: it is the veriest ‘king of shadows:’ it is nothing but the hollow echoing of some momentary oracle: and if we estimate the work of the reviews themselves, we have it, for they are the things now in authority: they are your only substantials: they give currency to our poets. . . . These men have it in their own hands, to mete out praise and censure, for half the population. We only hope they do not flatter themselves on the general assent. (Matthews 87-88)

The *Champion* writer cannot wholly despise public opinion for trying. He is torn between its insubstantiality, as “echo” or “shadow,” and its performative power.

In its concern for the poet’s vulnerability to public criticism, this defence anticipates the story of the murder of Keats by *Blackwood’s* and *Quarterly* reviewers. This is worth stressing because the role of publicity is almost entirely written out of the most famous versions of the story by Shelley and Byron. Both poets favor a starker inter-personal dynamic between the murderous reviewer and “susceptible” poet, so that the fable is usually understood as one of the power of *criticism*: as Byron responds to Shelley, “I did not think criticism had been so killing.”⁹ The story, as others saw it, had more to do with public opinion’s being so chilling. As Hazlitt says even after Keats’s death, the *Quarterly’s* attack on *Endymion* was “a warning to all unfledged tyros, how they venture upon any such doubtful experiments” (Howe 11.123). Keats himself had nothing to do with the “murdered by neglect” narratives, which he inverted: “One of the great reasons that the English have produced the finest writers,” he tells Sarah Jeffrey, “is, that the English world has ill-treated them during their lives and foster’d them after their deaths” (*Letters* 2.115). The perceived agent of this salutary abuse is not a lone reviewer but “the English world.”

Elsewhere, too, Keats shows himself less than “susceptible” to the reviews and in fact emulates Hazlitt’s analytical resistance to their manipulations of “public opinion.”¹⁰ “I have not the slightest feel of humility towards the Public . . . which I cannot address without feelings of Hostility,” he tells Reynolds while still anticipating *Blackwood’s* attack (*Letters* 1.266-67). Once it has appeared, his response resembles that of *The Champion*: declaring his “contempt of public opinion” in February, 1819, and blames the reviews:

the Reviews have enervated and made indolent mens minds—few think for themselves—These Reviews are getting more and more powerful and especially the Quarterly—they are like a superstition which the more it prostrates the Crowd and the longer it continues the more powerful it becomes just in proportion to their increasing weakness—I was in hopes that when people saw, as they must do now, all the trickery and iniquity of these Plagues they would scout them, but no they are like the spectators at the Westminster cock-pit . . .¹¹

This is, roughly speaking, a denunciation of fetish. The references to “iniquity” and “plague” allude to the scene of idolatry in Exodus. So far from formulating its own opinion, the “Crowd” worships the image of its opinion as devised by others; and while the worshipper and the image-maker are superficially distinct, the inverse relation of their powers hints at an underlying unity—the Reviews’ power is the alienated power of their readers. But most disconcerting is the rider: the people’s obeisance to this “public opinion” is unaffected even by their seeing the “trickery” by which it has been reified.

Keats’s interest in public opinion is inspired not only by phenomena of the discursive public sphere but also, and perhaps primarily, by the market. In March, 1818, Keats writes, “As Tradesmen say every thing is worth what it will fetch, so probably every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer—being in itself a nothing . . .” (*Letters* 1.242). Here is another romance of public opinion, or specifically of public credit, collective evaluation. The premise claims an almost tautological simplicity—that “every thing is worth what it will fetch”—as a commonplace of the streets. But this commonplace is itself a small wonder; if there is no magical transmutation, there is at least a sleight of hand, for the contingent practice of what a thing “will fetch” in any transaction has become a transcendent judgment of what it “is worth.” Since what determines a thing’s worth is not an isolated transaction but a market, the proposition appeals tacitly to public credit. When Keats draws the comparison, “so probably every mental pursuit takes its reality and its worth from the ardour of the pursuer,” the commonplace wonder is parlayed into an abstract of quest romance. The quest hero can valorize and (in the most active sense of this word) realize his object. Such a dynamic is commonplace in the market: like “ardour,” aggregate demand affects both the price and the production, both the “reality and . . . worth,” of an object. By merely predicating this power of an *individual*, Keats brings out its romance.

Several, if not all, of Keats’s mature romances turn upon such dynamics of self-substantiating confidence, or its inverse, self-substantiating fears. They attribute the dynamic sometimes to a population, sometimes to an individual, but in general they explore the powers and the dangers of population thinking. In what follows I refer to “La Belle Dame,” *Lamia*, and *Hyperion*, all written between late 1818 and late 1819. “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” the simplest case, is an

imitation of the romance ballad including all the devices: the verse form, plot, and characters, archaisms such as “wight” and “merci,” the question-and-answer narrative in which it is not clear who is speaking (Wolfson, *Questioning* 297), the paratactic fuzzing of causal links in the narrative, and even the confusion of competing versions.¹² The romance tradition has also suggested a traditional *reading* of the poem as a tale of enchantment and disenchantment: the errant knight dallies with a stranger, is desolated by her power, and by the same token enjoys (and passes on) a revelation concerning her demonic nature—sorrow is knowledge.¹³ Reading less strictly according to romance, close readers noticed textual ambiguities, such as the crucial difficulties as the reference of “this is why” (line 45; Waldoff 86-87) or of “deciding who says what to whom” and “who *does* what to whom” (Simpson, *Irony* 16). Karen Swann and Theresa Kelley, who exploit these causal ambiguities to challenge the sexism implicit in traditional readings of *La Belle Dame* as *femme fatale*, have brought the poem’s romance of public opinion to the fore.

“As the object of their dread and fascination,” says Kelley, “she is a fetish, a figure whose alien status is the product of a collective decision to name her ‘la belle dame sans merci.’” (333; Swann 88-90). Here indeed is a question of “who does what to whom”: Kelley’s emphasis on the (dis)figurative naming of the lady reverses the vector of domination, displacing the magic by which she enchants the knight with a more sophisticated (and plausible) magic by which he demonizes her and in the same movement desolates himself. Given that he does not act alone but in league with a masculine “collective,” the poem is, on this reading, a romance of public opinion; the poem may tell of a knight in thrall not to “*La Belle Dame*” but to a fear that has power by dint of its collectivity.

The catastrophe in *Lamia* can similarly be reconstructed. Reading the scene as one in which Apollonius alone sees through Lamia (qua illusion) and in so doing kills or banishes her¹⁴ appears to be warranted both by the narrator and by Lycius. Just as the narrator presents Apollonius (or his “philosophy”) as a destroyer of pleasing illusions (2.227-38), Lycius denounces Apollonius’s “demon eyes”: “Corinthians, see! / My sweet bride withers at their potency” (2.289-90). It is strange, however, that a disenchantment (sometimes taken as Keats’s renunciation of romance) should be narrated in the shape of an overtly magical action. If Apollonius is the “agent of reality” (Stillinger 56), how and why do such consequences instantly follow from his merely looking at Lamia? The answer is in part that the causal force at work in this passage does not pertain to Apollonius alone, but is more like public credit.

Lamia emphasizes, throughout, the predicament of the individual in relation to communities of opinion. Even Apollonius does not act alone; as a “sophist” (2.172, 285) and Lycius’s mentor, he is a leader of opinion. Conversely, Lycius

is a follower, though not always a willing one; his portrayal is sufficiently complex to emphasize the frictional difficulties of maintaining an independent vision within a social world. The first appearance of Lycius, “Charioting foremost in the envious race” (1.217), is ironically ambiguous: he is first in a beaten track, the “envious race” suggesting the social conformity of his desires. Thereafter, as though on guard against his own suggestibility, Lycius characteristically isolates himself. When he first encounters Lamia, he has just “by some freakful chance. . .made retire / From his companions, and set forth to walk, / Perhaps grown wearied of their Corinth talk” (230-32). Once she leads him back to Corinth, he “Muffl[es] his face, of greeting friends in fear” (1.362)—and especially of Apollonius, “my trusty guide / And good instructor” (1.373-4). And then comes the long retirement of Lamia and Lycius, “Shut from the busy world” (1.397). The “fear” implicit in this retirement concerns a threat posed by others to his vision or valuation of Lamia.¹⁵

When Lycius wakes from this retirement, however, with “a buzzing in his head” (2.29), this impulse seems to have reversed itself. He proposes to Lamia:

What mortal hath a prize, that other men
May be confounded and abash’d withal,
But lets it sometimes pace abroad majestic,
And triumph, as in thee I should rejoice
Amid the hoarse alarm of Corinth’s voice.
Let my foes choke, and my friends shout afar,
While through the thronged streets your bridal car
Wheels round its dazzling spokes. (2.57-64)

Lycius’s desire to take Lamia public corresponds to the moment in mortal love affairs when the lover is introduced to friends and family; but in calling her a “prize” and including “foes” among his spectators, he appeals to something more like the market economy, where values are objectified. In one way his new behavior is actually consistent with the old. In both cases he seeks, like the speaker of “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” to arrest alteration: if at first he feared that others’ perceptions might defeat his own, he appeals to them now for confirmation.

The public to which Lycius submits Lamia is described by the narrator in slavish terms, reminiscent of Keats’s vision of the “indolent” “spectators” among his reading public: a “gossip rout” with “common eyes,” a “herd” that “gaz’d” “marveling” at Lamia’s workmanship (2.146-52). Such a public poses little danger in itself, for it can hardly embody “Corinth’s voice” (61) without leadership. Indeed, though Lamia explicitly forbids Apollonius, and Apollonius calls himself an “uninvited guest” (2.100-101, 165), his invitation is implicit in Lycius’s appeal to “Corinth’s voice.” Among leaders of public opinion, Apollonius most closely resembles the skeptical or “despondent” commentator on matters of public finance. Conversely, like public credit, frequently allegorized as a woman, Lamia is deflated as a communal phantasm.¹⁶

While this does not speak to her essence (public credit is by definition what it is credited to be), it does implicate Lycius's failure to "support" her in defiance of the public estimation. As David Perkins noted, "Only when [Lycius] takes his eyes from Lamia to look at Apollonius does Lamia begin to vanish" (272; *Lamia* 2.242-4). Lycius may also be read as verbally accepting Apollonius's cold appraisal of Lamia in the ambiguously attributed final speech of the poem: "A Serpent!" echoed he; no sooner said, / Than with a frightful scream she vanished" (2.305-6). The antecedent of "he" is usually understood as Apollonius,¹⁷ but since Apollonius has just called Lamia "serpent" (2.298), the word "echoed" implies Lycius has also called her a "serpent." This melding figures the power of ascendant opinion to re-conform individual opinions to its pattern, and it suggests that Lamia disappears in response to the collapsing of Lycius' vision within that of Apollonius.

Keats's self-sobering "romance," which subjects individual vision to public scrutiny, is thus informed by principles familiar to contemporaries in the realm of public credit: principles respecting the fallibility, volatility, and power of public opinion, the dangers of courting it, the difficulty of countering it. The unexpected tragedy for Lycius is that public scrutiny turns out to have not just a confirmative but a transformative power, both over rival insights and over the "thing itself." In both "La Belle Dame" and *Lamia* the individualized performative, dependent only on the "ardour of the pursuer," is overwhelmed by baleful forms of public opinion and exists only as a precarious ideal. The moral, one might say, is think *for* yourself but *like* a population. For the power that both Lycius and the knight-at-arms want is independent imagination; what the poems show is their thrall-dom to consensus.

Though *Hyperion* was written before "La Belle Dame" and *Lamia*, I turn to it last because its treatment of the force of consensus is more complex and less certain—only partly because the poem is unfinished. But in its very complication at this level *Hyperion* presents a fuller picture of population thinking. The best question to begin with is what is the story—why have the Titans fallen? About this the Titans themselves are in quandaries; as Saturn demands:

Who had power
To make me desolate? whence came the strength?
How was it nurtur'd to such bursting forth,
While Fate seem'd strangled in my nervous grasp? (1.102f)

The implications are (a) that there was no battle in heaven (though Enceladus will refer to one later), and (b) that no one but Saturn had the power to defeat Saturn, that he is self-defeated. Hence, perhaps, the stupor and surprise: had Saturn been beaten by superior might, he should know by whom. Because Keats's sources tell of the Titans' fall as ensuing from a war with the Olympians, some critics assume this war as antecedent to Keats's *in medias res* beginning.¹⁸ But

as the fragment stands, only Enceladus refers to it unequivocally (2.309-38), and he is directly contradicted. Saturn wonders why the Titans "Should cower beneath what, in comparison, / Is untremendous might" (3.154-5), and Oceanus insists that "We fall by course of Nature's law, not force / Of thunder, or of Jove" (3.181-2). There is no trace in Keats of the traditional Saturn's violent pre-emptive striking or, on the other hand, of hostility on the part of the Olympians. Apollo appears not as a victor over his counterpart Hyperion, but as literally "wander[ing]" into a vacuum left by Hyperion's absence:

Where was he, when the Giant of the Sun
Stood bright, amid the sorrow of his peers?
Together had he left his mother fair
And his twin-sister sleeping in their bower,
And in the morning twilight wandered forth
Beside the osiers of a rivulet. . . (3.29-34)

Apollo and Hyperion are equally "perplex'd" (3.49, 1.170) concerning their respective rise and fall, and each seems oblivious to the other. Indeed, Apollo's *déjà-vu* reminiscence of Mnemosyne (3.53-61, 83) and his complaint of inexplicable "melancholy," feeling himself "Like one who once had wings" (3.88-91), tempts one to read him as a resurrected (or being-resurrected) Hyperion.

While *Hyperion* is most often treated as epic, this absence of overt causation makes it more akin to romance.¹⁹ The cause of the Titans' fall appears to be more psychological than physical, and in fact it resembles a failing in public credit or confidence.²⁰ The poem emphasizes fear and dejection, not just in one individual, but among the Titans at large: "There was a listening fear in [Thea's] regard, / As if calamity had just begun" (1.37-8). Hyperion is introduced as "yet unsecure," subject like mortals to "Fright" and to "horrors, portioned to a giant nerve" (1.168-75). His "minions" too are "full of fear[,] like anxious men" (1.197-8). Coelus's reflection on the fall emphasizes the humanizing passions, but pre-eminently fear: "vague fear there is. . . Unruffled, like high Gods, ye liv'd and ruled: / Now I behold in you fear, hope, and wrath" (1.327-32). The "mortal oil," the "dis-anoiting poison" that unseats Saturn is associated with fear and despair (2.94-98). And Apollo, by contrast, is found "in fearless yet in aching ignorance" (3.107). The performative moral is driven home by the closing image of Hyperion: "Despondence seiz'd again the fallen Gods / At sight of the *dejected* King of Day" (2.379-80, emphasis added). "Dejected" is both literal and figurative here because dejection in spirit is or leads to dejection in fact; failing spirits entail a more material failing. And as is clear by this point in the poem, dejection is not peculiar to Hyperion—it is general among the Titans, and even Enceladus's rousing anger makes only a transient difference. In this generality it resembles the consequential "dejection" that was considered so dangerous in the contemporary sphere of finance.

I do not claim that *Hyperion* is, any more than *Lamia*, directly an allegory of credit, only that its action is informed by dynamics operative in the public sphere of Keats's day. Whereas "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and *Lamia* focus on individual dreamers in relation to ascendant opinion, *Hyperion* portrays a population, one might say a nation, thinking. And by refusing a consistent focal point, it foregrounds the ferment of thought itself rather than any content or quality of thought. The reminiscence of *Paradise Lost's* opening upon Satan in Keats's opening upon Saturn emphasizes his Titans' de-centeredness, for it is clear how far this "poor old King" (1.52) falls short of Satan's kingship. The Titans' center has lost his center: "I am gone / Away from my own bosom," he complains, "I have left / My strong identity, my real self, / Somewhere between the throne, and where I sit. . . Thea! where is Saturn?" (1.112-15, 134). Saturn's tragicomic loss of identity suggests both his dissolution into what later theorists call the "group mind" and the transition from monarchical to democratic order. Though he calls the council of Titans, he does not control it; once Oceanus finishes, the council proceeds at random, like a badly run committee meeting, breaks up when Hyperion appears, and ends "in alternate uproar and sad peace" (3.1). The difference from Satan's canny management of his council could not be starker. This is how populations think without a leader to show them their thoughts. There is no "public opinion" in the discursive sense (the Titans cannot even agree on what has happened to them)—only population *thinking*—at most, the emergence of a public (dis)credit, a "great fear" or despondency that spreads like a "mist" (1.258; see 258-63). Reading from the beginning, across the consciousnesses of several characters (Thea, Saturn, the Titans at large, Hyperion, and his "winged minions"), the signs of consciousness are preponderantly affective and—except for a couple hitches—consistently negative. Though the Titans discourse little, and speak chiefly to themselves or at cross-purposes when they do, they coordinate in affect. There is some sign of non-verbal affective communication—as when Saturn tells Thea, "I feel thee ere I see thy face; / Look up, and let me see our doom in it" (1.96-97)—but there is also coordination across distance: "Meanwhile, in other realms big tears were shed, / More sorrow like to this" (1.158-9). And it all tends to "despondence" and "deject[ion]" (2.379-80), key terms in the contemporary lexicon of public credit.

Disorganized and de-centered though the Titans are, Oceanus formulates their collective resignation. He cannot be held responsible as a *leader* of opinion; his speech is followed by dead silence, the witless and inconsequent "complain[ing]" of Clymene (2.246-99), and finally Enceladus's scornful dismissal of them both: "Or shall we listen to the over-wise, / Or to the over-foolish, Giant-Gods?" (2.309-10). He is more like its mirror, merely verbalizing an already generalized mood in the shape of opinion. Saturn introduces him with a revealing pun: "in thy face / I see, astonished, that severe *content* / Which comes of thought and musing: give us

help!" (2.164-66, emphasis added). This evidently refers to the *content* of Oceanus's thought, but hints also at his contentment—which may well be "severe" in its consequences. Contentment or resignation may be the cause of the Titans' fall.

Critics sometimes describe Oceanus in terms of "stoic resignation," but stoicism refers to a fate that is inevitable (Sperry 185; J. Bate 334). The attitudes expressed by Oceanus may not respond to a necessity so much as they shape it—especially when understood as expressions of a general consensus. "I bring proof," he says, "How ye, perforce, must be content to stoop" (2.178)—but they have been stooping already. The word occurs, significantly, just before Hyperion's dive/fall: "Forward he stoop'd over the airy shore, / And plung'd all noiseless into the deep night" (1.356-57). Hyperion also "by hard compulsion *bent* / His spirit to the sorrow of the time" (1.300-301, emphasis added). The catalog of Titans in their "den" features many in the most painful stooping postures: "chain'd," "Dungeon'd," "crampt and screw'd," "prone" (2.5, 18, 23, 25, 49). But the catalog gives no hint of any Titans except Enceladus responding practically; those who are not bound are "wandering," "straying" "roam[ing]," or dreaming (2.18, 29, 31, 53-60). Oceanus's doctrine of necessity—"We fall by course of Nature's law" (2.181)—is ironically self-fulfilling. His discourse is appealing in its disinterestedness: "So on our heels a fresh perfection treads, / A power more strong in beauty, born of us / And fated to excel us" (2.212-14). But disinterestedness can be fatal, as Keats knew, if "pushed to an extremity"—"The Lion must starve as well as the swallow" (*Letters* 2.79). And for the Titans to regard the extinction of their "race" (2.230) with equanimity is surely extreme.

I will leave *Hyperion* by quoting a suggestive parallel for Oceanus's speech from an unlikely source, Thomas Paine's pamphlet *The Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance* (1796):

Do we not see that nature, in all her operations, disowns the visionary basis upon which the funding system is built? She acts always by renewed successions, and never by accumulating additions perpetually progressing. Animals and vegetables, men and trees, have existed ever since the world began; but that existence has been carried on by successions of generations, and not by continuing the same men and the same trees in existence that existed first; and to make room for the new she removes the old. Every natural ideot can see this. It is the stock-jobbing ideot only that mistakes. He has conceived that art can do what nature cannot. He is teaching her a new system—that there is no occasion for man to die—That the scheme of creation can be carried on upon the plan of the funding system—That it can proceed by continual additions of new beings, like new loans, and all live together in eternal youth. Go, count the graves, thou ideot, and learn the folly of thy arithmetic. (15-16)

The parallel is intriguing not only because it comes from a pamphlet on public credit, but also because the pamphlet is designed to encourage despondency and produce the fall it predicts. The baleful wonders of performative “public opinion” in Keats are never far removed from the wonders his “Tradesmen” encountered in the market.

Public opinion is an apt source of “believable marvels” for a post-enlightenment romance, for it is not merely countenanced in contemporary social science but already romanced in political usage—as the omniscient eye, the deific tribune, the disembodied voice that dictates to kings. Even a self-consciously skeptical thinker like Paine can put *vox dei* out the door and embrace *vox populi* returning through the window. A conscripted oath of loyalty, a projected evaluative judgment, an orchestrated mobbing, a panicked reaction, all may be hypostatized as “the public opinion.” At the same time there is no dearth of counter-positions; one man’s public opinion is another’s projection or echo, even in the Romantic period.

The conflictual scene of the literary reviews that schooled Keats illustrates the dualities of public opinion. They also illustrate that critique alone may not be an equal weapon. A factitious “public opinion” cannot, like Lamia, be dissolved with a cutting word and a piercing eye—it is more apt to be on the zapping side. As Keats was aware, the “indolent” public was impressed by the reviews and unfazed by knowledge of their “trickery.” Yet his relation to public opinion is not altogether negative. Within his letters—in his “Tradesmen” passage and in his justification of “Pride and egotism” (*Letters* 2.144)—Keats can project a quixotic, self-enabling “ardour” for the individual that appears to be modeled on the romance of performative public credit. A year or so after his *Blackwood’s* and *Quarterly* reviews, he can even voice a confidence in the capacity of literary public opinion for fair and accurate judgment.²¹ But his letters are largely given to speculative play; the poems, more deeply considered, focus on failures of credit or on tragic renderings of an individual’s capitulation to consensus. For Keats the romance of public opinion opens directly into critical reflection on the casualties of population thinking.²²

NOTES

¹Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the public sphere lies behind my conceptualization of these terms; despite recent criticism, it is based on period sources and remains valuable as an account of how the public sphere and public opinion were originally theorized. On this point, Gilmartin, especially 553-57.

²R.L. Palmer 44. Also Halévy, ch. 2 and Habermas 89-102; among contemporaries, William Mackinnon (1828) and William Hazlitt (Howe 17.321). Palmer writes, there is “no explicit formulation of [public opinion] prior to the eighteenth century,” though “the roots of the concept lie deep in the past” (231).

³E.g., Burke 170-2, 211-13; Paine, *Collected Writings* 475-76, 513, 536, 539, 544-47; and *Parliamentary History*, 29.1506, 1507, 1515; 30.51, 530, 541.

⁴On the need to rationalize romance, Hartman, Parker 159-66, and Kern 180.

⁵On Keats’s conflicted relation to romance, Stillinger 31-66, Parker 159-218, especially 167; and Kern.

⁶Habermas cites this passage (263n28). Paul Palmer describes Necker as the first to discuss “in detail the nature and significance of public opinion as a factor in statecraft” (237).

⁷Paul Palmer observes that “Since the latter part of the eighteenth century” the phrase *vox populi vox dei* “has been quoted, approvingly or otherwise, in almost every discussion of the source and competence of public opinion” (234).

⁸*ECCO* records only two titles including the phrase “public mind”; a full-text search turns up 2,624 results beginning in 1741, 90% of them from the 1790s.

⁹Byron to Shelley, April 26, 1821, qtd. Matthews 131. For Shelley, “Adonais” (1821; *Poetry and Prose* 407-27), and Matthews 124-27. “Susceptible” is Shelley’s term: “The savage criticism. . . in the *Quarterly Review*, produced the most violent effect on his susceptible mind” (Preface to “Adonais,” 410). For good analyses of this story and especially of Shelley’s construction of it, Heffernan and Wolfson, “Keats Enters History.”

¹⁰Keats writes Bailey in October, 1817: “You remember in Hazlitt’s essay on commonplace people—He says they read the *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly* and think as they do’. . .” (*Letters* 1.173). The reference is to Hazlitt’s “On Common-place Critics” in *The Round Table* (1817) (Howe 4.136-40).

¹¹To George and Georgiana Keats, Feb. 18 [for 19], 1819; *Letters* 2.65.

¹²On the versions McGann ch. 1; Simpson, *Irony* 18; Kelley 335-40.

¹³Kelley surveys “knight’s enthrallment” readings (355n1).

¹⁴Perkins 275; Evert 279, 286; Stillinger 57-58; Rajan 126; Lee 132.

¹⁵Charles Rzepka comments on Keats’s sensitivity to “the eye of any third party” that might “destroy” his own “fantasies” and his efforts “to ignore this unsympathetic third-person gaze” (190). I am generally indebted to Rzepka’s insights into the importance of intersubjective dynamics in Keats’s later poems and into their “reflections on the consensual nature of reality” (204; especially 190-242).

¹⁶Addison’s allegory of public credit in *The Spectator*, No. 3 (Mar. 3, 1711); Backscheider furnishes other examples.

¹⁷Waldoff, for instance, writes: "The second time Apollonius calls her 'Serpent!'. . . she disappears and Lycius dies" (169). Also Hunt (Matthews 169).

¹⁸E.g., Jonathan Bate: "an opening *in medias res*, a Titanic battle in heaven. . ." (332).

¹⁹Bate discusses the transition from *Hyperion* to *The Fall of Hyperion* as one from epic to romance. But Stillinger suggests that Keats "presumably refers to *Hyperion* in speaking of 'a new Romance which I have in my eye for next summer'" (*Complete Poems* 460, quoting Keats to Haydon, Sept. 28, 1817, *Letters* 1.168).

²⁰Ruthven and Hoagwood discuss *The Fall of Hyperion* in relation to matters of money and finance; because "Moneta" (whose name means "money") appears only in *The Fall*, such readings have focused more on *The Fall* than on the first *Hyperion*.

²¹"[A]ny thing really fine will in these days be felt," Keats writes Haydon; "I have no doubt that if I had written Othello I should have been cheered by as good as Mob as Hunt" (3 Oct. 1819, *Letters* 2.219).

²²With special thanks to Toby Benis for incisive editorial advice.

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